



Investigating the experiences and challenges of Youth Discipleship in a selected Christian Denomination in Accra, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The Church of Christ, in fulfilling its missional mandate of making Christ-like disciples, has faced several challenges in the 21st century. The youth who are inexperienced in the Christian faith face challenges in discipleship. Hence, hindering their growth and maturity in Christ. The paper used a qualitative single-case study approach to examine the experiences and challenges of youth disciples in a selected Christian denomination. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with fifteen (15) youths who were undergoing discipleship in the selected denomination within the Tema Metropolis of the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Purposive sampling was used to select them, providing a solid basis for a deeper qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data, and a practical theology approach was used to respond to the challenges they face in discipleship. It further submitted four potential challenges the youth may face in discipleship: family or parental challenges, emotional challenges, peer influence, and a lack of spiritual understanding. The paper argued that the church (through disciplers), in her quest to disciple the youth, should understand their challenges and find ways to help them throughout the discipleship process. The local church should create an enabling environment where young disciples can voice their challenges to their disciplers, and discipleship programmes should also be tailored to address the needs of the youth. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on youth ministry and its relationship with Christian discipleship.

Keywords: Disciple, Discipleship, Youth Disciple, Youth Discipleship

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that youth is a vital phase in the transition from parental dependence in childhood to adult responsibility.¹ This generation of contemporary youth is known to be exposed to diverse influences such as social media, smartphones, and internet applications that were not found in previous generations. In that sense, young people are much more connected to one another and to the social world in which they live.

¹ David Ovbiebo, "Church and Youth Empowerment: A Study of Pentecostal Missional Orientation in Edo State, Nigeria" (University of South Africa, 2021).

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Similarly, in the Church of Christ, young Christians are influenced by certain factors and experiences that may hinder spiritual growth and maturity. A recent study conducted by Shantelle Weber indicates that “the cultural backgrounds and practices of the youth influence formation of their faith.”² Weber explains cultural practices by asserting that “culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a social group.”³ This means that in the effort to make disciples, disciple makers must understand the contemporary challenges facing those whom they are discipling and find ways to help them.

The Church of Christ is tasked to embark on a mission. Mission (technically God’s mission) is “a comprehensive term encompassing everything God does in relation to the Kingdom and everything the church is sent to do on earth.”⁴ In that sense, mission is the tasking people to go and make disciples of all people (Matt 28:18-20). But, to fulfil God’s mission (*Missio Dei*), people must undergo a process of spiritual growth and maturity. This process is referred to as discipleship, in which those who have come into the Christian faith are taught and trained.

According to David Bosch, “discipleship is about teaching people and through that people can become disciples.”⁵ Similarly, Don Hawkins explains that discipleship is when “someone attaches himself or herself to a teacher to gain practical experience from them.”⁶ Therefore, we can say that youth discipleship involves teaching young Christians (particularly a young person) the precepts of scripture and helping them to be trained by the same. As the book of Proverbs says, “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” (Pro 22:6, NRSV).

Furthermore, making Christ-like disciples has not been without challenges in local churches. In a study conducted by Malan Nel, he referred to what Greg Ogden called the “discipleship malaise.”⁷ According to Ogden, “some factors have contributed to the low state of discipleship and the church’s failure to grow fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”⁸ Ogden further states that a key challenge of discipleship is that the churches have limited discipleship to programmes. For Ogden, “the scriptural context for growing disciples is through relationships and not programmes.” Until disciples receive personal attention so that their particular growth needs are addressed in a way that causes them to die to self and live fully to Christ, a disciple will not be made.⁹ Therefore, for young disciples, Christian disciplers have the mandate to help them grow and mature into Christlikeness. Also, Christian disciplers should identify the growth needs and contemporary challenges they face and find ways to support them. After all, the whole idea of discipleship is to develop people to respond correctly and maturely to life issues using scriptural and spiritual principles.

This paper uses a qualitative case study approach to examine the discipleship experiences and challenges of young disciples in a selected Christian denomination in the Accra Metropolis, Ghana. It uses narrative and descriptive methods to describe their experiences and challenges in discipleship in contemporary Ghana. It mainly argues that the church, in its quest to disciple young Christians, should understand their unique challenges and find ways to help them throughout the discipleship process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biblical Perspective of Discipleship

The Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) of the Bible present a theology of discipleship. In this section, an attempt is made to find a biblical basis for the words “disciple” and “discipleship” as well as the theological basis for youth discipleship.

² Shantelle Weber, “A South African Voice on Youth Ministry Research: Powerful or Powerless?,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015): 4–5.

³ Weber, “A South African Voice on Youth Ministry Research: Powerful or Powerless?”⁴

⁴ A. Scott, Moreau et al., *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 73.

⁵ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 10.

⁶ Don Hawkins, *Master Discipleship Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2019), 18.

⁷ Malan Nel, “Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach,” *HTS Religion & Society Series* 1 (2018): 206.

⁸ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 1998), 21.

⁹ Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*, 21.

In the OT, the word “disciple” is not explicitly stated. However, there are Hebrew words that point to it. Scholars such as Michael Wilkins argue that the words “limmud” and “talmid” were the closest Hebrew/Aramaic equivalents in Jewish literature to the word disciple.¹⁰ The Hebrew word “limmud” denotes a person who is taught or someone who is accustomed to a particular teaching (Isa 8:16, 50:4). The word “limmud” is similar to the Greek word “mathetes”, which is found in the NT. In the NT world, “mathetes” was used to describe a disciple as a student or learner of a particular master (teacher). Therefore, the OT and NT underscore that discipleship is about teaching people the principles of the word of God and living by it.

Also, another Hebrew word used to describe a disciple is “talmid”. In the OT world, “talmid” was used to describe a disciple as one who is being trained in a particular skill to carry out a task in the house of God. In ancient Israel, disciples (students) were under the authority of their fathers to receive direction and training from them. Particularly, 1 Chronicles 25:6-8 records this:

They were all under the direction of their father for the music in the household of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres for the service of the house of God. Asap, Jeduthun and Heman were under the order of the king. They and their kindred, who were trained in singing to the Lord, all of whom were skillful, numbered two hundred eighty-eight. And they cast lots for their duties, small and great, teacher and pupil alike.¹¹

Similar to the world of the New Testament, the Greek word “mathetes” has the same root as the word “mathematics”, which means the science of solving problems by developing theories and theorems to shape life through logical reasoning.¹² In the NT, disciples were also trained to develop skills for some work. For example, Jesus Christ trained the twelve and sent them out to drive unclean spirits and heal the sick (Matt 10:1). Paul also trained Timothy to be a worker in the kingdom of God (2 Tim 3:14-17). Similarly, Paul instructed Titus to train and appoint people as elders in every city (Titus 1:4-5). These examples suggest that discipleship in the NT was not only about teaching believers but also helping them become adherents of Christ.

Therefore, it could be said that in the Bible, discipleship encompasses two main tasks. The first is the mandate to teach a person (s) the truth of Scripture and prepare them for spiritual growth and maturity. The second task covers training a person (s) to develop skills for work of ministry or service in the house of God.

Theological Perspective of Youth Discipleship

The youth are not excluded from discipleship. God commands that the younger generation (children of Israel) in each generation be discipled by the older generation (mature persons). Deuteronomy 6:4-7, also known as the Shema, forms the basis of youth discipleship. It states as follows:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.¹³

From the above Biblical text, scholars like Patrick Miller argue that “the Shema was a standard by which the life and faith of Israel’s history with God is measured.”¹⁴ Similarly, Temaris Moore explains that “the Shema” is an ancient profession of faith given by God, reminding the religious community of their responsibility to train future generations in the faith.¹⁵ Therefore, we can say that God's church has the same mandate to disciple the youth through mature believers. Additionally, an exegetical reading of Deuteronomy 6:4-7 indicates that God commands every young person in Ancient Israel to love him since He is God alone

¹⁰ Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Mathew's Gospel* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 44.

¹¹ This was taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

¹² John Abedu Quashie and Mark S. Aidoo, “Commit To Faithful Brethren Who Are Able To Teach (2 Timothy 2: 2): The Pastor/Preacher As A Leader In Disciple Making,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020): 171.

¹³ This is taken from the NRSV version of the Bible.

¹⁴ Marvin J. Newell, *Commissioned: What Jesus Wants You to Know as You Go* (Illinois: CrossWay Books, 2010), 11.

¹⁵ Temaris L. Moore, “Youth Discipleship Framework for Church Revitalisation” (Liberty University, School of Divinity, USA, 2022), 44.

(vv. 4-5). Marilyn Schott explains that “the children of Israel were to hear and obey the words of God.”¹⁶ Similarly, Miller asserts that God, through Moses, instructed the youth to love the Lord their God.¹⁷ Therefore, God’s command to the Israelite community suggests that for all future generations (encompassing the era of the early church and today’s church), mature believers have been tasked by God to disciple young believers within the Church of Christ.

In line with the above antecedent (Deut. 6:4-7), the present authors would like to submit that first, youth discipleship should be about a relational process in which Christian youths are guided and instructed by mature believers. Second, youth discipleship should be about mature Christians helping young Christians practice principles of God in the Bible. According to Merrill, “the Israelites were to imprint God’s commandments in their hearts. If a person is to love God truly, his commands must always be at the forefront of a person’s thoughts and must always be part of a person’s conscious reflection.”¹⁸ Third, youth discipleship should also be about mature believers helping young Christians be saved from the corruption of this present world. According to Dean Ulrich, “it was the task of the youth in Ancient Israel to respond to God’s command so that they could escape the fall that befallen their parents or older generations.”¹⁹ Seth Kissi explains this better,

In the event during Noah’s time, all the household of Noah was saved and those who did not believe God’s word through Noah perished (Gen 7:13, 23). Those who perished included children who had not come to the age of discretion.... Therefore, if the lot of parents is salvation, the lot of their children is the same; and if the lot of the parents is wrath, judgment and destruction, that is the lot of their children too.²⁰

Kissi’s view on Yahweh’s judgment of the older generation and how it was passed on to future generations is relevant to today’s church to disciple the youth. Similar to ancient times, when mature believers refuse to disciple young Christians, they will act in ways that are contrary to God’s will, and hence, they can slip away from God to face His wrath.

Finally, God tells the mature Israelites to teach the younger ones diligently (Deut. 6:7). The Hebrew word “shanan”, which is translated “teach diligently”, connotes an idea of sharpening someone. In that sense, youth discipleship should be about mature believers sharpening or perfecting young believers. Mature believers must lead (influence) young Christians and show them the way they should go. As such, they will follow their example and live in ways that please the Lord.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a qualitative approach to obtain ideas and opinions from young disciples in a selected Christian denomination in Accra, Ghana. A qualitative approach was chosen because it helped to gain an in-depth understanding of how discipleship was practiced within the context of the local church and the challenges young disciples face in discipleship.²¹ Explorative and descriptive methods were used throughout the presentation and discussions of the data. The descriptive methods provided a narration of facts and unique characteristics of discipleship among young disciples.²² Whereas explorative methods aided in gaining deeper insights into the practice of youth discipleship and the lived experiences of young Christians during

¹⁶ Marilyn Schott, “The Shema: Its Significance and Implications for the 21st Century Christian Family” (South African Theological Seminary, 2014), 14.

¹⁷ Newell, *Commissioned: What Jesus Wants You to Know as You Go*, 11..

¹⁸ Schott, “The Shema: Its Significance and Implications for the 21st Century Christian Family, 16.”

¹⁹ Dean Ulrich, “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Tension Regarding a Changed Heart in Deuteronomy,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 6, no. 3 (2021): 455.

²⁰ Seth Kissi, *Understanding Some Disputed Church Practices* (Legon: Accra: Adwinsa Publications, 2024), 72.

²¹ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017), 61-62.

²² Hossein Nassaji, “Qualitative and Descriptive Research: Data Type versus Data Analysis,” *Language Teaching Research* 19, no. 2 (March 26, 2015): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168815572747>.

the process of discipleship.²³ Thus, new ideas and insights on the practice of youth discipleship and the challenges young disciples face were discovered after obtaining first-hand information.

Study Sample and Population

The study population were young people undergoing discipleship in a selected Christian denomination within the Greater Accra Metropolis of Ghana. The participants were aged 21 to 31 years. In all, 15 participants were selected using purposive sampling. The selected sample provided a solid basis for a deeper qualitative analysis. This is because Guest et al. argue that the point of data saturation could be reached within the first 12 interviews.²⁴ Through the sampling selection process, the researcher gathered relevant and detailed information on the practice of youth discipleship in the Christian Church.

Data Collection

The primary data were obtained through personal interviews with 15 youth undergoing discipleship. An interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from young disciples after a Sunday church service on the church's premises. Each interview session lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. The views of the interviewees were recorded and transcribed with Microsoft Word, together with the field notes.

Data Analysis Procedure

All interviews were classified into themes for analysis and discussion. Also, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to retain the authenticity of participants' responses. The researcher carefully read through the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. Thematic analysis based on the proposition by Braun and Clarke was conducted through systematic coding, in which key ideas and recurring patterns were identified and categorized into meaningful themes and sub-themes.²⁵ The qualitative data were labelled and analyzed and the themes that emerged from the study were discussed in line with the research aims. Thus, the themes in this study provide a clear narrative of evidence obtained from the participants. Additionally, secondary data from published theological volumes related to the study were used. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke.²⁶ Data sets were systematically coded into meaningful themes. The themes in this study provide a clear narrative of the evidence and facts obtained from the participants of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about ethical guidelines of qualitative research, including privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study. In reporting the findings, the researcher adhered to strict ethical standards that govern qualitative research.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Through qualitative interviews, opinions and valuable insights from youth disciples²⁷ are presented in this section. The themes that emerged from the data highlight their experiences in discipleship and the challenges they face in discipleship.

Youth Disciples' Perception of Discipleship

For the perception of discipleship by young disciples, it was found that most interviewees had similar opinions on what discipleship is. When asked about the meaning of "disciple and discipleship", a certain young disciple had the following to say:

²³ Nassaji, "Qualitative and Descriptive Research: Data Type versus Data Analysis, 130."

²⁴ Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 62.

²⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 98.

²⁶ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, 98."

²⁷ Under this section, the word "youth disciples are used interchangeably with young disciples.

A disciple is someone who is committed to learning under a teacher or spiritual leader. Discipleship is when a person who has submitted himself or herself to another person receives training intentionally from him or her.²⁸

Only a few respondents could not provide a clear explanation of the term “discipleship”. For instance, a certain interviewee stated as follows:

I do not know the meaning of discipleship, but what I know for sure is that I am a disciple of Christ.²⁹

The above opinion reflects a gap in understanding of the concept of discipleship, despite the involvement of young disciples in discipleship. However, one can conclude by saying that most of the interviewees' understanding of discipleship was largely influenced by what they had known and experienced in the discipleship process in the church.

Youth Disciples' Experiences in Discipleship

The responses of young disciples revealed their journey of discipleship and how discipleship practices have shaped their spiritual growth. A general experience of discipleship among all respondents indicates that discipleship was carried out at a personal and group level. The results of the interview pointed to the fact that the disciplers mainly adopted a relational model when discipling the youth. A certain young disciple responded as follows:

I was privileged to have a leader disciple me at a personal level. This has helped me to build a relationship with God as I received godly counsel from my discipler in times of challenges.³⁰

In addition, interviewees recounted their experience in discipleship as follows:

- a. Discipleship through group Bible study.
- b. Discipleship through group prayer.

Given the personal and group nature of discipleship in this Christian denomination, young disciples began to share the challenges they face in discipleship. The next section provides information and analyses to that effect.

Challenges Disciples face in Discipleship

This section presents and analyses the challenges young disciples face in discipleship in the selected Christian denomination. The following challenges were found to be faced by young disciples: family or parental influence, emotional challenges and the demands of life, peer influence and lack of spiritual understanding.

Parental/Family Influence

Family or parental challenges hindered young disciples during discipleship. For most respondents, their immediate families did not introduce them to any form of Christian discipleship while growing up. Additionally, some interviewees recounted that, although their parents took them to local Christian churches, they were not introduced to discipleship practices such as reading and studying the Bible and how to pray effectively. The following interview extracts show the views of interviewees regarding their challenges:

Before, I was just going to church with my parents without understanding what the Christian life is about. However, when I joined this church, I was introduced to certain practices such as reading and studying my Bible and being involved in personal and group prayer meetings.³¹

²⁸ Interview with young Christian disciples in a selected Christian Denomination.

²⁹ Interview with young Christian disciples in a selected Christian Denomination.

³⁰ Interview with young Christian disciples in a selected Christian Denomination.

³¹ Interview with young disciples.

Another young disciple stated:

My parents did not want me to be part of the church. Sometimes when I leave school and go home, I am not allowed to come to discipleship meetings because they said I am not on my own and I cannot choose to go to the church I want.³²

This evidence suggests that families or parents play a crucial role in influencing young Christian disciples. Parents and their families can significantly shape the lives and behaviours of believers. Therefore, a negative home environment can hinder the discipleship process, while a positive home environment can promote discipleship in the church.

Emotional Challenges

Young disciples who were interviewed recounted how they were faced with emotional and life challenges, which in turn hindered their discipleship. Most of the respondents revealed that personal issues such as finances, work demands, academic issues and fear of not attaining life aspirations were hindrances to effective discipleship in the church. An interviewee intimated:

My entire focus was on my academics; I needed to learn and get good grades in my courses as a student. Therefore, combining the discipleship demands of my church and my academics was my major challenge.³³

A similar opinion was given by a certain young disciple as follows:

For me, my challenge is the fear of not achieving my dreams in life. For example, I may want to own a car, but my discipler will suggest that it is not the right time. So, it all comes down to the lack of understanding between the disciple and the discipler.³⁴

It can be submitted that disciplers should be able to identify and understand the emotional issues of young disciples and create an environment where they can share their emotional concerns and find ways to support them.

Peer Influence

Peer influence came up strongly during interviews with young disciples as a hindrance to their discipleship. For most youths, some friends distracted them in several ways and, as a result, they were unable to focus on their spiritual growth during discipleship. A certain young disciple opined as follows:

One challenge is that of external influences, such as friends outside the church. I happen to be distracted by those influences and, therefore, I was not consistent in the discipleship process.³⁵

Also, some young disciples opined that they would attend discipleship meetings as long as their friends were coming with them. Additionally, some young disciples said that they mostly attended church services together with their friends, since they find it more comfortable and enjoyable. With other young disciples, they found peers as a means of socialization within the church, and they loved to do things together with them.

It should be noted that friends or peers exert a considerable influence on young disciples in discipleship. Therefore, disciple-makers should be aware of these facts and find ways to effectively disciple them towards growth and maturity.

³² Interview with young disciples.

³³ Interview with young disciples.

³⁴ Interview with young disciples.

³⁵ Interview with young disciples.

Inadequate Spiritual Understanding

Almost all the interviewees opined that sometimes they lack understanding of the word of God as preached and taught by their disciplers. An interviewee disclosed:

A particular challenge I face is understanding the teachings of my pastor. For example, my pastor will be trying to communicate a certain Bible truth, but I would be thinking in another way. So, the challenge is the lack of common understanding between my pastor and me during teaching sessions.³⁶

Similar to the earlier view, another young disciple intimated:

My challenge is with understanding and obeying the teachings I receive from my pastor and disciplers in the church. It was through disobedience that my discipleship stopped at a certain point in time. In my church, our pastor is very strong in his teachings when it comes to young people submitting their lives and everything to Christ, and since I was not used to that way of life, it became very challenging for me to obey the teachings I received.³⁷

It should be noted that most young disciples were unable to understand and practice the teachings of scripture as they received them from their disciplers. Thus, making them lack spiritual understanding and hence unable to practice the teachings of scripture effectively.

DISCUSSIONS AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Experiences of Young Disciples in Discipleship

The Christian Church has a missional mandate of making disciples of all people (Matt 28:18-20). In Ghana, the recent years have seen an increasing population of young people in Charismatic Churches.³⁸ The growing number of youths in local churches imposes on Christian disciplers to find ways to help them reach spiritual growth and maturity. This section discusses and reflects theologically on the nature of youth discipleship with emphasis on the experiences of young disciples in discipleship. The study indicates that youth discipleship is a relational process in which young disciples are made to learn and grow under the guidance of Christian disciplers. During discipleship, it was observed that young disciples tend to be more receptive to the process when they are put in groups. In other words, they found discipleship more welcoming when trained together with their Christian peers. This is in line with Anderson, who argued that “the youth have a strong peer connection in the area of faith development.”³⁹ Similarly, King et al. affirmed that “the more influence peers have on the youth, the greater the effect on religious outcomes among them.”⁴⁰ Therefore, to ensure that youth discipleship is effective in the church, youth peer groups should be encouraged for the purpose of discipling them.

Additionally, the present paper submits two key theological practices that would be beneficial to the youth’s spiritual growth and maturity. First, discipling the youth through group Bible study. A “group Bible study” was defined as putting together young Christian disciples in groups and allowing them to actively participate in scriptural discussions with either a Bible study manual or a devotional guide. For example, the Christian denomination under study had a study manual which was structured into weekly themes for discussions among young disciples. In that sense, young disciples were expected to devote themselves to the teachings or guidelines stipulated in the manual. It should be noted that this practice resonates with the early church method of discipleship, where Christians devoted themselves to the teachings of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). Second, discipling the youth through group prayer. Similar to group Bible study, group prayer refers

³⁶ Interview with young disciples.

³⁷ Interview with young disciples.

³⁸ Cephas Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Church in Ghana*, ed. Jan A.B. Jongeneel (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2002), 96.

³⁹ Tamara L. Anderson and Shelly A. Skinner, “Feelings: Discipleship That Understands the Affective Processes of a Disciple of Christ,” *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 1 (2019): 66–78.

⁴⁰ Pamela E. King, James L. Furrow, and Natalie Roth, “The Influence of Families and Peers on Adolescent Religiousness,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21, no. 2 (2002): 110–12.

to a gathering of young disciples for prayer and fellowship. It is suggested that such meetings should be held regularly to establish unity and bonds among disciples. As Acts 2:46 says, “the believers continued to meet together in the temple courts”, implying that they held meetings in groups.

The Challenges Disciples Face in Discipleship

Youth who are in discipleship face several challenges in the Christian Church. Based on the findings, this section discusses four potential challenges that hinder youth discipleship. They are: parental influence, emotional challenges, peer influence and lack of spiritual understanding.

Parental or Family Influence

On a daily basis, parents are given the opportunity to shape and influence the spiritual lives of their children. According to George Barna, seventy-eight percent of teenagers acknowledge that their parents have a lot of influence on how they think and act.⁴¹ Ghana, like many African countries, practice a communal family-focused approach of parenting that emphasizes respect, obedience, and cultural values. In that sense, children are expected to fully obey what their parents say. This perception is based on the Ghanaian adage that “the elderly are always right.” Ghanaian parents tend to be more authoritarian than authoritative in their parenting styles, especially with their children who are away from home. According to Cherry, “authoritarian parenting style expects the child to adhere to or follow the strict rules established by the parents and is often met with punishment when not adhered to.”⁴² As evidence to this fact, “only 6% of teens consider their religious beliefs very different from those of their mother and 11% very different from those of their father.”⁴³ Based on the primary findings, all the participants reported clear disagreement from their parents during discipleship at a church they themselves were not members of and the fact that the church was not considered a “mother church”. This view is based on a socially accepted phenomenon of “mother church”⁴⁴ in Ghana, which does not include most charismatic churches we have today. The few charismatic churches that have been accepted, although not entirely as a “mother church”, are over 30 years in existence. It suffices then to say that for most Ghanaian Christian parents, their children (who are youth) should equally attend their mother churches and be discipled by the same. Thus, parents tend to disagree with the youth who attend these charismatic churches, and since parental approval plays an important role in the spirituality of the youth, it tends to hinder the discipleship process.

Emotional Challenges

The emotional needs of youths are inherently complicated. It relates to many things: early-life influences; the supports a young person has; difficulties they face as they grow up, family issues, academic issues, financial difficulties and so on. We cannot simplify or reduce these influences to a handful of issues that affect all young people in the same way. Youth are in a period of transition from being a child who is dependent on their parents or guardian to being an independent and self-reliant adult. Typically, at this stage, the youth are expected to know what they want to do for work after school, when most of them are just discovering themselves. On top of this, the youth also face a constantly changing world. To keep up with the latest information and knowledge, they must spend extra time and resources studying and up-skilling themselves. All this in the midst of a technologically advanced society where they get so much information.

⁴¹ George Barna, *Third Millennium Teens: Research on the Minds, Hearts and Souls of America's Teenagers* (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 4.

⁴² Mark J. Cherry, “Parental Authority and Pediatric Bioethical Decision Making,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35, no. 5 (2010): 553–72.

⁴³ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

⁴⁴ Mother church in this article refers to the Christian Denomination where parents, family members or guardians of the youth attend and have been in existence for a long period of time.

Peer Influence

Youth are at a stage where they feel the need to be independent. Their need for independence means that parents become less important, while school and especially friends become more important. Often avoiding parental advice or influence and lean more towards that of their peers. They do this to “fit in” with their peers and gain their acceptance. This is mainly due to the generational gap between parents and youth. This has also explained the sudden growth in youth-centred charismatic denominations. As a youth discipler, the researcher has consistently realized that where the youth are disciplined together with their peers, they are more willing and committed to the discipleship process. However, when the peers of the youth are not involved, he or she expresses some level of restraint, and almost always, the discipleship process comes to an end. This resonates with King et al. on the observation that the more influence peers have on the youth, the greater the effect on religious outcomes among them.⁴⁵ Similar to the selected Christian Church, most disciples were influenced by their friends in various ways. Some attended discipleship meetings as long as their friends were with them. It is worth noting that although peers or friends may hinder the youth from being disciplined (as indicated by several respondents), a positive peer influence can promote discipleship and growth in the local church. In that sense, Christian disciplers should encourage a positive peer influence through group gatherings and also encourage young believers to meet together (Heb. 10:25).

Lack of Spiritual Understanding

Lack of spiritual understanding has emerged as a challenge for young disciples in discipleship. According to Thomas Frederick, “a person’s spirituality entails understanding and personal spiritual practices.”⁴⁶ For Frederick, “Spirituality considers how an individual lives and practices transcendent beliefs at its most basic and generic form.”⁴⁷ In Christianity, spirituality encompasses faith in Christ through the Bible and how believers apply the principles of scripture in their lives. Since discipleship is rooted in the teachings and principles of Scripture, disciplers must help young Christians to effectively understand Scripture and apply its teachings in their lives, resulting in growth and transformation of disciples. As Vanhoozer rightly stated, “pastors and disciplers are particularly interested in changes that encourage proper functioning, which is another way of saying, changes that make disciples more like Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings obtained on the experiences and challenges of young disciples in discipleship, the present author(s) make(s) the following recommendations. The local church should create an enabling environment where young disciples can voice their challenges to their disciplers, and also, discipleship programmes should be tailored to address the needs of the youth. It is further recommended that discipleship be done in peer groups under the supervision of more mature disciplers. This comes from the finding that the youth are more accommodating when relating with their peers, and thus they tend to learn more from one another. The study recommends discipleship meetings, such as group Bible study and group prayer meetings, for youth discipleship within the local church. Additionally, in modern Ghanaian societies, parents play a crucial role in the upbringing of their wards. Thus, when the church does not involve them during the discipleship process, a gap is created. Therefore, it is recommended that parents or the immediate family of young Christian disciples support their wards and the Church of Christ in their missional mandate of making Christlike disciples. This will go a long way to shaping the spirituality and growth needs of young disciples.

⁴⁵ King, Furrow, and Roth, “The Influence of Families and Peers on Adolescent Religiousness.”

⁴⁶ Thomas V. Frederick, “Discipleship and Spirituality from a Christian Perspective,” *Pastoral Psychology* 56, no. 6 (2008): 553.

⁴⁷ Frederick, “Discipleship and Spirituality from a Christian Perspective, 555.”

⁴⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Putting on Christ: Spiritual Formation and the Drama of Discipleship,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (2015): 147.

CONCLUSION

The present article has explored the experiences and challenges of young disciples in discipleship. The paper observed that discipleship is more welcoming to young people when done in groups. In this way, youth discipleship will be effective, and more young Christians can reach maturity in Christ. Also, the article identified four potential challenges that youth may face in discipleship, which are family or parental, emotional challenges, peer influence and lack of spiritual understanding. By unpacking these challenges, the article does two things: first, it provides insights into the challenges disciples face which hinder the discipleship process, and second, it gives the local church a starting point as to where to tackle the discipleship malaise from. This way, the local church will be informed on the root causes of their discipleship challenges, and from this, begin to develop unique solutions geared towards addressing these challenges for the Christian youth. It is important to state that these real-life challenges of young disciples are universal and thus can serve as a roadmap for local churches to design a discipleship program that identifies and addresses the real needs of young people.

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