The Future of Children and Teenage Ministries in Kenyan Churches: Fear of an Emergence of Generations without Solid Christian Foundation after COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every part of the World. It brought unfortunate consequences; unexpected deaths, sudden unemployment, strain on healthcare systems, economic near collapse and the worst of all is the unprecedented disruption in places of worship. On the March 13, 2020, the government of Kenya ordered an immediate closure of Churches as a containment measure against the spread of the pandemic. As at March 26, 2020 millions of children and adolescents in 165 countries were affected by the closure. Due to high level of vulnerability, children and the elderly were advised to stay at home to avoid risk of exposure. This move forced the Kenyan church leaders to navigate through unfamiliar territory of adopting new ways of doing ministry through online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, and Church Websites and Televisions to offer spiritual services such as preaching, discipleships, follow-ups, fellowships and even visitations to all groups' children, teens, youths and adults. This study was aimed at establishing the groups that did not receive adequate or specific attention in terms of spiritual services when churches were closed down on March 13, 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. The research was carried out on May 20, through June 20, 2020. The study used survey research design, a valuable tool of assessing the attitudes, opinions and trends of church leaders. An exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling technique was used to identify respondents. 429 (*n*) pastors and church leaders from 33 Counties of Kenya and among 161 denominations participated in the study. US-based data company *Survey Monkey Inc*. that processed and analyzed the data hosted the online survey. The study findings indicated that Children between the ages of 0- 11 years (64.57%) and Teenagers between the ages of 12- 19 years (30.77%) received inadequate attention. The knowledge gained in this research is helpful for churches and various denominations to formulate appropriate and practical methods of effectively ministering to the children and teenagers even in seasons of crises.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Children, Teenagers, Family, Church, Discipleship

I. INTRODUCTION

Kenya is currently experiencing a so called "youth bulge" a situation when at least 20 percent of a country's population is between the age of 15 to 24. With an estimated 61 percent being children aged 0 – 14 (40.87%) and youth 15 – 24 (18.83%) (Odondi, 2020; Hall, 2017). Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) data shows that the population grew by 26 percent from 37:7 million in 2009 to 47.6 million in 2019, translating into an addition 9.9 million people, adding that majority being in the rural areas (Gitogo, 2020). Simply stated is that approximately 59 percent of Kenya's population is youth who are naturally idealistic, creative and energetic.

Kenya's ratio of youth aged 15-24 years to the population stands at 20.3 percent above World's average of 15.8 percent and 19.2 percent for African (Otuki, 2017). Odonovan (2006) is in agreement with these demographics and observes that modern Africa is shifting to a younger population every year. These ratios are among the highest globally. These therefore calls for the need to rethink critically about these groups who are endowed with gifts, talents , passionate about information technology and open to modern trends in the market place. With this background it is evident that very many scholars concentrate on other social and economic aspects of our young people such as unemployment, marginalization, teenage pregnancies and sexual violence (Ajayi & Mwoka, 2020) but little attention is given to their spiritual lives during this period of COVID – 19 Pandemic by the church.

II. METHODS

The study used survey research design, a valuable tool of assessing the attitudes, opinions and trends (Ruel *et al.,* 2015; DeFranzo, 2012) of church leaders. This design is generally inexpensive, describes the characteristics of a large population, flexible and dependable in allowing respondents to answer with more candid and valid answers. An exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling technique which is commonly used to generate data for population where they are not easily available (Naderifar *et al.,* 2017). This method was employed to get respondents from various churches and denominations in Kenya who then recommended the survey link to other pastors and Church leaders within their networks. US-based Data Company *SurveyMonkey Inc.* that processed and analyzed the data hosted the online survey. As a result, the survey identified 429 (*n*) pastors and church leaders drawn from 33 Counties of Kenya and among 161 denominations who participated in the study.

III. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The question that was sought was "In view of your ongoing online or offline programs, which of your church groups do you think has NOT been given adequate and specific attention during this COVID-19 season''? The church groups under consideration included the Elderly (70+ years), Adult (36-69 years), Youth/ Young Adults (19- 35 years), Teenage Group (12-19 years), Children (0-11years). The results indicated that the top three groups that have not been given adequate and specific attention through the online or offline programs were: - Children 0-11Years (64.57%); Elderly 70+ years (61.07%) and Teenage Group 12-19 Years (30.77%) as shown on Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. CATEGORY OF CHURCH GROUPS AND ATTENTION ACCORDED DURING PANDEMIC
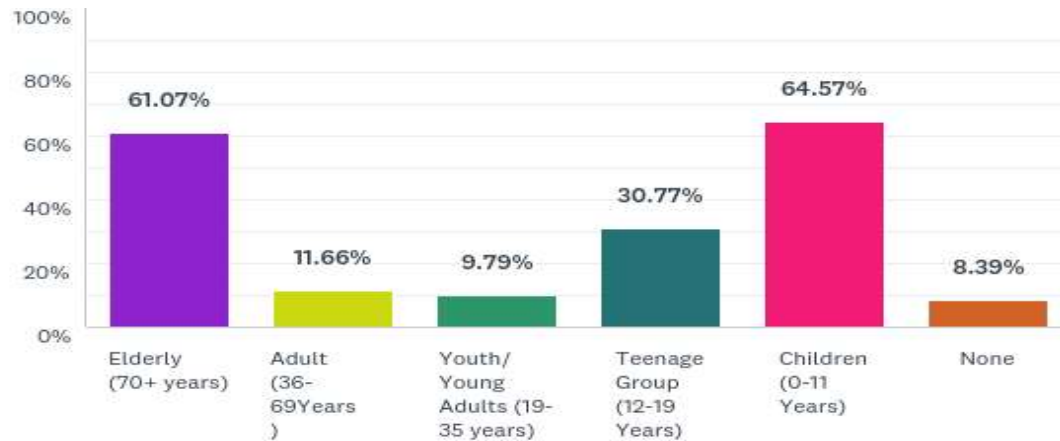
These results therefore indicated that children aged 0-11 years (64.57%) and teenagers between the ages 12-19 years (30.77%) were inadequately reached. Many questions arose from the data, was it because there was no content developed that was relevant to the ages of children and teenagers? Was it because the elderly people and children are neither active online users nor well-versed in using online platforms? Could it have been that many children have limited access to digital communication gadgets? This study revealed that Pastors and Church leaders might not have come out with a well thought out ministry strategies that were used over the first 100 days of COVID-19 pandemic and evaluate their effectiveness and relevance to various groups. Pastors/church leaders have a cardinal responsibility to plan on how to effectively reach out to different church group, by avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach. Different groups within the church have different needs that ought to be given attention. This finding shows that church leaders need to increase their efforts in the ministry to children, elderly and teenagers. During this period, each of these groups has fears, concerns, and faith-questions that need to be addressed.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether this was intentional or not, COVID-19 pandemic will certainly have a far reaching positive and negative ramification on the Church the body of Christ and the society at large (Xiang, Zhang & Kuwahara, 2020). Though, COVID-19 has brought family cohesion, the demerits far outweighs the merits which include psychosocial challenges, Buzzi *et al.* (2020) and public health concerns like anxiety, stress, parental mental illnesses resulting in domestic violence, child mistreatment, teenage pregnancies, child marriage, social isolation and all manner of vices are being reported every day according to (Fergent *et al.*, 2020). Besides 650 million girls and women have been married as children and over 200 million undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (UNICEF, 2020; Ajahi, 2020; Muturi, 2020 and; Otewa, 2018).

Evidently the pandemic caused more harm to children and teenagers than the disease itself. One such negative aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic would be an upsurge of a generation without a solid Christian foundation, arising from Churches and Schools being closed down. Though COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted ministries to the children and teenagers in our churches, parents should never lose focus of their children's hearts the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

South African National Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (Senter, 2001) confirms that children and teenagers are struggling with peer pressure where 15% have carried a weapon, 19% members of a gang, 46% abusing drugs, 21% had committed one or more suicide attempts, 21.1% current smokers, 30% sexually active, out of which 13% were under 13 years, 50% had consumed alcohol, 36% had been bullied, 21% had been in physical fight, 29% had spent longer than three (3) hours daily watching television or playing computer games. Kenyan children and teenagers are not exempt from these struggles.

Tripp (2017) and Powell *et al.* (2011) observes that failure to target the hearts of our children and teenagers, they will not understand the truth that straying behaviour displays a straying heart. This therefore calls for holistic faith formation practices to nurture spiritual intimacy of our children and teenagers (Kageler, 2008) by understanding faith formation strategies for youth between the ages of 14 -17 years old (Sahaya & Diane, 2014). Spiritual growth and maturity demand that parents should step in and bring forth relevant biblical teachings and modes of faith formation strategies for their Children and teens that targets the heart that subsequently drives the behaviour 'a change in behaviour stems from a change of heart' (Tripp, 2017, p. 20). In times of crisis such as that of COVID-19, it is easy to start shifting blame, that schoolteacher, pastors or parents are not doing their work. There is therefore need for parents to take advantage of the situation develop a rich spiritual formation tradition at home that would nourish and fortify their children from negative effect of the pandemic. This study recommends the following measures.

A. *Adopt the Old Testament tabernacle principle*

Now that COVID -19 pandemic has allowed us to be at home as families, an opportunity for doing ministry among our children and teenagers who are struggling with a myriad of challenges ranging from many forms of addiction and pornography, drug abuse, spiritual emptiness, identify crisis, single parenthoods homes and questions on meaning and purpose of life among others. Wanda (2010) argues that the family is the first school where parents are the first educators. Exodus 40:1-33 records the completion of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle served as a place where Israel as a Nation were trained and taught to the ground with the knowledge of Yahweh and in addition served as the national Jewish center for learning and leadership where God revealed Himself to man and revealed man's condition and the need for redemption. (Snaddon, 2020 and; Morales, 2019). Further, the ultimate goal of the Laws taught in the Tabernacle was to shape the inner man into the image of God and to wean them from idolatry of Egypt and set before them a pure and noble ideal worship and witness the presence, purity and presence of God (Canon, 2017). Ministry to our children and teenagers that will yield lasting fruit in shaping their character and destiny as originally intended by God in the Scriptures is centered at home. The pattern of behaviour that each child learns and follows is in the hands of parents. The social pillar of Kenya's Vision 2030, envisages a just and cohesive society that enjoys equitable social development to be realized though the revamping of various sectors such as education and training, healthcare

services, environment, water and sanitation, environment and conservation, gender youth and vulnerable populations housing and urbanization, labor and employment science technology and innovation (Mwenzwa & Misati, 2014).Good as it may be, this social pillar, fails in targeting the spiritual concerns of our young people. This Vision 2030 can only make sense when the hearts of our youth are secured.

B. *Revisit the doctrine priesthood of all believers*

In the absence of physical contact and public gathering, the Christian churches should embrace a new paradigm by turning to the priesthood of all believers, an important doctrine in the Protestant Churches but rarely utilized. This doctrine dates back to the Protestant Reformation of 1517 (Loter & Aarde, 2017). The doctrine of Priesthood of all Believers which evolved from the Levitical Priesthood Gregg (2015) postulates that all believers who have faith in Christ are designated priests and share in Christ royal priesthood as emphasized in 1Peter 2:5,9 and Ephesians 4:1-16. Hence there is no divide between Priests and the Laity (Ciano, 2020 ; Anizor & Voss, 2016) every believer is a priest, regardless of their full time occupation, their responsibility being prophetic proclamation of the message of reconciliation (Lindsely, 2017) and so they exercise praying for one another, hearing other's confession, serving one another including physical provision (Philippians 4:8; Hebrews 13:16).This doctrine therefore have an enormous implication for how Christian families exercise their priestly role in the household by instructing their children and teenagers in the ways of God (Hooks, 2018). Priesthood of all believers recognizes that the institution of marriage was established by God (Genesis 1:26-31) to procreate and subdue the Earth (Kostenberger & Jons, 2000;Atkison, 2014).

The responsibility of passing the spiritual legacy is placed upon the shoulders of the head of the family. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of Abraham who was tasked with the responsibility of inculcating spiritual and moral values (Genesis 18:19) so that they may do that which is right and just in the public square. In the prayer recited everyday by Jewish family called the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, the pedagogical approach emphasized is to visualize, demonstrate and actively teach God's commands within the context of the home. Proverbs 22:6, 15; 23:13-14 emphasizes the importance of instilling training and discipline on children based on positive motivational influence. In Joshua 24:15, emphasis is placed on the household leadership that determines the spiritual affairs and affiliation of the family.

It is therefore clear that the Christian family has a crucial position in God's purpose and plan for mankind (Bavinck, 2012). However there has never been a times when the family is faced so severe crisis as the time we are living. Even so, the family remains to be the strongest influence to children and teenagers and should never be ignored (Garland, 2020).The story of the Israelites in book Judges should serve as a reminder to us to reflect on our post-COVID-19 children and teenagers. The Israelites failed to pass on to their children the awesome work of God and they began worshipping idols. The shepherding our children and teens as Tripp (2017) observes, involves investing valuable times through teaching Gods word's (2 Timothy 4:2) carefully, faithfully, consistently, lovingly and boldly, open and honest communication that unfolds the meaning and purpose of life values and spiritual vitality (Proverbs 13:20). This is a sure way of bequeathing the world a mature youth who will make an impact in their generation.

C. *Embrace theological and spiritual approach to children and teenage ministries*

The goal of children, teenage and even ministries in our churches is to lead them into mature Disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:19). Empirical data indicates that youth ministries are unable to develop the children and teenage youth into mature Christians (Dean, 2010). This state of affair is traced to an emphasis on skill and socially driven approach to ministry to the youth, the main concern being emotional excitement and entertainment rather than theologically and spiritually driven ministry, where the Word of God is presented with integrity and allowed to accomplish the purpose of transforming the inner life of man (Dean, 2010; Purves,2004; Barna, 2000).The underlying reason seems to be lack of parental awareness of children and youth dynamics, shallow faith among the parents, shallow discipleship curriculum designed to effectively equip the child and teenagers with much needed moral foundation, lifelong spiritual choices and one's relationship with Christ. Thus, the need for relevant and solid theological and spiritual approach to ministry that will debunk on the teenager's perception of Christianity as rules-based, behaviour modification intended to enhance self-esteem and personal happiness.

Dobson (2012) argues that the depth of one's personal relationship with God is directly related to the authenticity of one's factual knowledge of God. Theology is needed as foundation in effective youth ministry (Borgman, 2013). Theology is a compound word derived from two Greek words '*theos*' (God) and '*logos*' (word) simply defined as the study conducted on the Word of God to try and understand God's nature and how He has revealed Himself. Thus 'God is both source and object in theological learning' (Dunn & Senter III, 1997, p. 49). The ultimate goal of any ministry worth its name to young people in our Churches should not only be to attend meetings about Christ but to connect to Christ and develop an intimate relationship with God. Christian culture does not transform but Chris to-centric message does. Purves (2004) rightly said that God draw near through the ministry of the Word preached through the power of the Holy Spirit which in turn leads to transformation and faithful living.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper argues for parents and church to rethink children and teenage ministries during and post- COVID-19. The model established by God through God's people begins with the spiritual institution call the family and reinforced and strengthened by spiritual leaders through strategic discipleship is one of the ways of ensuring that the moral and spiritual foundation remains solid whenever they make critical choices in their lives. This study further recommended three strategies to the parents and churches that can be adopted for purposeful engagement with our children and teenagers: firstly, adopt the Old Testament Tabernacle principle, secondly, revisit the doctrine of priesthood of all believers and thirdly, embrace a new paradigm shift from social to theological and spiritual approach to children and teenage ministries. These strategies are intended to be the nurturing and equipping bases on matters discipleship. The products from these processes will be that our children and teenagers will be saturated and insulated with God's truth that enable them have passionate faith and maintain purity of life in a permissive society.

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