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Engaging emerging adults: A missional model of ministry for house churches in South Africa

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This article examines the role of house churches in South Africa in the ministry of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a turbulent life stage that is characterised by change and exploration. Additionally, it involves increasing responsibility and autonomy as young people assume more adult roles. This article suggests that emerging adulthood is a critical life stage for several reasons. Given the contextual realities of South Africa (high unemployment, high levels of crime, poverty), as well as the associated negative behaviour and the increasing religious disaffiliation among emerging adults, it is essential to provide nurturing support to this group in particular. To this end, this article presents a missional model for house churches as an alternative method of ministry for reaching and retaining this population group. The characteristics of house churches and emerging adults are explored and serve as the backdrop for this missional model.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article makes intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions by engaging the theological disciplines of missiology and practical theology as well as psychology and sociology.

Keywords: missional; house church; emerging adulthood; South Africa; critical age; small faith communities.

Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on emerging adulthood and its social, cultural, economic, and religious contexts (cf. Arnett 2000; Arnett & Jensen 2002; Barry et al. 2020; Hardie, Pearce & Denton 2013; Smith & Snell 2009) as well as on house churches (cf. Barna Research Group 2006; Jeong 2018; Payne 2007; Simson 2009). However, the majority of these studies have been carried out internationally, and there is a dearth of research in the South African context. There is also a paucity of research on emerging adulthood religiosity in South Africa. Grant's (2013) master's research investigated South African house churches in the context of the Chinese diaspora while Wileman's (2008) study focussed on the role of the independent house church movement in youth ministry. Apart from these works, research on house churches in South Africa has mostly been associated with the African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs). This article distinguishes house churches from the AICs and cell group structures.[1] It also relies on international research about emerging adulthood religiosity, although it acknowledges that these findings may not always be directly applicable to the local context. A brief history of the house church movement and the characteristics of emerging adults is provided as a background and context for this study. The growing number of house churches worldwide has piqued much interest and led to research on this phenomenon in various regions of the world. The concept of 'emerging adulthood' is relatively new, spanning the last few decades. However, it has benefitted from concurrent research on various contextual aspects of this life stage, which has been undertaken by numerous academic disciplines. Given that there has been limited research conducted on the specific contextual aspects of emerging adulthood in South Africa, and with increasing religious disaffiliation in this demographic, this article aims to explore the potential missional role that house churches in South Africa can play in the ministry of emerging adults.

The role of the house in early Christianity

The 'house church' concept is not new. Button and Van Rensburg (2003:11) suggest that 'home', as it can refer to any type of dwelling, is better suited than 'house' to describe where the early Christians met, especially in light of the debate around the structure of the buildings used for these early Christian gatherings (cf. Button & Van Rensburg 2003; Linton 2005). The Early Church

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1. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess AICs or cell group structures.

gathered in homes (e.g., Ac 1:13, 1 Cor 6:19; Rm 16:3, 5; Col 4:15), which provided social and religious engagement for the early believers. Residential dwellings were the centre of family life and a vital part of the Early Church. Not only did they form the foundation of the local church, but they were also the focal point for worship, offered accommodation for missionaries, served as centres for evangelistic and missionary efforts, and provided the framework for the new Christian way of life (Bekker 1993:242–245). The early Christians met in homes because it followed the Jewish tradition of meeting in homes. Houses were convenient and readily available, provided protection during persecution, and had the facilities to prepare and serve meals, including the Lord's Supper (Blue 1998:474–475), and had amenities for water baptism (Linton 2005:238). The Early Church gathering centred on partaking in a meal (Ac 2:46), whereafter various disciplines such as prayer, teaching, singing, and worship followed (Alikin 2010:31). Households were the centres for the propagation of the gospel (Atkinson & Comiskey 2014:77; Last 2016:413), and the household provided the environment in which the early believers learned and practised the doctrine of the church (Birkey 1991:70). The success of meeting in homes is attributed to the privacy, intimacy, and stability of place that households provided. In addition, the intimate home setting provided an ideal environment in which relationships and friendships could be fostered (Linton 2005:238).

Evolution of the Christian gathering

House churches, which were a primary means of Christian gatherings in the first few centuries, have in recent years re-emerged in some parts of the world as a significant and influential centre for Christian worship and fellowship. If some house church proponents are to be believed, house churches will constitute a dominant ecclesial force in the future. There is an evolutionary correlation between the early and contemporary church gatherings which have come full circle: house church meetings proliferated pre-Christendom, while during the Christendom era the church building evolved and dominated as venues for Christian gatherings. Post-Christendom, especially in the ever-de-Christianised West and the religiously persecuted East, church buildings stand empty while there are increasing numbers of house churches.

With the advent of Christendom, the Early Church meetings evolved from gathering in simple household structures to larger extravagant buildings by the 3rd century in response to a number of precipitating factors (Billings 2011:543; Jeong 2018:43). At the onset, when Christianity under Constantine became the official religion of the empire, there was a notable appearance of purpose-built church buildings (De Beer 2018:75; Linton 2005:230; Peterson 1969:266). It is proposed that the construction of church buildings was most likely under the direction of the emperor (Smither 2014:150) and therefore lavish structures replaced simple homes as places of worship (Simson 2009:19). The architectural evolution of the Early Church building is certainly also related to

the growth of the Christian community which required modification of private homes to accommodate larger numbers (Linton 2005:244; Smither 2014:150). The ever-increasing numbers created a demand for larger buildings and thus modifying existing structures progressed to the construction of new buildings (Billings 2011:545). As the exclusive religion of the Roman Empire, all citizens were forced to become members of the Catholic Church which outlawed all other religious groups and gatherings, including meeting in house churches (Simson 2009:20). As a result, home-based gatherings were persecuted and stigmatised which persists as house churches not readily recognised as a valid expression of the Church by certain Christian groups today (Payne 2007:12). While the New Testament house church does not necessarily sanction the modern house church movement, it does draw support from the strong biblical tradition of the church meeting in homes during the first few centuries as well as the continuation of these house church meetings ever since (Prince 2020:47).

House churches have been around for centuries, although they have often been on the periphery of mainstream churches and society. Recently, however, there has been a re-emergence of this concept in various parts of the world. A multiplicity of factors is responsible, and these tend to differ with locality. The highest contemporary house church growth has occurred in parts of the United States of America (USA) (Payne 2007:13), Great Britain (Hollenweger 1980:45), China, and Korea (Hadaway, DuBose & Wright 1987:15–20), with corresponding research of the house church movement in those regions (Jeong 2018:3). Outside of those areas, research on the modern house church movement is scant. This paucity of research may suggest the absence of house churches in those parts or their marginalisation, but because house churches are informal and decentralised, record keeping of their occurrences may be inadequate and imprecise.

It is uncertain how and where the modern house church movement began (Hadaway et al. 1987:14), but there are estimates of millions of people belonging to house churches across the world. According to the Barna Research Group (2006), approximately 9% of the population in the USA is involved in house churches; while the world's largest church, in Seoul, Korea, attributes its growth to small group/house church initiatives, and it is estimated that house churches in China range in the tens of thousands (Hadaway et al. 1987:15–20). The reasons for the increasing involvement in house churches may be because of social, cultural, political, religious, and economic factors. Moreover, historically, the house church thrived during religious persecution and economic hardship. In the East, for example, religious persecution spurred the movement (Hadaway et al. 1987:20), whereas believers in the West are inspired to return to principles espoused by the New Testament church as they understand them (Hollenweger 1980:45; Effa 2015:376). Jeong's (2018) research seems to indicate that the movement in India has a socio-economic bent, as do house churches in Latin America which comprise mainly the poor and

marginalised, who account for nearly 80% of the population. In those parts, the base church generally serves society and the faith community through small group initiatives (Birkey 1991:75). Other areas experiencing house church growth include Nepal, Vietnam (Birkey 1991:75), and Ghana (Adubofour & Badu 2019:179). The literature of the house church movement in South Africa is scant and little is known about the individual house churches themselves.

According to Adubofour and Badu (2019:79), many contemporary church plants in the West start as organic house-churches. This development aligns with the emergence of small faith communities in the post-Christendom era. Small faith communities are an effective vehicle for ministry to reach the untouched, and to effect culture change. These communities provide safe places where relationships are formed, and where people can serve one another, and learn what it means to be the family of God as they live out their Christian faith (Mills 2023:3). Small faith communities tend to better understand and address the immediate needs of society by being in direct contact with and living in close proximity to their communities.

The existence of contemporary house churches has merit for several other reasons. Their particular characteristics make them suitable for grassroots emerging adulthood ministry. The organic and informal nature of house churches fosters familial, relational, and spontaneous fellowship, as well as organic interactions (Simson 2009:4). This fellowship is believed to promote personal spiritual growth (Anderson 2014:14) and contribute to an increase in numbers. Small faith communities provide an intimate environment that facilitates the faith development of its members through mutual participation in disciplines such as prayer, worship, scriptural reading, and meditation. Additionally, young people can learn and grow in their faith through observation and mentorship in conjunction with verbal instruction (Chiroma 2015:75; Folmsbee 2007:39; eds. Yust et al. 2006:255). Small groups promote and allow members to be as hands-on as they wish as believers grow and mature in their faith. In addition, it allows every voice to be heard and every idea to be considered (Prince 2020:143). Small groups tend to better embody the family metaphor found in Scripture which encourages strong relationships and friendships that promote accountability and responsibility (Gehring, cited by Anderson 2014:8).

Therefore, the house church is ideally positioned to provide the mandate found in Hebrews 10:24–25: '[T]o stimulate one another to love and good deeds' and 'to encourage one another'. It facilitates a lifestyle that acts like a spiritual extended family and incubator for fellowship and worship without being dependent on actual church buildings (Birkey 1991:72).

The informal and spontaneous nature facilitates individual participation that allows for questioning and listening, and the use of everyone's skills and talents for the mutual edification of the church, so that 'When you come together,

each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation' (1 Cor 14:26) (Simson 2009:3).

The kinetic participatory model of instruction favoured by small groups equips believers with the knowledge required to walk godly lives. It provides the opportunity to thresh out and make clear what the Bible expects for any situation (Simson 2009:37). Forums that allow for questioning and participation enhance learning as well as encourage corporate and individual spiritual growth. Intergenerational dialogue that happens in small groups allows for questioning, listening, and learning, which benefits both mature and young believers alike. Young believers can learn from mature believers by observing them do 'everything I have commanded you' (Mt 28:20) (Yount 2019:52).

Emerging adulthood: A critical period

Emerging adulthood was first described by Arnett (2000:473) as a distinct life period for young people in mainly industrialised societies. It is often characterised as a turbulent period associated with change and exploration as young people relinquish adolescent roles for more adult ones. During the transition to adulthood, young people frequently abandon the assumptive values and practices of childhood as they chart their own way forward (Arnett 2000:473; Fowler 1981:179). In South Africa, the impact and the socio-economic development context makes this transition even more problematic. The high unemployment rate means that two-thirds of the young people aged 15–24 years (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA] 2018) are unemployed. Unemployment has a direct correlation with poor self-identity and human dignity (Bauman 2005:35; Cloete 2015:514). The concept of 'self' directly relates to the concept of 'God', and thus a poor self-concept results in a poor theological conception. Emerging adulthood is also associated with risk-taking behaviour, such as engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse, substance abuse, speeding and driving under the influence (Arnett 2000:475; Hardie et al. 2013:2), as well as decreasing religious affiliation in comparison to other generations (Bergler 2017:65; Gurney 2007:11; Pew Research Centre 2015; Smith & Snell 2009:141). Religious disaffiliation is complex and multidimensional, manifesting as an abandonment of religious beliefs, decreased importance that young people place on religious and spiritual experiences, or abstaining from church services and other spiritual disciplines (Lee, Pearce & Schorpp 2017:2). Risk-taking behaviour engaged by young adults often has detrimental consequences on society, but the positive correlation between religious adherence and psychosocial, educational, and behavioural outcomes is widely reported (Bird 2016:311; Hardie et al. 2013:2; Moodley 2017:1515).

In addition, the spirituality of young people in the West has become increasingly more individualised. This new individualised belief system involves young people's cafeteria approach to religion, where they pick-and-choose from a range of choices to construct a spirituality that best

suits them (Barry et al. 2020:202; Smith & Snell 2009:137). In so doing, they form new distinctive theological and religious viewpoints that Smith and Denton (2005:162) describe as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Moralistic Therapeutic Deism reflects young people's unwillingness to submit to the specific requirements of Christianity or the disbelief that a real faith would make such demands of them (Lackey 2020:72). This therapeutic belief system is promoted by the assumption that there is a distant god who wants everyone to practise religious tolerance and acceptance (Devlin 2018:44). Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, in fact, a societal issue, and young people are merely mimicking what they have witnessed in adults (Smith & Denton 2005:162). Religious pluralism that incorporates different beliefs from a variety of religions pervades the postmodern world and is contrary to Scripture (cf. Dt 20:3: 'You shall have no other gods before me') (Prince 2020:84). Much like the pluralistic religious practices from other parts of the world, the religious practice for many black Africans is dualistic, combining African Traditional Religion (ATR) alongside formal Christian practice (Brittian, Lewin & Norris 2013:7; Pew Research Centre 2018). However, in South Africa, many black Africans are often negative towards Christianity, which is viewed as a colonial export (Knoetze 2017:5).

Against this backdrop, emerging adulthood is considered a critical age group that needs nurturing. A house church missional model for emerging adult ministry is proposed because this generational group seems to be avoiding traditional ecclesial forms.

Theological reflection of emerging adulthood and *missio Dei*

If emerging adults are disaffiliated from current church structures, then the church must explore creative and alternative solutions to engage and minister to this group, reaching outside itself to address them at the point of their need. It can no longer be expected that young people will come to a church building to hear and experience the love of God. Rather, the church must consider ministry that goes to these lost sheep. All Christian ministries must therefore be founded on and revolve around the trinitarian nature of God which is both missional and relational (Mills 2023:2). The Great Commission directive to 'go and make disciples of all men' (Mt 28:19) addresses the missional aspect of going to the lost instead of expecting them to come to the church, just as Jesus was also sent to seek and to save the lost (Lk 19:10). That the church is sent is directly borne from God's mission which originates in his trinitarian nature.

A missional hermeneutic, as proposed by Bosch (2011), Wright (2006), Bauckham (2003), Brownson (1994), and others, speaks of the missionary character of the Bible, which places mission as the fundamental and primary objective of Scripture. It rightly replaces the notion of mission as a church-initiated enterprise with the understanding that mission is derived from the very nature of God (Bosch 2011:546/7) who has a church for his mission (Wright 2010:46). Because the Bible is God's story about who he is and what he is doing in his world, a missional hermeneutic provides the scriptural tools required for the church, called and empowered by God, to participate in his mission, the *missio Dei* (Mills 2023:3). God is the sending God who sends the church into the world to witness and to make him visible. Du Preez, Hendricks and Carl (2013:3–4) explain that in the trinitarian nature of mission, the Father is the source and initiator of the *missio Dei*; the Son is the incarnational presence of the *missio Dei*; and the Spirit, the empowering presence of the *missio Dei*, which directs and empowers the church for this mission. The Holy Spirit both initiates and guides the church in mission as they are witnesses of the gospel of Christ (Bosch 2011:115, 117). As witnesses, the church points people to what God has done and is doing in the world. They point to God's salvation – the liberation from sin and a new life in Christ. As witnesses, the church understands the responsibility and urgency of the gospel message that sets sinners free from eternal damnation, and therefore as true disciples the church readily engages in God's mission of redeeming and saving people (Bosch 2011:18).

God is a relational God; Father, Son, and Spirit are in relational unity and equality, and God's desire is to share his love and service in relationship with humans (Bosch 2011:547). A focus on relationships in ministry is therefore important because it mirrors the triune God's nature and interactions with humanity. Consequently, significant relationships with other Christians matter because they teach each other something about what God is like (Dean & Foster 1998:30). In this way, the community of faith provides the environment for young people to learn from the examples of mature believers in their walk with God.

The relational and missional nature of God is evident in how the church conducts itself, having both an interwoven inward and outward focus. The church's inward focus is demonstrated by the relationships which build up people's holy faith through the practices of fellowship, prayer, breaking of bread, and devotion to biblical instruction. The outward focus means that the church actively engages society with the gospel (Bosch 2011:121). A church of faith understands its call and privilege to God's mission in the world and continually builds itself in the faith because it understands that God's mission includes living a life of holiness that cannot be achieved outside of a relationship with him. The Heidelberg Catechism describes the church as 'the communion of saints', that is,

> Firstly, that all and everyone, who believes, being members of Christ, are in common, partakers of him, and of all his riches and gifts; secondly, that everyone must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members. (Christian Reformed Church n.d.)

The church is therefore called to participate in the life and suffering of Christ, and to be actively involved in his mission in the lives of individuals, in the life of the community of faith, and in the world. Sharing of life and suffering implies a relationship and personal bond with Christ (Nel 1994:101)

and with his body, and outside of this communion with Christ, the mission of the church would not be possible (Baker 2013:38).

God's mission relates to his activity in the world in which the church is called to participate (Bosch 2011:10, 401). God's activity is manifold and includes the salvation of the world. Therefore, the mission of God's people, as an extension of and participation in his mission, happens when disciples walk in righteousness and justice and 'work for holistic redemptive blessing for the oppressed' (Wright 2010:128). Believers are thus called to represent God by their verbal witness and by living lives of practical holiness that draw people to God (Wright 2010:129). Evangelism, an act of participation in God's mission, therefore, takes on the form of verbal proclamation and physical demonstration as believers declare God's salvation to the lost.

A missional church empowers believers to make an impact on their sphere by declaring the Good News and demonstrating it through their daily lives – in word and deed. By participating in God's redemptive plan, the church recognises its role as agents of restoration in the world. A missional model should equip believers to a lifelong commitment to the faith as it helps people understand and embrace their responsibility to the advancement of God's kingdom and mission of healing and redemption in the rest of creation. A missional model helps the church attain John 10:10's abundant life – living one's life to the full – which is realised as believers mature spiritually and are enabled, empowered, and motivated to minister to the lost and to disciple them (Nel 2015:1). It involves getting people saved and helping them grow and mature into the stature of Christ.

Identifying and understanding the peculiar characteristics of emerging adulthood will enable the house church to minister to this group more effectively. Because emerging adulthood is a time of questioning and wrestling, particularly with the assumptive values and beliefs of childhood, this period presents an opportune time for the church to get involved in their lives to properly guide them with sound theological training and wisdom towards their maturity of faith. Some other notable characteristics of emerging adulthood highlighted by Prince (2020) include their hands-on and participatory approach in the religious, professional, and social structures that they inhabit (2020:31). Thus, the role of the church is to make emerging adults aware of their role as participants in God's mission in their lives and in the world. The church should allow emerging adults to practise their faith in safe environments that afford them the ability to share their skills and talents for the greater good. Emerging adults have the desire to have their voices heard (2020:99), and the church should encourage and guide them in how to use their voice to declare the Good News of the gospel in a dying world. That they want to bring about change (2020:137) is closely aligned with God's mission to share his goodness and redemption with the world.

For emerging adults to effect meaningful and lasting transformation in their lives and within their communities, they should be taught to genuinely replicate the life and activities of Jesus in all areas (Gibson 2016:157). This happens when sound theological teaching is accompanied with discipleship as they learn how to live a life that glorifies God (Folmsbee 2007:39). Discipleship involves following, obeying, and participating in God's mission (Brueggemann 2004:122). This is done by teaching young people how to pray, explaining the importance of fellowship, and Scripture devotion (Groome 1980:73–77). These behaviours are best learnt in environments that are mutually inclusive and authentic, and that allow for open observation and participation. Importantly, they involve enduring relationships with young people. Mature believers are to set godly examples for young people to follow since true discipleship involves learning about God and learning how to live a life that glorifies him (Folmsbee 2007:39; Powell, Griffin & Crawford 2011:34).

A missional model of ministry for house churches in South Africa

Prince (2023), from her study 'House churches in urban South Africa as agents for missional faith formation amongst emerging adults', found that house churches are not purposefully attending to the challenges of emerging adults in the South African context. In light of her findings, she proposes a missional model of ministry for house churches to address the ministry needs of emerging adulthood in South Africa more wholistically. Prince (2023:270) concluded her study with several causative factors for the religious disaffiliation of emerging adults. These are highlighted below with suggestions for a workable model for emerging adulthood ministry.

Emerging adulthood spirituality

Young people tend to have a more accommodative pluralistic spirituality that results in them adopting a range of beliefs and practices from different religions to form one that best suits them (Barry et al. 2020:202; Smith & Denton 2005:162). Wholistic ministry should incorporate an understanding of the spirituality of young people, which sees them open to other religions alongside their Christian faith. To that end, interfaith dialogue (Bosch 2011:494–501) is important as it can aid in the formation of a Christian specific identity since the uniqueness of Christ will be grasped.

Wholistic biblical teaching

Wholistic emerging adult ministry should address their religious pluralism. This is achieved by providing relevant biblical teaching. A feature in MTD is that young people do not believe and accept the demands for loyalty and commitment to the Christian faith (Devlin 2018:44). It is essential that the Word of God is taught in its fullness if emerging adults are to grow into the fullness of who they are called to be in Christ (Groome 1980:49–51; Root & Dean

2011:71). Emerging adults need to be taught not only the Word, but also adherence to the Word. If a low view of biblical instruction permeates a ministry, then young people are likely to demonstrate the same low view of the requirements of Scripture. It is therefore essential that the seriousness of the Word of God be communicated to emerging adults if they are to view the church with any seriousness.

Create opportunities for ministry

Church ministry is not just about the individual but is communal as well; it has both an internal (individual-church) and an external (church-world) focus (Bosch 2011:121). A ministry model should thus emphasise evangelism as well as discipleship which are equally important (Moser & Nel 2019:1). Small faith communities encourage group participation and involvement. Emerging adults should be encouraged to use their gifts and talents to edify the body (internal focus) and reach out to and evangelise the world (external focus). In other words, emerging adults need to take what they have learnt and put it into practice.

Create opportunities for intergenerational dialogue

There is a need for intergenerational dialogue in emerging adulthood ministry. Intergenerational ministries have been demonstrated by Williams, Irby and Warner (2016:9) to be more effective in retaining young people than ministries that are categorised by age. This is because all age groups participate in all church activities at the same time. In addition, emerging adults want to learn but they also want to contribute. Intergenerational ministries can provide a platform where people learn from and contribute to the faith formation of others. An intimate setting allows people to express themselves and question one another about the different aspects of their faith or other challenges they may be experiencing within a safe environment.

Godly leadership

Leadership is instrumental in ministry (Niemandt 2019). A key aspect for emerging adults is their general preference for inclusive and participatory leadership styles that allow everyone the opportunity to have a say and to participate (Anderson 2014:48; Mitchell, Poest & Espinoza 2016:35). Leaders therefore need to create a space for young people to get involved in the life of the church. They must have a strong theological foundation and must be godly examples from which young people can learn and live out their faith. Godly living inspires people to mature in Christlikeness because it demonstrates and encourages others to cultivate a relationship with Christ (Knoetze 2015:7).

Leaders also need to be intentional in raising up other leaders by creating opportunities for growth, which may include nominating, appointing, and training up assistant leaders.

Transdisciplinary approach to ministry

Emerging adult ministry requires a transdisciplinary approach that involves the development of the entire personhood. Emerging adults tend to want to make an impact and change the world for good (supportive of socially driven causes) (Smith & Snell 2009:295; Zukin & Szeltner 2012:2). Therefore, the house church should look for opportunities to involve emerging adults in outreach programmes that address the physical and spiritual needs of the community. This can fulfil their desire to contribute to the greater good, and to be part of something larger than themselves. Moreover, it also allows them the opportunity to live for God in achieving his mission.

Because the house church is 'closer to the ground', it is more in tune with and has a good understanding of the needs and circumstances of its community, which provides emerging adults with the channels and access to get involved and make an impact in the community. Another aspect of the wholistic ministry of emerging adults involves life skills. Here the emphasis should be on creating awareness and upskilling young people to cope with multiple challenges that are often associated with emerging adulthood and the contextual realities of South Africa, such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, youth unemployment, among others. (Modise 2018:14). The house church should assist young people to identify opportunities to affirm their worth, for example, through forums, where they are allowed to participate in decision making and policymaking in a meaningful way.

The house church should also oppose cultural structures that devalue and oppress members of society. For instance, it can oppose negative media content and advocate for wholesome content through engagement with government and media houses. The house church also has the responsibility to teach young people to affirm godly values.

Progressive plan to recruit emerging adults

Emerging adulthood is peculiar from other generations which requires out-of-the-box thinking to recruit and retain this group.

Firstly, since fellowship with peers is an important characteristic for young people, house churches should strengthen their network with other house churches and faith communities to provide support to one another and create opportunities for emerging adults to connect with each other.

Secondly, the house church should give attention to evangelism. Evangelism is an 'essential dimension' of mission (Bosch 2011:414) and can occur in two ways:

1. It involves emerging adults belonging to the house church getting involved in outreach (evangelism) programmes and opportunities created by the house church. Evangelism allows emerging adults to live out

their faith in practical ways by proclaiming the Good News to a lost and dying world (Knoetze 2017). This includes sharing their faith within their immediate circle of influence and by practically demonstrating this in the way that they live.

2. Evangelism in the house church involves reaching out to, and recruiting emerging adults. To effectively reach this group, the house church should use methods and strategies that are likely to capture their attention and interest. Advertising the location of the house church and making it easily accessible to those in the surrounding area are important steps in attracting emerging adults. This also requires clear communication about the purpose, beliefs, and practices of the house church, including its emphasis on intimate and relational connections, a return to biblical principles, and opportunities for involvement in various ministries and social causes.

Conclusion

This article presented the missional role that house churches can play in emerging adult ministry. Emerging adults tend to be less inclined to belong to any particular religious structure than other groups, which challenges the church to find alternative and creative ways to attract and retain this group. Emerging adults can greatly benefit from small faith communities such as house churches. However, these faith communities must proactively seek out those who are lost and nurture them towards godliness. The historical role of house churches in Christianity positioned them as centres for worship and fellowship, and they were instrumental in the propagation and growth of the Christian faith. The existence of the modern house church also has merit because they can provide environments for fellowship with God and other believers, and the opportunities for the spiritual and physical needs of one another to be met. Moreover, house churches provide the framework for believers to learn and exercise the doctrines of the church.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

Prof. J.J.K. was the supervisor of the PhD thesis that led to this article, and he also edited the article and made some contributions.

R.P. did all the research and wrote a PhD thesis on the topic, and the article is a fruit of the thesis.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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