



Inclusivity in youth ministry praxis and the challenge of mainline church attrition



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Despite a century of professional development in youth ministry, the American church continues to face generational attrition. This article explores this paradox, employing practical theology to scrutinise the historical praxis and philosophies shaping 20th-century youth ministry. I have taken Nel's work on inclusive missional ecclesiology as my basic point of departure, analysing four interconnected 'texts': Ecclesiological perspective, a historical review of youth ministry evolution, adolescents' developmental locus within congregations, and a qualitative study featuring interviews with members from seven American churches involved in youth ministry. The investigation highlights the necessity for a paradigm shift in youth ministry from an exclusive programme to a more inclusive missional approach. It urges recognising adolescents as equals in congregational life, fostering an environment that not only retains but also nurtures them as indispensable community members. By adhering to this reformed vision, the church can address the persistent crisis of generational attrition effectively, encouraging the collaborative growth of the American church with the active participation of its adolescent members. It suggests a path forward that sees youth not as future church, but active contributors to the contemporary church ecosystem.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research guides churches in considering the theological, sociological, and developmental implications of adolescent inclusion through the lens of missional ecclesiology, suggesting adolescent inclusion is critical to contextual missional praxis.

Keywords: youth; inclusion; missional; attrition; belonging; kinship; United States of America; youth group.

Introduction

This article seeks to answer a critical question: Despite a century of efforts in terms of research, training, and resource allocation directed towards youth ministry, why is the American church currently facing a generational crisis of attrition? This core inquiry stems from the longstanding issue of declining youth participation, a situation brought into sharper focus during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Contrary to common perception, recent research conducted by the University of Chicago establishes that the pandemic has not substantially impacted religious affiliations. Instead, it has transformed the modalities through which individuals interact with religious services, pivoting largely towards online platforms (cf. Witt-Swanson, Benz & Cox 2023). This revelation negates the assumption that the pandemic has been a principal factor in reducing church engagement.

Further scrutiny unveils that the alterations in engagement patterns observed in the post-pandemic period are not anomalous but part of an ongoing generational trend. This beckons a deeper exploration of the underlying causes, transcending the immediate impacts of the pandemic, to understand the continuous decline in youth participation within the American church landscape.

The American church in transition

Long before the pandemic, the American church was grappling with crucial transitions described by Olsen (2008:37) as moving from *Christian to post-Christian*, *modern to postmodern*, and *monoethnic to multi-ethnic*. In truth, the decrease in engagement has been unravelling slowly since the mid-20th century, with efforts to revise methodologies falling short in halting the progressive attrition.

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Root (2021:5) insightfully terms the prevalent mood as 'congregational depression', highlighting a general loss of youthful vigour and an overwhelming feeling of despondency hampering the church's mission and pace. The goal of this research is to address the question of why, after decades of research, training, and resource development, is the American church continuing this slow attrition? I believe this study provides ample argument that the factors are not external or pedagogical, and that practical theology offers a path forward through an inclusive missional ecclesiology that invites adolescent participation as equals while recognising their contextual uniqueness and integrating that uniqueness into a local congregational ecclesial life.

Inclusive and missional as point of departure

What is suggested in the research presented in this article is that churches that have practised an exclusivism as programmatic segregated youth ministry require a reconsideration of its foundational theology through a missional lens. As a point of departure, this research finds its rooting in the work of Nel (2015:8) and his work in developing an inclusive missional framework for ministry. With the inclusive missional framework as one influential text, I have identified three other 'texts' to draw upon for this study.

The adolescent text

While I affirm that this research has implications far beyond a single age group, I have chosen adolescence as the predominant lens. As a focal point, the developmental period of adolescence is chosen for two primary reasons.

The *first* is the locus of adolescence as the hinge point of affiliation (or non-affiliation) within faith as a matter of self-identification. In other words, the developmental characteristic of identity formation in adolescence makes this a point of decision for how a person is going to relate to faith and a faith community. That locus is often relegated to preparation for 'joining' the church that keeps them disconnected from greater church life. However, Nel (2018:195) with reference to Little (1968:15), names this as the 'future church heresy'. From the vast amount of resource allocation and professional training given to the reaching and discipleship of teenagers reflected in the research question, it would be false to suggest that the church does not consider the teenage years as valuable and worthy of attention. Yet, the pattern of attrition begins in the younger generations. A Hartford Seminary study on Faith Communities Today (2021) noted that while senior citizens (65 and over) make up only 17% of the United States of America (US) population, they make up 33% of the churches. Conversely, 18–24-year-olds make up 24% of the population but only 14% of the churches. Considering the locus of adolescence in identity-making, it is impossible to divorce the experience of attrition from the youth population.

The second reason to offer adolescence as a focal point is the nature of identity formation in the developmental stage of

adolescence. The nature of identity formation in the liminal experience of human development has much to teach the church. Nel (2018:3) has rightly argued for the placement of youth ministry firmly as practical theology as well as for the church to consider the process of identity formation as foundational to a missional orientation. He refers to it as 'being' instead of 'doing' missions because we 'do *because* we are' (Nel 2015:11). Adolescents are in a process of identity formation that often requires communal bonds. The formation of identity within the isolated subculture of 'teenage' life does not allow identity formation within the embodied wisdom of a mature congregation (cf. Wimberly & Parker 2011).

The historical text

The history of youth ministry in the US context is considered in this research as the *second* text. The interpretive work of practical theology (Osmer 2008:4) requires a consideration of the historical development of hegemonic youth ministry. Through a historical lens, not only do the theological building blocks become visible, but so does the cultural imagination and ethnographic influences that formed these blocks. For this reason, the focus is narrowed to the US context, and further to the US hegemony. The US has been the geographical and cultural forge that has given rise to a large percentage of these resources yet continues a pattern of attrition. The answer cannot be more or improved resources from this same source. The research suggests a theological misapplication of adolescent theory that resulted in the institutionalisation of the liminal period of human development. It is believed that a critique of youth ministry from the soil of US hegemonic imagination will provide a valuable tool for the global church to consider its own praxis.

The empirical text

The *final* text will be an empirical sampling of US churches who have experienced youth ministry for more than two generations. The sampling is not large enough to be considered an exhaustive study on its own, but combined with the theoretical work done, it provides a corroboration of the theoretical findings.

The argument will follow a path from the intrinsic conceptualisations of youth ministry considering 19th and 20th century understandings and compare the application of these conceptualisations to an inclusive missional ecclesiological framework. The empirical results are introduced to corroborate the theoretical findings. The intent of this study is to invite a realignment of adolescents into the corporate identity of congregational life.

These four texts, namely the theoretical framework of inclusive missional ecclesiology, the historical framework of US hegemonic youth ministry, the locus of adolescents, and the discoveries of the empirical research, present evidence for a reformation in the church's adolescent ministry that attends to the question at hand.

Defining what is meant by 'crisis'

Before beginning the argument, what is meant by crisis of attrition in the research question should be clarified. I use it to amend the stated crisis, namely a loss in membership, with what would constitute an appropriate crisis, a loss of ecclesial identity. I align with Guder (2015:20–21) who suggests that 'For the long established churches of Western Christendom, this movement from normativity to theological and cultural pluralism has been a difficult readjustment'. Consideration of this viewpoint suggests that the felt 'crisis' that the American church is facing is one of influence and placement within American society. Guder (2015:30) further points out that the 'cultural and legal privileging of churches is rapidly disappearing (e.g., repeal of blue laws, increasingly restrictive zoning regulation of churches, loss of the "protected Sunday morning")'. Guder (2015:30) also points out that the growing significance of the 'so-called evangelical' Christianity in the United States, and especially of its political influence, complicates the discussion of the 'end of Christendom'; however, the very fact that the argument of crisis stems from cultural or political influence suggests a misalignment with mission. There is clearly a reduction of presence in the pews and increased competition for American attention and dollars. In other words, it is Christendom that is in a season of crisis, but that should have little effect on ecclesial identity. Nel (2015:14) highlights the 'building up' orientation of the people of God vs. the numerical growth or influence of the local parish. If the hierarchal power structures and cultural influence of Christendom are not considered to be synonymous with ecclesia, then the call to the church is not the restoration of influence or place within American society, but a re-engagement and reformation within the prime motivator of divine mission. This clarification lays the foundation for inclusion of adolescents as participants in that mission.

Defining adolescence

By way of foundation, it is important to note how the concept of adolescence is used in this article. Adolescence as a liminal stage existing between childhood and adulthood is not a new concept. For a well-considered argument towards this, I offer Kirgiss (2015). The framework of adolescence here is reflected by Chinn (2009:13) who suggests that industrialisation and subsequent immigration were the seeds of the creation and identification of teenagers as a separate cultural cohort. She argues that adolescence is not a universal, biologically determined phenomenon but rather a socially constructed concept that has evolved over time. When we speak of the development of adolescence, it is not a stage of human development that we are critiquing but the systematic shaping of the adolescent cohort within and after the industrial revolution. If the growing concept of adolescence itself is connected to industrialisation, Nel's (2018:20) observation that 'youth ministry did not really exist before the industrial revolution' draws us into a consideration of youth ministry within the context of economic and cultural factors rather than the theological factors that should drive the formation of praxis.

Adolescent identity formation

The inclusion of adolescent development within this research is vital. The sense of belonging, experienced within communal structures, coupled with a clear sense of purpose (mission) is critical to pass through liminality with a mature identity. This movement towards maturity is mirrored in the communal life of the church. Nel (2015:19) provides a reminder 'that spiritual maturity is not a state, but a way of growing in faith, hope, and love' noting that being in this state of fluidity is essential to revealing 'the real nature of the only true God'. There is a humility that is required in this process that 'breaks down the self-sufficiency of groups of believers' which Nel (2015:20) identifies as a common characteristic of middle-class communities that often play host to youth ministries. This study will argue in the following sections that it was an ingrained cultural self-sufficiency that served as the laboratory that gave birth to much of what became understood as youth ministry in the US.

A short walk through history

The text of history is vital to understanding the development of youth ministry as both a praxis and a theological laboratory. More comprehensive work has already been done on the history of youth ministry in the 19th and 20th century (See Kett 1977; Senter 2010) as well as the impact of relational youth ministry as an orthopraxis (Root 2007). This section offers only a brief consideration to frame contemporary praxis as an interpretive task by highlighting the ecclesiological impact ministry developed predominantly in 20th century US.

Hall and the moral panic

This cultural orientation towards protecting adolescents roots back to Hall (1904) and the emotional tension (*strum and drang*) that puts the adolescent in conflict with themselves. This pendulum of emotions will eventually result in adulthood, but an unaddressed (or unprotected) adolescence can lead to crime or other negative social conditions. Danger to the adolescent arises when 'home, school, church, fail to recognize its nature and needs and, perhaps most of all, its perils' (Hall 1904:xiv). Recognising that in 1904, high school attendance was still rare (Senter 2010:13) and that 'home' among the immigrant poor flooding to industrialised cities did not reflect the homelife of Hall's imagination, it becomes clear that Hall's call was for the protection of a particular privileged class of youth. As Chinn (2009:18) points out, 'Like his eugenicist peers, Hall was deeply alarmed by the promiscuous mixing of ethnic groups ...' which would create 'instability' within the race of Hall (1904:322). This 'urban hothouse life' (Hall 1904:322) that Hall described came across the middle-class and upper-class imagination like a clarion. This fuelled the emerging belief that there was what Senter (2010:96) refers to as a 'youth problem' or what Foster (2001:93) calls the 'moral panic' that needed to be addressed. This panic or problem is far more than an identification of the

unique characteristics of adolescence. A liminal stage of human development was understood before the field of psychology (Kirgiss 2015), but the xenophobia brought on by urbanisation and immigration resulted in a very different application of adolescent theory among the middle and upper class. Hall (1904:89) suggested that youth 'should have its fling' but with 'careful supervision and wise direction'. Kett (1977:211) sees this influence as thread emerging through developing youth organisations, particularly churches, in the late 19th century. This is prior to Hall demonstrating how these ideas were already part of the cultural imagination. This article argues that this moral panic is the soil that influenced the ecclesial posture towards youth in the 20th century.

Rise of youth ministry

Kett (1977:210) also correlates the rise of modern youth ministry with the sociological anxieties of the early 20th century. He indicts Christian youth ministry as a factor in the invention of adolescence where 'prolonged immaturity could sustain itself' and where one could 'shield young people from contamination by the alien culture of big cities and immigrants'. Root (2000:60) considers contemporary youth ministry praxis in a similar fashion as the 'slowing down' of adolescent development. Early attempts at youth ministry can trace its roots to Hall and the hegemonic fears related to the cultural changes of industrialisation and immigration. Hall had given name to the youth problem that became identifiable in a changing social climate. Hall (1924:136) himself had a conversion experience in what he would describe to be his teenage years. In his watershed work, he cites anecdotal evidence from evangelist D.L. Moody and others suggesting that because of the turbulence of this period of life, the young are more open to crisis conversions, the hallmark of youth ministry in the 20th century (Hall 1905:288; cf. Senter 2010:44). Senter (2010:85) also reminds us that the earliest evangelistic efforts of Moody was 'Mr. Moody's Sunday School' in Chicago. The Sunday School epitomised directed ministry towards children that has been a hallmark of modern society. This lives in sharp contrast to Bushnell's (1876) work that the young are nurtured in Christian families. Bushnell's perspective became overshadowed by the 'crisis' posture of Christian conversion and growth that grew from cultural renegotiation regarding adolescence. Kett (1977:114) suggests that Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* existed as a critique of the popular revival-style conversion. Though Kett (1977:84) considers Bushnell's approach as 'utopian', he does suggest that it is only an option for the middle class who can have a present family life. In the popular evangelical viewpoint of the day, the streets were crawling with urban dangers and youth on the edge rather than caring families. Bushnell's suggestion that true conversion is of a gradual nature is overshadowed by the more popular idea of radical change, something that flows from Moody and other revivalists and is clearly tied to the urban fear mongering popular at the time. Nel (2018:30) considers that this 'decision making' approach to salvation 'is backfiring on the church in a serious way.' Conversion

of the teenager in a crisis experience became the driving theology of American Protestant youth ministry, eclipsing the work of Bushnell and paving the way for a unique new approach to reaching the newly forming adolescent cohort.

While Hall's work may have given language to cultural fears, it was in this environment that movements such as the Clark's Young People's Society for Christian Endeavor that popularised a 'pledge' style approach to encourage a protestant ethical construct flourished (Senter 2010:158). The growing emergence of an adolescent cohort in urban areas had already resulted in a growing panic among church leaders as this new cohort found new places to grow their identity. To counter this, pledge movements became popular ways to ensure 'Christian' practice, patterned after popular 'temperance pledges' (Senter 2010:58). After the initial pledge was published, Clark was forced to write a new pledge that included supporting the local church and attending all regular Sunday and mid-week services because of the fears that Clark's pledge would take the young from church (Senter 2010:58). While the pledge approach went out of vogue in the early 20th century, replaced by the new movement of relational ministry, Christian Endeavor demonstrates a growing orientation to more cohort-specific programming for youth.

Youth ministry and 'The self-chosen relationship'

The roots of modern youth ministry grew very distinctly from an ecclesial body. By the early 20th century, suburban adolescents had made the transition from factory or farm life to public high school where the cultural cohort became so strong that they could be identifiable by the term 'teenager' and all could form a picture in their mind. Efforts to reach the members of this sub-culture were not based within churches, but by entrepreneurs that utilised the culture of teenagers to draw them to an evangelistic message of a relational Christ. Young Life and its founder Jim Rayburn are arguably the innovators of this new approach to ministry and require focussed consideration; but as Root (2007:49) points out, they did not arrive on the scene alone. Mediums such as radio and the pep rally were adopted by the Youth for Christ (YFC) movement (Senter 2010:261) with massive success. The movement's founder Jack Wyrzten's conversion provides a foundation for the praxis that drove the movement. Wyrzten's conversion was not in a church, but among a group of friends that did not seek out a church post-conversion, but formed their own group which they named Chi Beta Alpha (Senter 2010:261). Without the need for a church, Wyrzten was free to capitalise on the new medium of radio patterned after Percy Crawford's 'Young People of the Air' (Senter 2010:260). The success of Wyrzten's YFC movement cannot be argued from a quantitative standpoint as thousands would attend the live broadcasts known as Youth for Christ rallies that could fill large stadiums such as Madison Square Garden and Chicago's Soldier Field. Youth for Christ rallies sprang up independently across the country, eventually nationalising the movement under the leadership of Torrey Johnson and with Billy

Graham as the first staff evangelist. Graham's message was simple and, as Root (2007:46–47) points out, struck a distinct nationalistic message of triumph over atheistic communism and the need for a personal (individual) relationship with Jesus Christ. This message laid the foundation for a distinctly American theological construct that would shape ecclesial life into the 21st century. Local YFC chapters across the country had begun to form a new model of ministry work that bypassed the church and provided support for staff from independent contributors who had a vested interest in the youth problem. These entrepreneurial youth staff will eventually form the foundation youth group and/or youth pastor movement in the latter half of the 20th century (Senter 2010:250). But it was Rayburn's Young Life Campaign, formed before the YFC movement, that would shape an orthopraxy of ministry that would define not only the exercise of age-specific youth ministry, but a theological foundation of imbedded incarnational relational theology (Root 2007:48–49; Tanis & Ward 2016:23).

Emerging from a strict fundamentalism that may have found more comfort with the pledge movement of the earlier generation, Rayburn became captured with the soteriological construct of Lewis Sperry Chafer (Rayburn III 1999:27) who taught a finality to the work of Christ that offered liberative freedom to Rayburn. Pahl (2000:68) offers that this is in contrast to the Youth for Christ movement that while using modern methods, it still promoted strict doctrines and moral standards in a person's standing before God. Rayburn chose a relational approach that involved striking up conversations with teenagers about what interested them and then inviting them to participate in clubs (Cailliet 1963:13; Root 2007:52). Root (2007:53) suggests that Rayburn himself had to 'accrue a currency of cool' to do this incarnate work. These popular students lent their social capital to Rayburn. It was the capitalisation on the 'self-chosen relationship' that met the adolescent at their most vulnerable (Root 2007:53). Adolescents were in historically uncharted waters with the creation of public high schools and the subsequent development of a youth culture. Rather than forming an identity within a broader intergenerational culture, adolescents were now in cohorts with specific cultural demands and structures. The relational (or friendship) approach not only met adolescents at a unique pain point, but the promise of 'club' gave them a place to belong. Root (2007:54) again highlights that prior to 1940, this type of ministry strategy would not be needed, but with the 'modernizing of family, local community, and society', self-chosen relationships 'become the only location for intimacy'. This created a dramatic shift theologically. With the 1960s emergence of the youth group, fuelled by resources from former YFC staff, relational ministry not only became the dominant youth ministry style, but with generations raised within this message, the gospel became a relational gospel and the mission of the church simply relational.

Within the relational framework, adolescents are often given a great deal of activities, and receive enthusiastic support from a congregation, but they have limited agency in the

contributive life of a congregation. The practice of this form of youth ministry remains largely uncritiqued and is still the normative practice of many hegemonic churches, even in the face of statistical loss. However, allowing youth ministry to exist as a vital branch of practical theology allows a critical critique of ministry with youth through an inclusive missional lens.

Identity-driven churches

Nel (2015:205) argued adeptly for a reformation that begins with a collective discovery of, or reconnection with, a missional identity. Through this lens, the American church is indeed in a crisis, but not one of membership but of identity. Or maybe it is better said, the crisis stems from how members form identity as the community of Christ. To be rightly aligned, there must be a recognition or realignment with the central nature of the church. Nel (2015:41) argues that the nature of the church is as a creation of God that continues the mission of God in the world. Bosch (1995:33) puts it this way: 'Mission is more and different from recruitment to our brand of religion; it is the alerting people to the universal reign of God through Christ'. While this strikes as Christendom language, I believe a proper reading of Bosch would lead to a reflection of the presence of God *already at work* in the world and the church getting in sync with that liberative and healing work. This simple statement has powerful implications to how church members see themselves in relation to the ecclesia and how they see each of the other members. A characteristic of middle-class Americans is to see themselves as the 'clients' or 'customers' of the church to accomplish personal or cultural goals (Mercer 2005:120; Nel 2015:20). Nel (2015:14) provides a comprehensive consideration of the question of identity as he sees the thru-line of God's 'building up' of a community throughout the scriptures. There is ample example of God's 'tearing down' of the community, but it is always with an 'orientation toward the future' that suggests the building of the people of God (Nel 2015:14; cf. Jr 31:31–35).

It is the orientation towards hope that does not require mere human agency; 'No longer will a man say to his neighbour 'Know the LORD'. The reformation is God's as God's people accesses the movement of God's presence among and within; 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their heart'. We cannot help but note that sense of belonging critically involves every age from 'the least of them to the greatest' in contributing to the theological life of the congregation. Nel (2015:15) further points out, for it to be a movement of God, a missional aspect is required. Nel (2015:15) argues this line of building (*oikodomein*) is drawn from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Within the messianic concept, God continues to be the subject and builder. God uniquely exists within God's people in the person of Jesus and through his death and life is the builder of his ecclesia, being built to withstand even the gates of hell (Mt 16:17). Paul continues the building motif, comparing the ecclesia to a body with vast diversity that is vitalised by the head which is Christ (Col 1:18) and the writer of Hebrews compares the ecclesia to

a building 'whose maker and builder is God' (Heb 11:10), also continuing the future orientation. Even the gifts received are given 'for the building up of the congregation' (Nel 2015:17; cf. 1 Cor 12:1–11) which has both the aspect of belonging and mission. Both are critical to identity formation and orient us towards an inclusive and missional ecclesiology that provides a critical departure point for ministry with adolescents.

A willingness to serve, driven by love

Nel (2015:20) also restates the missional aspect as he reminds us that a departure from this middle-class self-sufficiency 'entails a willingness to serve' that is 'driven by love' and challenges a 'sick self-righteousness' and transforms the disciple from consumer to a disciple committed to 'the building of the body as a whole' of which everyone is a vital and living part.

This research intends to make vital connections between the identity formation that is vital to the maturity of the body of Christ and the characteristics of maturity that are vital to the formation of people in the liminal stage of adolescence. In both the cases, we should not understand maturity as a terminus, but as a locus of maturity that continues to build with achieved characteristics of vital belonging (inclusion) and mission (purpose). This transforms the idea of building from the strategies of 'church growth' to an ever-deepening sense of identity. Church growth strategies have marketplace or power implications within them, whereas maturity focusses on the aspect of *becoming* as the predominant driving force. Rather than strategies of success, we begin to consider the uniqueness of adolescence and our ministry with them in terms of belonging and mission. In other words, how do we include their uniqueness (gifts, context, person) into the constantly developing ecclesial mission? Referring to the future church heresy, Nel (2015:28) sees the misalignment of these ideas in many churches' approach to youth ministry as 'an investment for the sake of the future of the given institution.' Resources are seen to be 'banked' in the adolescent cohort so that members have confidence that the institution will continue much in its present form. Framed in this manner, it is obvious that both the institution and the adolescent are being set up for inevitable failure. It is no longer building that is the goal, but preservation. Within a preservationist framework, it is entirely possible that the church can lose its sense of purpose (Nel 2015:28).

This framing does require us to consider if there is a distinction between the congregation (*ecclesia*) and the institution (church/*kirche*). Nel (2015:41) argues, and rightly so, that the nature of the church as an expression of God does require us to consider this distinction and rethink our ecclesiology, though it does not flow that we must abandon the institution. I would affirm this perspective for fear that this research is used to argue the abandonment of adolescent education or socialisation. It is more of a matter of what we consider ourselves partners in building.

The distinction does not require an ecclesial binary (*ecclesia* OR *kirche*) any more than it requires us to choose between *including* adolescents in congregational life or a *distinctive* youth ministry that exists in parallel. I affirm the 'included but differentiated' posture of youth ministry suggested by Nel (2018:13). This research demonstrates the vital nature of developing a distinctive engagement with the adolescent cohort that recognises their uniqueness and seeks to recognise that uniqueness as one of the informative 'texts' that forms and reforms the mission of a local congregation.

Qualitative research sample

To test the theoretical insights, I conducted interviews with seven churches that span a diverse ethnic and economic range to discern any common traits that align with an inclusive missional blueprint. The central indicators of growth in these congregations were a palpable sense of belonging and a clearly defined mission. It is important to clarify that 'growth' in this study does not pertain to numerical expansion, a metric often employed in marketplace contexts that potentially complicates the comprehensive understanding of an inclusive missional framework. Instead, the term 'growth' is utilised to denote the development of emerging adults who are actively engaged with a local congregation where sustainability is a demonstrable factor.

The criteria for growth encompassed active participation in congregational activities and a manifest enthusiasm towards fostering a sense of belonging within the congregation. The questions probed the theoretical premise advocating for a church to be both inclusive and mission-oriented to uphold its true function. This is drawn from Nel (2015:11), who argues that the absence of a missional characteristic essentially undermines the very essence of 'being' church.

Methodology

Following the preliminary interviews with the seven churches, an impartial research assistant was engaged, and ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) software was employed to facilitate unbiased analytical processing. Variables such as adolescent involvement in the congregation, the congregation's responsiveness to adolescents' needs, and the pervading sense of the church's mission were analysed in correlation with perceived growth or decline of the church.

The research investigated a correlation between an inclusive missional stance and a robust engagement of the youth in church life.

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Pretoria review board and ethics consent was received on 12 November 2018. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. Presented here is a brief articulation of the findings with examples from interviewed churches.

A sense of inclusive belonging

In analysing churches with a pronounced culture of youth engagement, a recurring attribute is the fostering of an environment characterised by youth inclusion and belonging. An exemplary instance is observed in an African American congregation situated north of New York City. Distinctively, this congregation stood out not merely for the inclusion of youth representatives during the interview, but for the evident desire to have their viewpoints. Family engagement within this church correlated with superior youth retention, embodying mutual familial reinforcement. A poignant illustration of this reciprocal ethos emerged from a nonagenarian member who recently acquired an iPad, aiming to connect with younger congregants.

Congregations maintaining an active youth ministry invariably highlighted a sense of belonging – either intrinsic or purposefully nurtured. A prevalent culture of kinship, especially within African American communities, appeared to facilitate this inclusion instinctively. Notwithstanding, churches instilling a sense of belonging through deliberate strategies similarly reported youth engagement. For instance, a Maryland-based church indicated youth participation in worship, a trend consistent across congregations with notable youth populations.

In stark contrast, congregations registering minimal youth engagement typically endorsed an operational approach that compartmentalised the youth demographic. A church from the Midwest expressed their confusion over the decline in young people's church engagement. For instance, it was shocking to hear that Sunday school was no longer offered to young people (at a well-known church), as it was once a fundamental component of the Baptist faith and church.

Their bewilderment seemed to revolve around why youth-centric programmes are no longer populated. Such congregations exhibited a tendency to ascribe this disparity to external factors, such as sports or social media.

A missional orientation

Churches that reported significant youth engagement frequently demonstrated a discernible sense of mission and purpose. Such institutions not only recognised the needs of their youth but actively responded to the broader community. A case in point is a predominantly African American church in Washington D.C. located in an area with a considerable homeless population. Addressing this issue has become a unified church mission. Elderly women collaborate with younger counterparts to craft blankets,

while children and youth team up with adults to prepare sandwiches. Subsequently, all capable members distribute these provisions among the unhoused individuals in the community.

It is worth noting that even churches lacking an ingrained intergenerational culture, but reporting expansive youth ministries, prioritise mission and service. For instance, a Connecticut-based church finds its annual mission trip and year-round service projects to be the predominant catalysts for youth participation within the community. However, because of the absence of holistic church involvement, such institutions face challenges retaining youth post-high school. Nonetheless, the distinct sense of purpose manifested by their youth ministry remains notable for this article.

Inclusive belonging and mission limited to youth ministry

Within this research, a particularly enlightening discovery emerged from churches demonstrating attributes of belonging and mission, yet these traits are not shared across the entire congregation. It should be clarified that this does not insinuate the absence of belonging or mission in the broader church context; such an examination lay outside the scope of this study. The central insight is the observed deficiency in a *shared* congregational experience of belonging and mission across the generational spectrum which influences youth retention.

A church culture that perceives both its members and the extended community as 'kin' ostensibly demonstrates enhanced generational retention in comparison to churches where the sense of mission and belonging is predominantly confined to youth groups. A case in point is a Korean church in New Jersey, characterised by bifurcated ministries: one predominantly adult-oriented where the Korean language is spoken and the other primarily youth-focussed in English. While Korean adults partake in the English ministry, notably by preparing meals and offering leadership, linguistic impediments considerably hinder intergenerational engagement. Despite their nurturing efforts, this congregation recorded a notably diminished continuation rate post-high school. While they grapple with a profound challenge, their situation underscores the paramount importance of adopting an intergenerational stance within an inclusive missional framework.

Summary of findings

The empirical research substantiates the pivotal role of intergenerational involvement in fostering growth within a congregation's participatory life. Congregations that nurture inclusivity across all age groups evidently maintain a more successful trajectory in cultivating an environment conducive to growth compared to those that do not. This is also a notable discovery in Seibel and Nel (2010:1) who found congregations with a clear sense of mission and generational inclusion were key to the ongoing traditioning of a congregation.

Moreover, it has been observed that the growing churches' mission exhibits contextual variations, also noted by Seibel and Nel (2010:1). These were influenced substantially by location. Congregations that find defining an overarching mission to be a complex endeavour, particularly those that perceive missionary work predominantly as financial outreach to external endeavours, seem to struggle in membership cohesion. In contrast, congregations attuned to the pressing concerns of young individuals and the wider community, appear to have a profound engagement with their purpose, thereby nurturing a more enriched sense of mission.

Furthermore, ethnographic elements considerably influence the potential for fostering environments of belonging. In this regard, cultures with an established tradition of kinship are seemingly at an advantage, creating a sense of belonging more organically compared to hegemonic groups. This observation is not to undermine the capacity of hegemonic churches to foster belonging; rather, it underscores the necessity for such entities to conscientiously develop counter-cultural ecosystems that challenge the prevailing tendencies towards hyper-individualisation. This holistic approach calls for a reflective critique and possible reconfiguration of existing structures to foster inclusivity and connectedness, central to nurturing growth and a deepened sense of purpose within a congregational setting.

A way forward

The research presented in this article has drawn the four texts into conversation with a way forward that challenges the cultural locus of adolescents as institutionally isolated to an identity forming orientation that includes adolescents in divine mission. The missional framework articulated by Nel is corroborated by the empirical findings contained in this study. Within the framework of a missional identity, this research argues that there is a critical component of the voice of the young missing from the ecclesial conversation. This research argues that hegemonic agreements on the nature and dangers facing liminal adults resulted in a segregation of adolescents into institutionalised cohorts. These absent cohorts not only arrested the missional nature of ecclesial life, but in turn the church participated in the institutionalisation of the adolescent cohort in the larger American society. While steps towards renegotiation must be left for another study, reformation around how the church includes adolescents is critical to a renewal in ecclesial identity and energy. The church must provide counter-cultural orientations towards adolescents that invite them as unique but equal participants in divine mission.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

The article reflects the original research of M.W.D., who completed all of the research and all of the writing in the document. M.N. provided supervision, editing, and content, advice during the writing process.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Pretoria review board, and ethics consent was received on 12 November 2018. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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Data availability

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.N., on request.

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