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Youth Disillusionment with Organized Religion: Christian Perspective in Africa

La Désillusion des Jeunes Face à la Religion Institutionnalisée : Une Perspective Chrétienne en Afrique

Chinedu Evidence Ugbedinma[1] and Abigail Daniel Dariya[2]

Abstract

The growing disillusionment of youths with organised religion within the African context has emerged as one of the defining concerns of modern Christianity. Young people are questioning institutional religion, having a faith crisis, walking away from the Church altogether, and in some cases becoming non-religious. It argued that the issue of youth disillusionment carries significant weight, as it concerns the continuity of the Christian witness, specifically the responsibility of the present generation to pass on the faith with integrity and truth. It highlighted how young people are responding to this trend. This paper examined existing literature and contextual realities to explore, from a Christian perspective, the phenomenon of youth disillusionment with organised religion The paper discussed the trends and causes of youth disengagement, revealing that some reject and disaffiliate from the Church, becoming de-churched, while others identify as "spiritual but non-religious," and others seek alternative, individualised spiritual expressions. Factors such as faith crises, perceived hypocrisy, moral failure, cultural shifts, secularism, and inadequate discipleship are identified as major contributors to this trend. The paper concludes by proposing practical missiological strategies for reconnection, including the need to contextualise the gospel, prioritise intentional discipleship, restore trust through the integrity of church leaders, engage digital spaces meaningfully, and address the real-life concerns of young people.

Keywords: Youth, Disillusionment, Organised Religion, Church, Christian Witness

Résumé

La désillusion croissante des jeunes à l'égard de la religion organisée dans le contexte africain est devenue l'une des préoccupations majeures du christianisme contemporain. Les jeunes remettent en question la religion institutionnelle, traversent des crises de foi, quittent complètement l'Église et, dans certains cas, deviennent non religieux. Cette question revêt une importance considérable, car elle concerne la continuité du témoignage chrétien, notamment la responsabilité de la génération actuelle de transmettre la foi avec intégrité et vérité. Cet article examine la littérature existante et les réalités contextuelles afin d'explorer, dans une perspective chrétienne, le phénomène de la désillusion des jeunes à l'égard de la religion organisée. Il analyse les tendances et les causes du désengagement des jeunes, révélant que certains rejettent l'Église et s'en désaffilient, devenant ainsi des personnes éloignées de

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l'Église ; d'autres se définissent comme « spirituels mais non religieux », tandis que d'autres encore recherchent des expressions spirituelles alternatives et individualisées. Des facteurs tels que les crises de foi, l'hypocrisie perçue, les échecs moraux, les changements culturels, la sécularisation et un discipulat insuffisant sont identifiés comme des causes majeures de cette tendance. L'article conclut en proposant des stratégies missiologiques pratiques de reconnexion : contextualiser l'Évangile, accorder la priorité à un discipulat intentionnel, restaurer la confiance par l'intégrité des responsables d'Église, investir de manière significative les espaces numériques et répondre aux préoccupations concrètes des jeunes.

Mots-clés : jeunesse, désillusion, religion organisée, Église, témoignage chrétien

Introduction

Across various denominations within the African context, a growing number of young people are stepping away from organised religion.[3] The decline in religious affiliation among youths is not necessarily a result of rebellion or anger, but rather of their varied experiences with the Church.[4] The current religious stance of some youths in terms of their disaffiliation is because they have been hurt or disappointed by the Church. While various reasons drive this sad reality, most acts of dissatisfaction and disappointment stem from people's actions within the Church.[5] The growing alienation of youth from the Church has become one of the defining challenges of contemporary African Christianity, raising questions about faith and the future of the Church. This paper argues that the issue of youth disillusionment carries significant weight, as it concerns the continuity of the Christian witness, specifically the responsibility of the present generation to pass on the faith with integrity and truth. Hence, this paper reviews the existing literature and contextual realities to explore youth disillusionment with organised religion from a Christian perspective within the African context. It seeks to understand the causes behind this trend, discuss how young people are responding to it, and outline missiological strategies for reconnection with disillusioned youths.

Conceptualising Organised Religion and Youth Disillusionment

In the Christian setting, "organised religion" means the structured way faith is expressed and lived out through the Church and its various forms, whether in denominations, parishes, ministries, mission groups, or fellowships. These organised bodies have long shaped how African Christian adherents practise their faith together, guiding worship, teaching, and community life, while also influencing the continent's moral and social values.[6] It involves leadership hierarchies, defined doctrines and formal creeds, traditions, and liturgy for worship,

[3] James S. J. Hanvey, *On the Way to Life: Contemporary Culture and Theological Development as a Framework for Catholic Education, Catechesis and Formation* (London, England: The Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, 2005), 10; Abah Anthony John, "Nigerian Catholic Official Warns of Growing Youth Disillusionment amid Corruption, Election Rigging," *ACI Africa,* June 9, 2026. https://www.aciafrica.org/news/22235/nigerian-catholic-official-warns-of-growing-youth-disillusionment-amid-corruption-election-rigging (July 4, 2026).

[4] Aušra Karaliūtė-Cane, "Towards a Better Understanding of Issues and Pastoral Insights on the Catholic Disaffiliation," *SOTER: Religijos Mokslo Žurnalas* 120, no. 92 (2024): 25-26.

[5] Ed Hager, "Overcoming Disillusionment with the Church," *Chase Oaks,* August 20, 2021. https://www.chaseoaks.org/articles/overcoming-disillusionment-with-the-church (accessed November 6, 2025).

[6] Veit Bader, "Dilemmas of Institutionalisation and Political Participation of Organised Religions in Europe. Associational Governance as a Promising Alternative," *European Science Foundation* 25 (2014): 1-7; Stratos Patrikios, "The Formal Rules of Organised Religion: A Framework for Empirical Research," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 38, no. 3 (2023): 507; Wisdom Library, "The Concept of Organised Religion in Christianity." https://www.wisdomlib.org/christianity/concept/organised-religion#google_vignette (accessed November 8, 2025).

all meant to nurture faith and spiritual formation among Christian adherents.[7] Ideally, these structures exist to guide congregants in living out their faith within a local church setting. However, when structure takes centre stage and overshadows genuine fellowship among believers, the Church can easily drift from its core missional purpose of drawing people closer to God through evangelism, engaging them in discipleship, equipping them for ministry, and enjoying worship and fellowship with one another.

On the other hand, "disillusionment" stems from the word "disillusion," which literally means freeing oneself from illusion or false ideas. It also implies taking "away the ideals or idealism of and" making one disappointed or bitter.[8] It describes a state of disappointment that arises when expectations are betrayed or ideals crumble.[9] From a psychological perspective, disillusionment leads to frustration, confusion, scepticism, loss of trust, and sometimes apathy due to feelings of betrayal and deception, which often leads to spiritual fatigue or quiet emotional withdrawal.[10] Spiritually, it becomes a crisis of faith as one struggles inwardly to reconcile belief in God with disappointment in His representatives.

Conversely, in general terms, the concept of "youth" refers to young people. Specifically, the World Health Organisation defines "youth" as individuals aged 15-24 years, young people as those aged 10-24 years, and those aged 10-19 years as adolescents.[11] Similarly, the United Nations (UN) defines "youth" as individuals aged 15-24. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of youth, for statistical purposes, an age bracket is used.[12] The description of youth can vary from one member nation of the UN to another. One factor that accounts for this variance is the cultural milieu and peculiarities of the nations that make up the UN.

However, the African Youth Charter defines youths as those aged 15 to 35. This definition, which differs from the UN's age group for youth, originates from the African Union and takes into account the specific characteristics of the African context.[13] This age range represents the youth in various African countries. For example, youth in South Africa are those aged 14 to 35.[14] In contrast, while 18-35 years was previously considered the youth age in Nigeria, the 2019 edition of the National Youth Policy categorises individuals between the ages of 15 and

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[7] Fivable, "Organized Religion: AP World History; Modern Review." https://fiveable.me/key-terms/ap-world/organized-religion (accessed November 8, 2025).

[8] Hager, "Overcoming Disillusionment."

[9] U. Ofangbonmu, P. A. Barnabas and S. Okan, "Youth Disillusionment with Education in Nigeria: Unpacking the 'Education is a Scam' Slogan and Proposing Remedial Measures," *Studies in Education* 23, no. 2 (2025): 158.

[10] Divya Gupta, "Youth Unrest: Crisis in Ethics and Moralities," *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)* 5, no. 1 (2023): 1176; United Nations, "Youth Development and Participation," in *World Youth Report: Youth Social Entrepreneurship and the 2030 Agenda* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), 44; Asheesh Advani, "Youth Disillusionment is a Global Risk, But It Can Be Mitigated: This Study on Gen Z Shows Why," June 18, 2021. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/06/youth-disillusionment-global-risk-gen-z-resilience/ (accessed November 8, 2025).

[11] World Health Organization, "Adolescent Health." https://www.who.int/southeastasia/health-topics/adolescent-health#:~:text=Adolescent%20health-,Overview,age%20range%2010%2D24%20years. (accessed November 8, 2025).

[12] United Nations, "Definition of Youth," 1. https://share.google/9QZiLtnun1HoxbHm9 (accessed November 8, 2025); UNESCO, "UNESCO with, by and for Youth." https://www.unesco.org/en/youth#:~:text=Definition%20of%20youth,in%20UNESCO's%20definition%20of%20youth. (accessed November 8, 2025).

[13] The African Youth Charter, "Summary of the African Youth Charter," 1. https://www.youthpolicy.org/uploads/documents/2006_Summary_Of_African_Youth_Charter_Eng.pdf (accessed November 8, 2025).

[14] Pali Lehohla, "Social Profile of Vulnerable Groups: 2002-2012," *Statistics of South Africa* (2013): 35.

29 years as youths.[15] Nevertheless, due to variations in the definition of youth age, this paper uses the term "youth" to refer to the transitional stage between adolescence and full adulthood, estimated to be between the ages of 15 and 35.

Trends and Causes of Youth Disillusionment

The growing trend of dissatisfaction and disaffiliation from organised religion, especially from Christian congregations in Africa, is widespread and affects various denominations within the continent.[16] Even in regions like West Africa, where the numbers of Christian adherents seem high, there is a noticeable drop in genuine youth engagement in church life.[17] Church attendance in many settings does not always translate to conviction, and participation in church activities does not guarantee spiritual depth. The way faith is practised and propagated in contemporary times has been altered by the social realities that define each context.

Disillusionment with Christianity among African youths can adversely deepen into some of them completely rejecting the Christian faith and ceasing all forms of affiliation or participation in church life without any plan of reaffiliation. Mullen reports that young people, especially those aged 18 and above, have the highest rate of abandonment of the Christian faith entirely due to dissatisfaction with the Church.[18] The Pew Research Centre also reports a high rate of young people becoming dissatisfied with the Christian faith, which has significantly contributed to the decline in church attendance.[19] For instance, Al Jazeera reports that in regions like southeast Nigeria, disillusionment with imported religious doctrines has led some youths to abandon Christian congregations entirely and return to traditional African spiritual beliefs.[20] Those who have expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with the Church have been labelled as disaffiliates, reaching "point zero," non-religion, and nones.[21] Bullivant opines that the concept of disaffiliation applies to the adoption of "no religion."[22] Kinnaman describes "nomads" as those who disengage from the Church yet claim to be Christians, "prodigals" as those who lose their faith and consider themselves no longer Christians, while "exiles" are those who still participate in their Christian faith but struggle between appeal to culture and the Church.[23] Survey from Pew Research Centre estimate that between 2010 and 2020, the number of religiously unaffiliated population in Sub-Saharan Africa grew by 10% to reach nearly 29

[15] Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Youth Policy: Enhancing Youth Development and Participation in the Context of Sustainable Development* (Abuja: Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019), 3, 9.

[16] Karaliūtė-Cane, 25-26, 28.

[17] A. Koduah Koduah, "Declining Membership and Attendance in the Traditional Mainline Churches in the Western World: Lessons for Christianity in Ghana," *Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission* 3 (2019): 65-86.

[18] Timothy Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving," *2020.*

[19] Pew Research centre, "Americans' Faith in God may be Eroding," November 4, 2015. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/04/americans-faith-in-god-may-be-eroding/ (accessed November 11, 2025).

[20] Chibuike Nwachukwu, "Why Some Nigerians are Leaving Christianity for African Spiritual Beliefs," *Al Jazeera,* April 29, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/4/29/why-some-nigerians-are-leaving-christianity-for-african-spiritual-beliefs (accessed July 5, 2026).

[21] Linda Woodhead, "The Rise of 'no Religion' in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority," *Journal of the British Academy* 78, no. 3 (2017): 245-246.

[22] Stephen Bullivant, "Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Report Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Data," in *Catholic Research Forum Reports 1* (Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2016), 54.

[23] David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church… and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 20.

million people.[24] In nations like South Africa and Mozambique, roughly 10% to 14% of respondents reported by the Pew Research Centre report to have no religious affiliation, identifying as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" refered to as the "nones."[25]

Several factors contribute to the reality of quiet disillusionment and gradual drifting away from African Christian denominations in contemporary times. For some African youths, this process of disillusionment with Christianity begins with a faith crisis. Kinnaman describes this faith crisis as a "discipleship-making problem," in which the Church fails to adequately nurture young people to faithfully follow Jesus amid a changing culture.[26] Hence, a major cause of disillusionment and faith-dropout among African youths stems from how the Church approaches discipleship to deepen their spiritual formation, which is intended to resolve their faith crisis.[27] The theoretical approach, rather than the relational approach to discipleship of youth by some Christian congregations, is no longer effective in attracting and retaining them, nor in strengthening their resolve to faithfully follow Christ, as well as nurturing God-centred relationships between them and older congregants. Hence, churches that fail to invest in the intentional discipleship of youth to strengthen their conviction and relationship with God may face the challenge of retaining them when faith crises arise.[28]

Some youths, due to encounters with new forms of knowledge, social change, the inheritance of new beliefs, and exposure to complex philosophical questions about science, life, suffering, sexuality, and justice, among others, test the limits of what they were taught in childhood. Such changes can also alter their perspectives, putting their beliefs under pressure and leading to a crisis of faith.[29] When such doubts arise, and the Church fails to proactively respond with honesty, instead remaining silent or defensive with moral judgment, youths who raise such questions may feel alienated and gradually slip away from the Church and the faith, believing the Church fails to address real issues with truth.

When the faith of youths within the Church is weakened, the struggle between belief and belonging may deepen disillusionment. While some youths may still maintain personal faith with God, they may become detached from the institutional Church due to feeling like they believe, yet not having a sense of belonging.[30] Connection, honesty and fellowship are crucial languages young people desire to be communicated in the Church, but when the Church often presents bureaucracy, tradition and the exclusion of youth, it can drive disillusionment. Consequently, they gradually withdraw, not necessarily from Christ, but from structures that seem to misrepresent Him.

Additionally, some of these drifts from Christianity are not the result of rebellion or hostility toward faith; rather, in most cases, a subtle disappointment and gradual loss of confidence in what the Church represents drive such disillusionment.[31] Some African youths

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[24] Pew Research Centre, "Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa," June 9, 2025. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/religion-in-sub-saharan-africa/ (accessed July 4, 2026).

[25] Pew Research Centre, "Religious Affiliation," April 15, 2010. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/04/15/religious-affiliation-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/ (accessed July 4, 2026).

[26] Kinnaman, 16.

[27] Kinnaman, 183-184.

[28] Youth and Student Ministries Department, *Migration of Young People from Baptist Denomination* (Ibadan: Youth and Student Ministries Department, 2022), 64.

[29] Andrea C. Walker, Andrew SID Lang, and Ricky Munoz, Religious Doubts and the Problem with Religious Pressures for Christian Students," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 10 (2023): 1-5.

[30] Suvi-Maria Katariina Saarelainen, "Lack of Belonging as Disrupting the Formation of Meaning and Faith: Experiences of Youth at risk of Becoming Marginalized," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 17, no. 2 (2018): 127-129.

[31] Chuck Lawless, "8 Reasons Some Young People Are Walking Away from Their Faith," *Church Answers,* January 10, 2024. https://churchanswers.com/blog/8-reasons-some-young-people-are-walking-away-

showcase tendencies for disillusionment with Christianity who still believe in God and what the Bible teaches, but their experience of the Church as an institution meant to nurture that belief has become marked by frustration, doubt, emotional distance and gradual drift. Equally, some youths who once attended Sunday school or youth fellowship, now describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR).[32] Hence, a tendency towards individualised spirituality outside institutionalised Church is on the increase among the youth.

According to the Barna Group's 2016 research, individuals who are spiritual but not religious consider "affiliation as a measure of religiosity" unnecessary, as some identify as atheist (12%), agnostic (30%), or unaffiliated (58%). They categorised the spiritual but not religious into two groups: those who claim to be spiritual but consider their faith non-essential in their lives, and those who claim to be spiritual but do not affiliate with any faith (atheists, agnostics, or unaffiliated). Only a small percentage of youths identifying as SBNR who are spiritually nourished on their own and those nourished outside the institutional Church participate in religious activities, such as scripture reading (4% and 10%), prayer (21% and 22%), and group retreats (3% and 2%). They instead derive spiritual nourishment from yoga (26% and 34%), meditation (26% and 34%) and the practice of silence and solitude (26% and 32%). Their study concludes that there is a difference between the two SBNR groups. One group was disappointed with the Church while still clinging to their Christian faith; the second group, however, was disappointed with religion, leading to its rejection.[33]

Moreover, the de-churching trend is another way disillusioned youths respond to institutional churches. Skye Jethani employs the term "de-churched" to describe individuals who, due to a loss of confidence in their local churches or the way certain issues were handled, become disappointed and cease their involvement or attendance at Church. He identifies three categories of de-churched Christians. First, there are relational-dechurched Christians who leave the institutional Church because they lack meaningful relationships with other members of the congregation, which they consider essential to building their faith in Christ. Second, the missionally de-churched are those who abandon the institutional Church out of frustration, as die-hard activists. Thirdly, the transformationally de-churched are those with a desire for an experiential transformation, but they see the Church as failing to help them actualise this expectation and capitalise on the judgmental feedback they receive from other congregants.[34]

De-churching trends among some African Christian youths begin with disengagement. Barna Group asserts that statistically, 61% of young Christians disengage from the institutional Church in their twenties and cease their active attendance of Church, study the Bible or pray.[35] Nyangia's study mirror the Barna Group's findings in the Mbita Central Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Kenya Lake Conference, revealing a similar "youth exodus" where large number of young Christians disengage from the church life as they enter their twenties due to

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from-their-faith/#:~:text=They%20have%20never%20had%20anyone,what%20they're%20getting%20now (accessed November 11, 2025).

[32] David Kaywood, "The Problem With 'Spiritual but Not Religious.'" https://www.gospelrelevance.com/2019/11/12/spiritual-but-not-religious/#:~:text=But%20an%20honest%20statement%20is,culture%20dominated%20by%20expressive%20individualism. (accessed November 11, 2025); Waterloo Catholic Faith Formation, "Thoughts About Being Spiritual but Not Religious." https://waterloocatholics.org/thoughts-about-being-spiritual-but-not-religious (accessed November 11, 2025).

[33] Barna Group, "Meet the 'Spiritual but Not Religious,'" April 6, 2017. https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/ (accessed November 12, 2025).

[34] Skye Jethani, "Who Are the De-Churched? Part 1." March 16, 2010. Accessed from https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2010/march-online-only/who-are-de-churched-part-1.html (accessed November 10, 2025).

[35] The Barna Group, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shalf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years." https://barna.com/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shalf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/ (accessed November 10, 2025).

factors such as segregation according to social class, economic disability and ability, and ignorance about many facts about the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA) at large.[36]

In a study by Tijani et al., it was reported that more than 40% of youths surveyed expressed a desire to emigrate due to the *japa* syndrome, which connotes youth migration, leading to membership decline among churches of Lagos East Baptist Conference (LEBC). Their study recounts that church pastors in Epe and Ibeju-Lekki confirmed that many youths disengage from local church activities months before their relocation. Such disengagement, they noted, has weakened youth ministry structures.[37]

The gradual drifting away of youths from active involvement in their local Church creates a vacuum, leading to the loss of potential leaders, resource personnel, and an efficient church workforce, as well as a reduction in the quality of essential ministries within local congregations. Youth disengagement from church life, resulting from a diminished sense of excitement, will also lead to further decline in church membership and increased dispiritedness. When people lose their excitement about their local congregation, they are more likely to refuse to invite others to worship services.

De-churching trends, driven by disillusionment, contribute to the diminished priority accorded to congregational worship as an essential aspect of the Christian life among young people. Some youths professing to be Christians now consider the corporate worship of the local Church as an optional extracurricular activity; hence, they gradually drift away till they become church dropouts.[38] De-churching trends, driven by a high rate of church dropouts among youths, have left some local congregations increasingly one-generational in weekly attendance.[39] The Church may be seen as an optional extracurricular activity by some youths, and they may drift away due to boredom when they become dissatisfied with the liturgy and worship experience within the local Church.[40] When Church services become too formal and repetitive, lacking any sense of liveliness in worship expression and heartfelt participation from congregants, such rigidity can be perceived by the youth as a ritualistic performance that they endure rather than experience.[41]

Ugbedinma opines that some traditional Christian denominations in Nigeria are at odds with the youth who, through exposure to charismatic movements, desire the alteration of the formal liturgy and worship style to a more ecstatic, spontaneous worship expression, like singing, dancing and excitement and homilies that are emotionally engaging and lively to drive encounters during worship. Such points of disagreement have also contributed to dissatisfaction and a high rate of church migrants seeking more dynamic forms of worship. At the same time, some become church dropouts without re-affiliating with any church.[42]

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[36] Charles Anguka Nyangia, "A Strategy to Retain Members in Mbita Central Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Kenya Lake Conference" (MA Thesis, Adventist University of Africa Theological Seminary, 2016), 69.

[37] Timothy O. Tijani, Priscilla Fiyinfoluwa Itopa, Fortunatus GP Alabi, and Afolorunso O. Dairo, "Church Unity and Membership Retention: Lessons from Lagos East Baptist Conference for South African Ecumenical Praxis," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 82, no. 2 (2026): 2.

[38] Paul Tautges, "Six De-Churching Trends," *Counseling One Another,* April 26, 2018. https://counselingoneanother.com/2018/04/26/6-de-churching-trends/ (accessed November 10, 2025).

[39] Thom S. Rainer, "12 Markers of Churches on the Downslope," *Church Answers,* February 26, 2020. https://churchanswers.com/blog/12-markers-of-churches-on-the-downslope/ (accessed November 10, 2025).

[40] Youth and Student Ministries Department, 36.

[41] Kevin Hester, "The Role of Emotions in Worship." https://www.nafwb.org/onemag/emotions.htm (accessed November 11, 2025); Zac Hicks, "Thinking Pastorally about Emotions in Worship." https://www.doxologyandtheology.com/blog/thinking-pastorally-about-emotions-in-worship (accessed November11, 2025).

[42] Chinedu Evidence Ugbedinma, "The Pentecostalisation of Baptist Faith and Its Missiological Implications for Baptist Churches in Delta State, Nigeria" (PhD Diss., The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, 2025), 119, 151-152, 155.

Likewise, young people in Nigeria from the 1980s began to grow weary of what they saw as rigid structures of organised religion and distant leadership within the mainline church traditions, and developed a desire to reconnect with God and experience spiritual revival. That sense of disillusionment prompted them to seek a more living and personal experience of God. Out of that search came the rise of various Pentecostal and Charismatic groups across universities and urban centres, with an emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, expression of faith, charismatic gifts, healings, and miracles, as well as holiness and activities such as revival meetings, healing crusades, vigils, prayer conferences that draw large crowds, prayers with "anointing oil," among others. These movements were, in many ways, the spiritual quests of youths who longed for spontaneous expressions of genuine worship that felt in sync with their hearts, faith that resonated with their daily socio-economic realities, and a congregation where they could have a sense of belonging to participate fully.[43]

Consequently, to minimise the drift of youths from mainline churches and their migration to newer expressions of Christianity, some traditional churches in Nigeria have been compelled to alter their liturgical style, theological emphasis, leadership model and hierarchical structure to accommodate and retain their younger congregants. Such trends have led to the growth and revitalisation of some mainline congregations across Nigeria, with a shift away from traditional practices to a more spontaneous worship style and an evangelistic passion, marked by large-scale revival meetings and media-driven outreaches.[44]

On the contrary, Timothy Mullen, in his research, asserts that some young people recount that their journey of dissatisfaction and disaffiliation with the Church was premised on the fact that their voices and suggestions were ignored as their local churches seemed not to care.[45] The tendency for the Church to repeatedly fail to get things right when godly suggestions are proffered for her health is continually ignored, which may lead to disillusionment among young people, resulting in church decline, with some becoming church dropouts, and the Church may eventually reach a state of plateau. The plateau stage is a stage of slow growth that stagnates the life of local churches. When a church plateaus, its insistence on and concentration on traditions and stale practices to maintain the status quo become routine, discouraging the re-affiliation of disaffiliated youths.[46]

There is also a growing gap between church teachings and the real-life issues that concern the young. Some local churches have maintained silence while society contends with devastating socio-economic, political, and cultural challenges, such as poverty, mental health, conflict, oppression, justice, unemployment, corruption, and questions of identity. Some young congregants argue that sermons can sometimes be abstract and disconnected from the lived realities and struggles that occupy their minds and hearts.[47]

The absence of practical relevance in sermonic communication makes faith appear distant. When a preacher's homiletics fail to touch the struggles of daily life or resonate emotionally with the cultural experiences of the audience, it soon loses meaning to young Christian adherents.[48] However, congregants feel more connected to their pastor and the

[43] Ibid., 3-6, 125-126.

[44] Ibid., 6, 127.

[45] Timothy Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving," *Research Online* (2020): 76. https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/2304 (accessed November 10, 2025.

[46] Thom S. Rainer, "Five Reasons Why Stability Is Bad for a Church," *Church Answers,* May 29, 2017. https://churchanswers.com/blog/five-reasons-stability-bad-church/ (accessed November 11, 2025).

[47] Paul Olarinre Fajinmi, "Prospects and Challenges of Emotional Engagement in Preaching and Their Implications for Sermonic Communication in Africa" (M.Div. Thesis, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, 2025), 5, 92.

[48] Njoroge J. Nyambura, *Preaching in the African Context* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication, 2012), 216-219; Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Preaching to a Shifting Culture: 12 Perspectives on Communicating that Connects* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 147 PDF.

Church when they feel loved and cared for, as evidenced by sermonic communications that address their pressing issues.[49]

On the other hand, modernity and secularism have also reshaped the worldviews of young people. At the same time, technology and globalisation have exposed them to a diversity of perspectives and reshaped their spiritual imagination, challenging traditional teachings within the Church.[50] Secularism promotes the notion of self-determination and rationality over submission to divine order.[51] The diversity of opinion and voices that claim authority tends to overshadow the voice of the Church, making the Church unable to speak effectively to the modern mind, which places a premium on experience and evidence over authority and creed.

Likewise, the internet has made exposure to diverse beliefs and philosophies inevitable. The constant stream of opinion on social media challenges the notion of absolute truth and authority.[52] Iherue notes that among Nigerian youths, online anonymity and content freedom through social media platforms empower young people to critique religious leaders, expose financial transparency issues, and debate Christian doctrines openly. Podcasters and independent digital ministers offer alternative perspectives that circumvent traditional church hierarchies.[53]

Conversely, Megbowon and Chijioke assert that for some youths, the commercialisation and exploitation of the gospel among African congregations for material or monetary gain have created an internal conflict, as they struggle to relate to institutional religion, which they consider to be acting contrary to the intent of religion. Acts of commercialising the gospel for business purposes are common in Nigeria through the sale of anointing water, oil, handkerchiefs, miracle soap, and payment of certain consultation fees to have an audience with a spiritual figure for prayers or to receive miracles. Such infiltration of merchandising the Christian faith and trading in spiritual items is presented in a manner that compels adherents to provide financial patronage as a prerequisite for obtaining miracles; however, this stands in contradiction to the biblical injunctions.[54]

Contrary to the Scriptural stance on the virtues of godliness and contentment, materialistic consciousness and ideology devoid of contentment among Christian leaders have infiltrated the contemporary Nigerian Church, which has fostered disillusionment among the youth. Megbowon and Chijioke note that while the primary basis of prayer is reconnecting humanity with God, the emphasis on prayers with materialistic colourations and desire for higher socio-economic status due to the prosperity gospel is now common within the contemporary Church, which has fuelled desperation in people to get rich quickly by all means necessary and meet the "unquenchable wants of humans in a consumerist society."[55] Such economic and materialistic desperation, when not realised through the exercise of faith, can drive a sense of disappointment that may lead to disaffiliation from Church life among youths.

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[49] Fajinmi, 98.

[50] Jan Perszon, "The Crisis of Western Culture and Secularism," *Verbum Vitae* 42, no. 2 (2024): 377-379; Lene Arnett Jensen, "The Cultural Psychology of Religiosity, Spirituality, and Secularism in Adolescence," *Adolescent Research Review* 6, no. 3 (2021): 277-279.

[51] Benjamin Berger, "The Limits of Belief: Freedom of Religion, Secularism, and the Liberal State," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society/La Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 17, no. 1 (2002): 47-48.

[52] László Ropolyi, "Toward a Philosophy of the Internet," *The American Philosophical Association* 17, no. 2 (2018): 45.

[53] Sunday Onyema Iherue, "Erosion of Values in Nigeria and the Influence of Social Media on Contemporary Nigerian Youths," *Ohazurume: Unizik Journal of Culture and Civilization* 4, no. 4 (2026): 125.

[54] Funmilola Kemi Megbowon and Uwah Chijioke, "Disillusionment of Religion in Contemporary Nigeria in Wole Soyinka's Drama and Relevance of African Worldview as a Corrective Mechanism," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 101 (2020): 4-5.

[55] Megbowon and Chijioke, 5-6.

Correspondingly, betrayal and weakening mutual trust are other painful causes of disillusionment. Trust is vital for a cordial relationship between pastors and their congregants. Nevertheless, when trust is violated by clerics betraying their fellow ministers or congregants regarding the confidentiality of their private issues, undermining ministerial ethics, it creates an inner unease and loss of confidence in young people toward their religious leaders as a reaction to such a traumatic betrayal.[56]

Similarly, perceived moral bankruptcy among church leaders is another painful cause of disillusionment among African Christian youths. Sadly, declining morals in terms of diverse expressions of sexual immorality, such as lust, rape, premarital sex, and extramarital sex, as well as sexual predation, have found their way into the Church setting. Unfortunately, some clerics who are expected to model sound morals and saintliness have been found to be involved in diverse shameful sexual scandals that have negatively impacted the moral credibility of the Church and shaken the trust of several young believers.[57]

Youths, who crave integrity as the standard that the Church is meant to uphold for society to learn from, turn away when they see the same vices condemned from the pulpit being practised in private.[58] It sends a devastating message when the words and actions of the Church do not align. This perceived hypocrisy has done more to drive the youth away than any secular philosophy could. Some even see the failure of integrity among church leaders as a betrayal of the faith itself. Additionally, the trio of falsehood, hypocrisy, and manipulation among clerics and congregants, which contradict ministerial ethics of uprightness and honesty, is a major cause of disillusionment among youths. When youths discover that clerics fail to practice what they preach, falsify prophecies and miracles to manipulate gullible congregants psychologically and defraud them for selfish purposes, and live hypocritical lives, through double standards, this weakens the moral compass of the Church and leaves youths disappointed.[59]

Finally, beyond the walls of the Church, the influence of modern culture within African society adds to the challenge. The modern world now celebrates self-expression, personal freedom and moral relativism in this postmodern era.[60] Absolute truth is viewed with suspicion, and moral conviction is often mistaken for intolerance.[61] These social realities in contemporary times make it challenging, as many youths feel torn between their Christian faith and cultural expectations. Failure to bridge the two worldviews has made some youths live in quiet compromise and distance themselves from the Church.

The causes enumerated in this paper are non-exhaustive but representative of key factors that drive youth disillusionment with organised religion from a Christian perspective in Africa. It can be summarised that a deep desire for authenticity in the expression of Christianity within the institutional Church in Africa is foundational to this challenge of youth disengagement, which leads them to reject a version of religion that feels disconnected from the reality of Christ as presented in the Bible. The same youths who are yet leaving may yet return, not to the institution as it is, but to faith as it was meant to be lived, if only the African Church begins to listen again. Hence, it is necessary to discuss some crucial missiological strategies for reconnecting with disillusioned young people.

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[56] Megbowon and Chijioke, 6-7.

[57] Ibid., 7-8.

[58] Youth and Student Ministries Department, 33.

[59] Megbowon and Chijioke. 8-10.

[60] Abun Dami Damianus, "A Critical Review of Moral Relativism, Universalism, and the Teaching of the Catholic Church on Catholic Morality," *Divine Word International Journal of Management and Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2022): 102-111.

[61] Krzysztof Kaucha, "Is It True That There Is No Truth? The Veritative Argument for Christianity in Joseph Ratzinger's Thought," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 70, no. 4 (2023): 21-36.

Missiological Strategies for Reconnection

In the book *Sticky Church,* Larry Osborne posits that the back door of a church never closes on its own; instead, it takes the intentionality of the local Church to completely shut the back door, thereby discontinuing the continuum of disillusionment and disaffiliation.[62] Thom Rainer asserts that a church that fails to address the issues driving disillusionment, mass disaffiliation, and attendance decline is more likely to spiral into a plateau or death.[63] Hence, African congregations must be intentional in understanding the factors that drive youth disillusionment, so as to address the issue properly and minimise the rate of disaffiliation and faith dropouts. The Church must return to her missional purpose and be intentional in reconnecting young people with the Church to safeguard the future of Christianity.

Kinnaman notes that when youths are adequately engaged in the overall life of the Church, their faith becomes stronger.[64] Christian congregations must be intentional in developing strategic ways to impart the faith to young people from the moment of their conversion through spiritual formation, so that they can live out the truth of God's word without any sense of moral compromise.[65] Therefore, a shift from driving attendance to intentional discipleship is necessary to spiritually form the youth. Intentional discipleship for the youth is a crucial task of the Church that should be developed to deepen their commitment and growth in the Lord Jesus Christ. The discipleship approach should shift from confined, formal teaching or doctrinal lessons to one that combines spiritual guidance with an authentic relationship.[66] While young people are not seeking perfection in their leaders, they are searching for honesty and truth. In the Church, they are looking for a safe environment where conversations can address their doubts and lead to discovery, where their faith can deepen.

Research conducted by the Dutch Reformed Church in 2015 indicates that 90% of church migrants from their dissatisfied former congregations attest that their new congregations strongly prioritised their spiritual growth. Additionally, 84% affirmed that their new churches prioritised activities to deepen their spiritual formation, while 96% experienced a need to maintain a deeper intimacy with God.[67] Hence, if African congregations desire the same kind of results among young people, they must engage in intentional discipleship so that their yearning for intimacy with God and spiritual formation can be actualised.

Similarly, Carey Nieuwhof opines that prioritising the reengagement and reintegration of youth is essential because, in the future, church attendance will no longer drive engagement; rather, engagement and genuine spiritual formation will drive church attendance.[68] Therefore, reconnecting youths to become re-affiliated and adequately engaged in the overall life of the Church, in a manner that prioritises their sense of belonging, is another essential step African congregations must pursue to minimise disengagement and faith dropouts. It will also help them stay committed to the faith and life of the Church.

Likewise, building the relationship between young people and the Church calls for more than new programmes; it demands a genuine return to the heart of Christ's mission. Contextualising the gospel in a way that accounts for the shifts in youth culture is crucial. The

[62] Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), n.p. EPUB.

[63] Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive.* Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2014.

[64] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 202.

[65] Michael L. Rackley, "Rethinking Discipleship in the Area of High School Ministry: Key Strategies for Transforming Urban Youth" (D.Min. Thesis, Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

[66] Youth and Student Ministries Department, 66-67.

[67] Ignatius Michael Bredenkamp and Wilem Jacobus Schoeman, "Reasons for the Migration of Church Members from One Congregation to Another," *Acta Theologica* 2015, no. 2 (2015): 140.

[68] Carey Nieuwhof, "10 Predictions About the Future Church and Shifting Attendance Patterns." https://careynieuwhof.com/10-predictions-about-the future-church and-shifting-attendance-patterns/ (accessed November 11, 2025).

Church must learn to speak the language without losing the message by addressing their anxieties, identity struggles, social pressures and lived socio-economic realities. In doing so, the Church will make it apparent that the gospel remains powerful and continues to speak meaningfully to their struggles. Faith must no longer be presented in ways that fuel the perception that it is detached from everyday challenges. The Church must begin to address everyday challenges biblically with honesty, issues such as injustice, poverty, mental health, unemployment, abortion, relationships, purpose, and suffering, among others. In doing so, Christ-centred congregations will naturally attract youths seeking meaning and connection beyond surface-level religion.

Moreover, since many young believers have been wounded by hypocrisy or disillusioned by moral failings within the Church, their healing and reconnection will begin when leaders choose transparency and demonstrate the fruit of repentance in their speech and conduct. Restoring trust would be premised on leaders demonstrating humility and leading their respective congregations with the heart of a shepherd rather than a posture of authority. Likewise, the structures of leadership within the Church must be intentional in prioritising the inclusion of young voices, enabling them to actively participate in the decision-making process. This way, the Church can no longer feel like a distant institution, but rather like home.

Finally, digital engagement is another vital frontier for reconnection with disillusioned youths. The Church can strategically utilise social media as a powerful tool for podcasts, online fellowship, virtual discipleship, and online missions.[69] While youths may love visibility, the goal of the Church utilising social media platforms must be to maintain meaningful interaction with them rather than mere visibility. Such social media spaces can extend the reach of the Church into the very environments where young people now live their daily lives.

Conclusion

The growing disillusionment among young African Christians is a wake-up call that something within the life of the Church has grown weary and needs renewal. As this paper reveals, some of these youths are not turning away from Christ Himself, but from the way His message has been presented through institutions that sometimes feel distant from His compassion and truth. Their frustration often speaks to a longing for an authentic faith characterised by honest relationships. Youths seek a Church that lives out the justice and love it proclaims. If the Church continues to confuse activity with devotion or attendance with transformation, it risks losing a generation earnestly searching for purpose. Healing this gap must begin with truthfulness and making amends in places where the Church has fallen short. Since young people want a faith community that listens to them, the Church must learn to listen before preaching and to care before correcting, so that the bridge to reconnection can begin to form. Worship should feel less like a performance and more like a genuine participation. The gospel is still strong enough to reach this generation; what it needs is a Church willing to live it in all honesty. Renewal will come from both new strategies and a return to the essence of faith, such as love that serves, truth that frees, and a congregation that heals. Through such a Church, even those who have grown weary of religion can find their way back to hope, not through institution, but through the living Christ once more.

[69] Tim Hutchings, "Christianity and Digital Media," in *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, 3811-3830 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014), 3811-3813.

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