

## The Impact of Youth Ministry on Church Growth in the Edo Baptist Conference

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### Abstract

This article examines the youth ministry's profound role in fostering church growth within the Edo Baptist Conference, with a focus on both spiritual and numerical development. Youth ministry has become an integral part of modern church life, serving not only as a means of educating young people but also playing a crucial role in increasing congregational participation, fostering a sense of community, and ultimately contributing to the church's overall growth. This study examines ways youth ministry promotes spiritual maturity among youth, youth involvement in church, and numerical expansion. The study also highlights the challenges faced in youth ministry and provides practical recommendations to overcome them. The study adopted a descriptive research method. The primary source used in this study is the interview and Personal observation. The respondents were youths and youth leaders/pastors randomly selected from 10 Baptist churches of the Edo Baptist Conference within the Benin Area. The study revealed that gathering youths in fellowship, studying, and praying together greatly affects the youth's spiritual maturity, congregational engagement, and numerical growth of the church. The study concludes with recommendations to overcome the challenges faced in youth ministry.

**Keywords:** Youth, Ministry, Church Growth, Spiritual Maturity, Congregational Engagement.

### Introduction

The Nigerian church operates in a context of rapid sociocultural changes, urbanisation and expanding youth population. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 50% of Nigeria's population is below 30 years of age, making youth ministry indispensable for the survival and growth of the church. It is important to state that youths play an important role in the life of a church, as they are the leaders of tomorrow and the church's future. Their involvement is critical to the church's growth. The youth ministry provides numerous opportunities for service, such as the worship team, small groups, etc. By exploring these opportunities, the youth can grow in faith. This prepares them for the future and allows them to contribute to the church's growth. Within the Edo Baptist Conference, a union of churches under the Nigerian Baptist Convention, youth ministries serve as a platform for spiritual formation, leadership training, and evangelism. However, despite their potential, many churches underutilise youth or fail to provide strategic frameworks for their engagement in the church.

Church Growth, according to Thom Rainer (1993), is "the discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:18-20)". Similarly, McGavran (1990) defined church growth as numerical increase, spiritual maturity, and social transformation. These dimensions, as mentioned by Rainer and McGavran, align with the Great Commission mandate in Matthew 28:19-20, which emphasises evangelism and discipleship. Therefore, this paper argues that robust youth ministries in Edo Baptist Conference can significantly impact church growth by addressing spiritual and social dimensions of faith. As such, this study explores how youth ministry can foster church growth, highlighting the intersections of spiritual formation and youth involvement in church life.

This inquiry also seeks to understand youth ministry's challenges and identify ways to overcome them effectively. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative study design. The primary source used in this study was an interview and personal observation. The researcher designed the interview guide questionnaire. The respondents were youths, deacons, and pastors randomly selected from 10 Baptist churches of the Edo Baptist Conference within the Benin Area. The study

also used a secondary method, which involved reviewing books, journals, seminal papers or examining what other scholars have said about youth's involvement in church growth.

### **Understanding Church Growth: A Broader Framework**

Church growth is a multifaceted concept encompassing numerical increase, spiritual maturity and holistic development in the Christian community. Church Growth, according to Thom Rainer (1993), is "the discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:18-20)". Similarly, McGravran (1990) defined church growth as numerical increase, spiritual maturity, and social transformation. Similarly, Peter Wagner (1984:72) believed that church growth is, at the same time, a theological conviction and applied science, striving to combine the eternal principles of God's Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioural sciences. Church growth is anchored in the Bible as the divine mandate for the church to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20). The directive from this scripture emphasises evangelism, discipleship and spiritual reproduction, which together form the core of authentic growth (Green, 2003). Therefore, the concept of church growth is not limited to statistics but involves a balance between quantitative increase and qualitative transformation of believers (Wagner, 1998).

Further still, Rick Warren, in his book titled "The Purpose Driven Church", described genuine church growth as having five facts: Churches grow warmer through fellowship; churches grow broader through ministry; churches grow deeper through discipleship; churches grow larger through evangelism." These five dimensions of church growth describe the various ways in which growth is essential in the church. This was evident in the early church as recorded in the book of Acts, the believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. This led to significant numerical growth and spiritual depth (Acts 2:41-47). This shows that genuine growth is both Spirit-led and mission-oriented.

While numerical growth has to do with quantity in number, spiritual growth has to do with the level of maturity of the individual believers. In his epistles, Paul also highlights the spiritual dimension of growth, stressing maturity, unity and the building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). While both are quite important, a more holistic perspective recognises the importance of ongoing congregational engagement. This placed greater emphasis on the role of generational ministry, with a particular focus on youth. Youth ministry is the backbone of the church and has as its objective not only to have a continuous and active church but also a bigger scope of widening the church's influence in the wider community. According to Nel (2000:63), youth ministry plays a big role in building the local church. No ministry impacts the church than youth ministry.

Meanwhile, church growth in the opinion of this researcher is the God-ordained and Spirit-driven expansion of the Body of Christ, accomplished through the proclamation of the Gospel, the making of disciples, and the nurturing of believers into spiritual maturity, in obedience to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and modeled after the early church's pattern of evangelism, fellowship, and service (Acts 2:41-47; Ephesians 4:11-16). It involves both numerical increase through conversions and qualitative transformation through sanctification, resulting in the manifestation of God's kingdom and glory on earth. This is primarily the work of God, with human agents participating in God's mission. Paul affirmed this truth when he stated, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6). This indicated that while human strategies and efforts are necessary, ultimate growth is a divine activity empowered by the Holy Spirit. More so, church growth should lead to the deepening of believers' faith, active participation in ministry, and commitment to kingdom values.

### **Impact of Youth Ministry on Church Growth**

Youth ministry is a generic term for the numerous ministerial programmes and outreaches targeted at youths. The youth ministry within the church deals with the youth group and is

instrumental in nurturing the spiritual growth of young individuals, developing their relationship with Jesus Christ, becoming active within the church, and promoting the numerical expansion of the church. Youth ministry is rooted in the church's doctrine as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), with each member, regardless of age, contributing to the church's growth and unity. The Bible underscores the strategic role of young people in God's redemptive plan. Timothy's example in 1 Timothy 4:12 affirmed that youth are not to be despised but empowered as models of faith. The Old Testament also recorded the leadership of young figures such as David (1 Samuel 17) and Josiah (2 Kings 22), demonstrating that age is no barrier to divine calling. Joel 2:28 also prophesies that "your sons and daughters will prophesy," indicating an eschatological vision where youth actively participate in the Spirit's mission.

Youth ministries within the Edo Baptist Conference, a major arm of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), serve as a strategic platform for spiritual formation, leadership development, and evangelistic engagement. These ministries exist to nurture young believers into mature disciples, equip them for Christian service, and integrate them into the life and mission of the church. The Royal Ambassadors (RA), Girls' Auxiliary (GA), and Baptist Student Fellowship (BSF) have been foundational youth organisations within the Baptist tradition in Nigeria (Ajayi, 2015). In the Edo Baptist Conference, these organisations have provided structured opportunities for biblical instruction, leadership training, and mission involvement among youths. Their programs include Bible studies, mission education, evangelism outreaches, and social engagement activities. Edo Baptist youth ministries prioritise discipleship through Bible study, prayer meetings, and annual youth camps. Meanwhile, evangelistic activities remain central, with youth groups participating in rural missions, campus outreaches, and citywide evangelism campaigns. Beyond spiritual activities, Edo Baptist youth ministries address practical issues such as unemployment and moral decadence by organising skill acquisition programs, health seminars, and community development projects.

Moreover, studies have shown that vibrant youth ministries have historically driven church expansion. For instance, Afolabi (2015), in his study about the contributions of Youth in the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), like the Light of the World Society, spearheaded evangelistic campaigns which led to the planting of over 25 churches between 1966 and 1992. Similarly, Baptist Student Fellowship programs across Nigerian tertiary institutions have produced pastors, missionaries, and lay leaders who significantly impact denominational growth (Ajayi, 2020). Therefore, the youth ministry provides room and avenues to explore their faith, build upon solid morals, and actively participate in the church's activities. Equally important, the ministry has ensured the sustenance of the faith and empowered the next generation to be leaders and stewards by getting them involved in church activities such as worship, leadership, and decision-making.

Furthermore, youth ministry has a multifaceted impact on the church, relating to various responsibilities, opportunities, and contributions to the overall mission and health of the church. Research by Onwubiko (2010) highlights that youth empowerment programs—such as vocational training, educational scholarships, and leadership development—contribute to church members' social and spiritual well-being. From spiritual growth through discipleship to congregational engagement through leadership development, and numerical growth through mission, the list goes on. Youth are usually considered the church's future leaders; therefore, the youth ministry develops the youth's leadership skills, spiritual maturity, and commitment to the church. According to Paul (2020), the youth can be mentored by older church members and be allowed to take leadership roles in the youth ministry and other church departments. As a valuable ministry of the church, youth ministry contributes to the vibrancy and vitality of the church and plays a significant role in advancing the kingdom of God on earth.

### **Impact on Spiritual Maturity of the Church:**

Spiritual maturity refers to the process of sanctification and transformation into Christlikeness (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:13). Youth ministry contributes to this by creating spaces for worship, biblical teaching, mentorship, and active service, which align with the Great

Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). As Stott (2008) notes, “discipleship is essential to Christian growth, and young people must be integrated into the church's life to ensure holistic spiritual formation”. Discipleship programs within youth fellowships nurture strong faith identities, reducing vulnerability to secular ideologies. Robust discipleship deepens orthodoxy and orthopraxy, which McGavran already treated as inseparable from healthy growth (doctrinal depth sustains numerical gains). Longitudinal sociological work (National Study of Youth & Religion) further shows that consistent intergenerational religious practice predicts durable faith in emerging adulthood—strengthening congregational stability over time (Smith & Denton, 2005).

Youth camps, gatherings, music concerts, and others organised by the youth ministry have effectively drawn youth to church. These have helped the young people in the church to grow in their relationship with Christ. Many youth ministry programs offer a variety of educational and social activities that provide spiritual nourishment for teenagers and young adults, allowing them to be more committed to their faith and active in their church. In this condition, Onongha (2015) asserted that “youth ministry injects vitality into the church's worship life through music, drama, and creative arts, which foster spiritual engagement”. This agrees with Psalm 150, which encourages worship with diverse expressions. Spiritually vibrant worship often inspires deeper communal devotion and revival, impacting the entire congregation.

Most of the people interviewed believed that the Youth Ministry programs, including Bible study, worship experiences, outreach events, and community service, often helped them understand Christian teachings and theological understanding and applied them to everyday life. Besides formal education, Albert Olufemi (2024) believed that youth ministry develops relationships between young people and leaders who serve as spiritual mentors. These relationships provide young people a safe space to discuss issues, ask questions, and grow together in faith. Osatohanwen Adodo (2024) also stated that “the gathering of youths in fellowship, studying and praying together has a great effect on the spiritual growth of the youths.” Similarly, Tuoyo Uyi-Eribo opined that youth ministry promotes spiritual growth through fellowship.

### **Impact on Congregational engagement**

Congregational engagement is the active participation of members in the church's worship, service, and ministry life. This principle is established in the New Testament vision of the church as the Body of Christ, where “each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16, New International Version). Paul emphasises interdependence and shared responsibility in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, indicating that every member—including youth—contributes to the whole body's vitality. Youth ministry prepares young people to be involved in church life, not just spectators. Youth are integral members of the church, and youth ministry prepares them to actively participate in worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings and other spiritual activities. This yields measurable outcomes in leadership participation and reduces drop-off during the transition to adulthood (Clark, 2015). It will also improve leadership supply and organisational impact—key markers of long-term church health (Oyelade, 2023).

Furthermore, according to Lynchburg (2013), their presence and involvement enrich the worship experience and contribute to unity and diversity within the church. For instance, youth are given opportunities to develop their leadership skills by serving in leadership roles within youth ministry and participating in church committees and decision-making processes. They also contribute to the worship experience by participating in music ministries and assisting with audiovisual technology (Hanna, 2020). As they take on responsibilities and serve in various capacities, they gain confidence, grow in their faith, and prepare to become future leaders within the church and society. Therefore, youth ministry impacted the church within its walls and wider world by empowering and equipping young people to live out their faith authentically and passionately.

Also, healthy youth ministry provides some structure for the youth to continue attending church and then to small groups, leading to active participation in the adult ministry programs. When young people are actively involved in church life, they bring energy and enthusiasm, and

encourage more involvement in church activities in other members. There has been evidence of this in the Bible, as God used youngsters to do great things. For example, God used Timothy to pastor and lead the Ephesians church as a youth (1 Timothy 4:12) (Iyamu, 2024). Olowolagba (2024) opined that youths are encouraged to take on leadership roles in the church through youth groups, outreaches, volunteer groups, or other activities as they grow in their faith. By giving the youth leadership opportunities, the youth ministry gives them a sense of ownership in the church and creates an active participatory culture. In this condition, Adodo (2024) asserted that “there are departments in the church as well as other programs/activities organised by the church that the youth could participate in when youth fellowships are organised”.

Further still, the researcher also observed that the Youth ministry provides intentional discipleship programs that nurture spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, and evangelism. At the convention level, the Nigerian Baptist Convention emphasises youth discipleship programs that strengthen doctrinal grounding and encourage holiness. By equipping young people with biblical truths, the church ensures a pipeline of spiritually mature leaders (Ephesians 4:11-16). In addition,

### **Impact on Church Numerical Expansion**

Church growth, particularly numerical expansion, has a strong biblical foundation. In Acts 2:41, following Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, “about three thousand were added to their number that day” (New International Version). This growth continued as “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Numerical expansion is a reflection of the fulfilment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), as the Gospel spreads and more people enter the fellowship of believers. Youth ministry is not just about spiritual formation, but also directly impacts church growth. Similarly, youth play a vital role in the church's mission and outreach efforts to share the Gospel and serve others. They may engage in evangelism, discipleship and support mission initiatives through fundraising and awareness building, among others (Lynchburg, 2013). Youth-led evangelism initiatives increase church membership through peer influence and campus outreach (Afolabi, 2015).

Furthermore, according to Adodo (2024), youth ministry contributes to a very large extent to the church’s growth. She explained that when youth fellowships/meetings are held, members of the youth fellowship who are not members of the church may love to come to church because of the youth ministry.” Hence, a well-structured youth ministry consistently correlates with measurable congregational increase through peer-to-peer evangelism and campus outreach. The researcher observed that youth-led worship services and creative expressions often attract unchurched youth, fostering church attendance and membership. Similarly, Olagunju (2016) alluded that churches with active youth ministry tend to record higher membership retention and growth. The researcher also noted that the youth ministry trains future pastors, missionaries, and church leaders who later pioneer new congregations. This buttressed Paul’s instruction in 2 Timothy 2:2 on entrusting the Gospel to reliable people who will teach others.

In Nigerian Baptist contexts, emerging evidence shows that youth-focused programs increase participation in mission and outreach, contributing to congregational vitality and expansion (Oyelade, 2023; *Baptist Youth Ministry and Mission Enterprise of the Nigerian Baptist Convention*, 2024). The Ibadan Baptist Conference study identifies youth inclusion as a driver of congregational impact and leadership sustainability, implying downstream numerical effects through empowered participation. The researcher believed that young people, when empowered, become effective evangelists, fulfilling Jesus’ call in Acts 1:8 to be witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” The researcher noted that Edo Baptist Conference Youth Fellowship have been instrumental in rural evangelism, campus ministries, and digital outreach, which not only bring new converts but also deepen the church's missional identity.

### **Challenges Faced in Youth Ministry in the Edo Baptist Conference**

While youth ministry plays an important role in the church's spiritual maturity and numerical expansion, various challenges hinder these ministries' effective functioning, thereby affecting church growth. This researcher and the respondents demonstrated a strong awareness of some of the challenges facing the youth ministries of the Edo Baptist Conference, hindering their impact on church growth. The challenges include the following:

These include limited resources, cultural gaps, non-availability of youths, and retention after graduation. However, socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and moral decadence threaten spiritual formation. Churches that neglect youth risk stagnation or decline (Olagunju, 2016). Conversely, churches that invest in youth ministries through mentorship, theological education, and vocational empowerment experience numerical growth and deepened spiritual life (Okonkwo, 2019).

**Limited resources:** This is the inadequacy of financial, material, and infrastructural support for sustaining effective youth ministry. In the Edo Baptist Conference, this constraint significantly affects youth-related programs' scope, quality, and consistency, thereby impeding church growth. Youth ministries often depend on church budgets for organising retreats, conferences, evangelism, and skill acquisition programs. When funds are insufficient, critical initiatives such as mission outreaches and vocational training workshops are either scaled down or abandoned, reducing the impact of the ministry (Adedibu, 2020). All respondents demonstrated awareness of limited resources in their church's youth ministry. They mentioned the availability of human and material resources as key to effective and efficient youth ministry. Effective youth ministry requires adequate funding, skilled leadership, and appropriate programming. Churches, especially those with small budgets, can struggle to allocate their needed resources. The researcher observed that within the NBC polity, churches are expected to submit annual statistics and resource their ministries locally (Nigerian Baptist Convention, n.d.). *Our Constitution* (reporting/statistics provisions). However, in many Edo Baptist Conference churches, especially in the Benin Area, limited budgets squeeze youth training, evangelism, and media tools, narrowing program scope and impact (Adodo, 2024). In Addition, Tuoyo Uyi-Eribo (2024) observed that most youths are not interested in things of God. Churches must not leave young people behind. Adedibu (2020) notes that financial constraints remain a major hindrance to youth ministry effectiveness in Nigerian Baptist churches, limiting innovation and evangelistic outreach. Consequently, youth ministries can initiate small business ventures (bookshops, printing services, event planning) to generate funds.

**Digital distraction:** Despite the impact of the youth ministry, the digital revolution has brought many distractions to the youth. Digital distraction is the inability of individuals, particularly youths, to maintain sustained attention on spiritual disciplines and congregational life due to the pervasive influence of digital technologies such as social media, gaming platforms, and entertainment applications. In the Edo Baptist Conference, as in much of Nigeria, the proliferation of smartphones and affordable internet access has dramatically reshaped how young people allocate their time and attention (Ononogbu, 2021). Many respondents affirmed that youths are no longer making themselves available to God. Both youth and church leaders also demonstrated deep knowledge of this challenge. Many youths prioritise social media interaction, online videos, or gaming over attending Bible studies, prayer meetings, or youth fellowship (Nok Agho, 2024). Therefore, most respondents highlighted the need for well-organised and planned special events within the regular programme to provide sustainability in youth ministry.

#### **Economic precarity and unemployment dampen participation:**

Economic precarity is a state of financial instability where individuals, particularly youths, lack secure income or employment opportunities to sustain their basic needs. This reality significantly impacts youth participation in church activities in the Edo Baptist Conference. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), the unemployment and underemployment rates among Nigerian youths (ages 15–34) remain above 40%, with Edo State recording similar patterns due to limited industrial opportunities and migration trends. This socio-economic burden

has direct implications for youth ministry effectiveness and church growth. The researcher observed that youth unemployment is a persistent barrier to sustained program attendance and service, pushing many youths toward survival strategies (multiple jobs, migration) that reduce congregational rhythms. Emmanuel Agamini (2024) reports that financial constraints hinder participation in youth camps, conferences, and mission trips, where transportation and registration costs are required. James Olowolagba (2024) emphasised that pairing spiritual formation with skills/enterprise programs will stabilise participation. Charity Oghene suggests churches in the Edo Baptist Conference can organise skills acquisition programs (digital marketing, tailoring, small business training) within youth fellowships.

**Tendency of Youths Leaving Church after Graduation:** This is a situation in which youths reduce or completely discontinue active participation in church life once they complete their formal education and transition into new life stages. Most respondents agreed that some youths who attend church stop attending church when they graduate. This shows that the faith of such youths was not meaningful to them personally. Origho (2024) believed that most youths stopped attending church because they do not believe in what they are being taught or do not find the church atmosphere encouraging. A youth leader observed that “many youths are also disengaged from church activities, often cite a lack of relevance to their lives, boredom, or a disconnect from their peers. The rise of technology and social media has also made several youths disengage from youth ministry and fully embrace online services, meetings and ministries. Eranola Abigail (2024) found measurable drift of Baptist youths to Pentecostal congregations, citing weak Baptist campus ministries, inadequate mentoring, and perceived lack of empowerment. In this condition, Ojo (2021) emphasises that churches that invest in career-oriented and discipleship-driven programs for graduates experience higher retention rates. Therefore, Victor, in agreement with the reports from the Nigerian Baptist Convention (2022), stressed the need for intentional follow-up and empowerment strategies for graduates as a critical step in sustaining church growth. In addition, the respondents strongly recommended a genuinely inclusive, open, and welcoming approach regarding young people in the church. A youth leader suggested that “churches should always try to recognise the youths and their gifts and support them in any way they can. Their encouragement and support will boost their strength to do more.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of youth ministry on church growth in the Edo Baptist Conference through spiritual maturity, congregational engagement and numerical expansion. It was established in the study that youth ministry plays a crucial role in church growth and transformation. Meanwhile, several challenges have been identified that dampen the impact of youth ministry on church growth. This includes limited resources, digital distraction, economic precarity, unemployment, and the tendency of youth to leave the church after graduation. Therefore, the study concludes that these challenges can be overcome with appropriate measures taken by churches in the Edo Baptist Conference and stakeholders, as recommended by this study.

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