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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Kgalemang, Malebogo
Publisher	Regnum Books International
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-10 21:49:12
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166472

(120) THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SHAPING AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Malebogo Kgalemang

Introduction: Defining Youth

The question of ‘What, or who, is youth?’¹ has historically been addressed along various disciplinary enquiries. The young has been variously defined sociologically as two varying age ranges: generally, fourteen to thirty-five years for some countries or fifteen to twenty-four years according to the UN. Rajui Assaad and Farzaneh Rourdi-Fahim note this age-range is characterised by a few transitions from childhood dependency to the independence of adulthood.² Furthermore, this period is marked by enthusiasm, dreams and ambitions.³ Assaad and Rourdi-Fahim observe that these ‘set the stage for adult life, such as education, marriage, and entrance into the job market’.⁴ Yet the young are sensitive to transformations in the economy, as their activities, prospects and ambitions are dislocated and redirected.⁵

Anthropology defines the young as a ‘historically constructed social category, as a relational concept and youth as a group of action forming an especially sharp lens through which social forces are focused in Africa’.⁶ In many African societies, initiation schools mark the stage into youth as an important stage or a rite of passage. For example, in traditional Botswana culture, the initiation school for boys and girls gave them adulthood rights and responsibilities, such as getting married, owning property and participating in public debates.

Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is apparently home to ‘almost one in four of the world’s Christians’.⁷ It is expected, according to the Pew Research Report on religion, that Africa will become the continent with the largest number of Christians by a wide margin. The Pew Report on religion further states that sub-Saharan Africa’s share of the global Christian population may rise from 24% in 2010 to 38% in 2050.⁸ But what does this mean for the population of the young? Commencing from the universal, in 2010, Christians were only slightly older, with an average age of thirty, than the age of the overall population (with the average age of 28).⁹ This means the age breakdown of the world’s population is not distinct from that of the world’s Christian population. The Pew Report on religion gives an example of the world’s population younger than 15, as about 27% of the world’s people overall. The following section explores particular Christian youth organisations and discusses the role youth play in shaping African Christianity.

¹ Deborah Durham, ‘Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73, no. 3, Part 1 (Jul. 2000): 113-120.

² Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Rourdi-Fahimi, ‘Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?’ Washington, DC. *Population Reference Bureau*, 2007.

³ Assaad & Rourdi-Fahimi, ‘Youth in the Middle East’, 114.

⁴ Assaad & Rourdi-Fahimi, ‘Youth in the Middle East’, 115.

⁵ Assaad & Rourdi-Fahimi, ‘Youth in the Middle East’, 115.

⁶ Durham, ‘Youth and Social Imagination’, 114.

⁷ Sherrill Jacobs. ‘Church Business Goes Digital in Africa.’ www.thisafricaonline.com/Business/Church-business-goes-digital-in-Africa (accessed 20 February 2015).

⁸ Pew Research Report: Pew Templeton Global Religious Future Project. [www.pewforum.org/data/](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/www.pewforum.org/data/) (accessed 20 February 2015).

⁹ Pew Research Report. www.globalreligiousfutures.org.

The Role of Youth in Shaping African Christianity

Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, has a significant number of Christian youth organizations. The majority of these are evangelistic in nature and orientation. Good examples include *Youth for Christ International in Africa*, *Youth with a Mission* and *The African Christian Youth Development Foundation*. In general, Christian youth organizations cater for the various needs of youth. The overarching drive is catering for the spiritual needs of the young which is addressed through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, Christian organizations are not limited to meeting the spiritual needs of the young. The majority of youth organizations explored below also cater for the material and social needs of the young. However, the way the young are shaped by Christian youth organizations differs from one African country to another and even from one denomination to another. Whereas, in some countries, Christian youth organizations are essential to the development of the young, in others they are not visible. However, Christian youth organizations are much more numerous than can be discussed in this paper. This is because almost every church denomination and congregation has its own youth department and organization. Below, I briefly present Christian youth organizations on the African continent.

*Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)*¹⁰

Originally formed in Britain, but currently headquartered in Switzerland since 1965, YWCA is the oldest Christian youth non-profit organization. YWCA is found in at least twenty-five member associations in sub-Saharan Africa. The latest addition is the Rwandan Young Women's Christian Movement in 1995, which has since been legally recognised by the government of Rwanda in 2005. With goals to transform communities and empower women, YWCA began strictly as a Christian movement shaped by a Christian ethos. It has since taken a holistic role to help shape and establish young women. YCWA developed the following focus areas: young women's leadership; sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV and AIDS and violence against women. The holistic approaches were equally important in nurturing women.

Youth for Christ International

Youth for Christ International is an organization present in at least thirty-six African countries. Its main goal is the evangelisation of youth. This evangelization has high spiritual approaches through its movement called 'Generation 21',¹¹ which is characterised by cultivating skills in spiritual warfare, boldness in evangelism, passion in social involvement and godliness in leadership. It also features the greatest change in accommodating the young, their aspirations and desires. Though evangelistic, the organization is also holistic in approach. It is committed to social, mental and physical development in tackling issues and challenges facing the young. Youth for Christ International, for example, has created HIV and AIDS programmes, and vocational skills, etc.¹² It has abandoned traditional modes of reaching the young, opting for what the young prefer. These include the use of blogs, Twitter and various other modes of reaching the young. Its pioneering work in Africa is concentrated in the following Nigerian cities: Akure, Asaba, Kaduna, Owerri and Lagos, with its headquarters in South Africa since the 1940s.

Youth with a Mission

Youth with a Mission is an inter-denominational, non-profit, Christian, missionary organization. Though it caters for all Christian ages, its primary focus is on youth. Its purpose is to 'make God known' to the young. One of the means through which it makes God known is its ministry of helps, the Mercy Ministry. This has a number of relief and development programmes. It champions young people's interests and

¹⁰ Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), www.worldywca.org (accessed 14 August 2015).

¹¹ Youth For Christ International in Africa, <http://africa.yfci.org/> (accessed 16 August 2015)

¹² Youth Rise: Nigeria. <http://youthrise.org/projects/youth-rise-nigeria> (accessed 16 August 2015).

provides space for them to spearhead its vision and ministry. Hence, its purpose is to train the young and support them by creating spaces for them to flourish and develop.

The African Christian Youth Development Foundation

The African Christian Youth Development Foundation is a Nigeria-based youth organization that seeks to advance the glory of God and the Kingdom of Christ. It has a holistic approach that seeks to promote education and relieve poverty among Christian youth in Africa. It uses ‘subtle’ Christian political activism to challenge and change the rules and practices that generate poverty. In addition, it has an interfaith or pluralistic approach to ‘building bridges of trust and understanding among the different faith traditions and cultures in communities where the young live and work’.¹³ It nurtures the spiritual life of young Christians, such that they become worthy ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the process equipping young Christians to minister effectively to the young.

One of its key goals is to cultivate ethical living. This is practised through an invitation to people to examine their lives and to act on the pressing moral, ethical and spiritual issues and challenges of our time. It encourages the inclusion of faith and values perspective in public discourse.

The Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA)

The Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA) is a movement inspired by St Pope John Paul’s 1990 message for the World Day of Peace. In the message, he made an urgent call to upscale ecological awareness: ‘Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone... Its various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing ties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, states, and the international community.’¹⁴ Young Catholics in Eastern Africa took this mantle and actively networked with five other countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe for addressing environmental challenges from Christian perspectives.

CYNESA’s mission seeks to respond to the ‘twin challenges of environmental degradation and climate change in an effective, co-ordinated manner, culturally sensitive and spiritually grounded’.¹⁵ The goals of CYNESA are delineated along three objectives. First, it aims at education and awareness creation, in which the aim of CYNESA is preparing a ‘toolkit on climate change that draws from Scripture’.¹⁶ It is also informed by Ignatian Spirituality, scientific research and Catholic social teaching. The second objective is developing networking and advocacy training. The latter seeks to build ‘relationships with like-minded partners; to train young Catholics in advocacy on environment sustainability, and to link initiatives on the continent’.¹⁷ Thirdly, it promotes and supports context-based plans for young people to act in their parishes, schools and within their youth movements. It provides training, resources and consultation to parish communities to assist in the development of youth ministry initiatives. In regard to the environment and the young, it provides specific programmes to children, teens and families in youth ministry.

Scripture Union (SU)

Scripture Union, commonly abbreviated as SU, is one of the oldest Christian youth organizations in the world. It was founded in Britain by an American student and spread worldwide to over 130 countries, with

¹³ African Christian Youth Development Foundation. www.acydfoundation.cfsites.org (accessed 16 August 2015)

¹⁴ The Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA). [www.http://cynesa.org/](http://cynesa.org/) (accessed 14 August 2015)

¹⁵ Catholic Youth Network, (CYNESA) [www.http://cynesa.org/](http://cynesa.org/).

¹⁶ Catholic Youth Network, (CYNESA) . [www.http://cynesa.org/](http://cynesa.org/).

¹⁷ Catholic Youth Network, (CYNESA) [www.http://cynesa.org/](http://cynesa.org/).

about sixty member countries in the African region and sub-region. Its African headquarters are in Nairobi, Kenya.

SU is a non-denominational Christian youth organization that operates in post-primary schools in some African countries while it is also predominantly involved in primary schools in other African Countries. It was a movement that had a 'variety of specialist ministries'.¹⁸ It works with churches to present the good news of Jesus Christ to children, youth and families. Its vision has targeted children and youth following Jesus, and filled them with hope and trust in God. One of its other objectives was to promote Bible reading among children of all ages in primary and high school, with a view to 'furthering personal discipleship, Christian community and social concern'.¹⁹ Young Christian readers of the Bible were to be made aware of the reality and presence of God. Scripture Union has been an excellent evangelising organization that reaches both primary and high school with the gospels, thereafter encouraging them to be active in their churches or to find churches if they did not have one. Because of its lengthy existence in a number of countries, it has developed excellent rapport with host governments. According to J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, SU also became 'coterminous with conservative evangelism'.²⁰

All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and Youth Empowerment

The All Africa Conference of Churches is a fellowship of Christian churches that holds its general assembly every eighteen months. Each assembly is preceded by a 'Youth Pre-Assembly Event'²¹ which reflects the value AACC place on the young. At its Ninth Assembly, Bernard Okok-Obuoga discussed six hallmark areas for youth empowerment towards effective, sustainable and responsible leadership on the continent. Only four will be covered in this section.

First, leadership and organizational structures will play an effective role with a strong voice of the All Africa Youth and Students Assembly (AAYSA) towards sustainable and transparent working relationships. Lobbying, advocacy and networking is the second important hallmark for 'positive socio-economic transformation that responds to local realities and the needs of the people'.²² Since a world is as effective as its educational development, education towards effective youth leadership is pertinent. Therefore, youth empowerment can take 'the form of training and exposure for strengthening skills'.²³ AACC facilitates this through exchange programmes between the AACC youth and those from African sub-regions. Fourthly, the integration of young people into the mainstream activities of ecumenical organizations is another important hallmark of empowerment towards effective leadership. The AACC sought to separate the 'AACC Women's Desk from the Youth Desk'²⁴ who will also be integrated into the 'activities and leadership of the church'.

Conclusion

Clearly, more Christian youth organizations are active in some sub-Saharan Africa countries than this section can fully explore. Given the advancement of social networks, the youthfulness of the African

¹⁸ James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa*. (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 243.

¹⁹ Amanze, *A History*, 244.

²⁰ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 102-103.

²¹ Bernard Okok-Obuoga, 'Youth Empowerment for Effective Leadership' in *Africa Step Forth in Faith: The 9th AACC General Assembly Report, Maputo 2008*: All Africa Conference of Churches.

²² Okok-Obuoga, 'Youth Empowerment', 56.

²³ Okok-Obuoga, 'Youth Empowerment', 56-57.

²⁴ Okok-Obuoga, 'Youth Empowerment', 56-57.

population and the challenges facing the young, Christian youth organizations and the church will continue to play a vital role in shaping and being shaped by the young in sub-Saharan Africa.

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