

Emerging apologetics Themes in contemporary African youth ministry: A Kenyan perspective

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Abstract

Contemporary Christian ministry and theological education in Africa cannot neglect her children and young people. Engaging effectively with the children and youth in Africa's cities presents a rising challenge to scholars and practitioners. In addition to the developmental issues surrounding children and youth, there are worldview issues at play among young people. Urban African cities like Nairobi contain a mixture of African traditional religious worldviews, modern worldviews, and postmodern worldviews. This means that Christian ministry with the emerging generations will often take an apologetic mode. The scholarly literature on apologetics in the continent is scanty. Further, much of the research is merely theoretical and lacks empirical insight from practical ministry. This article will use an empirical methodology among African church leaders to collect salient themes in the discipline and practice of apologetics and draw conclusions for ministry and theological education.

Keywords

African Christianity; African theology; apologetics; empirical study; worldviews; youth ministry; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Contemporary ministry in Africa is a contextual engagement with relevant issues in the continent. Ministry forms, including preaching, teaching, counselling, evangelism, and missions, are usually engaged within specific lived realities of a people. One of the salient features of the continent of Africa is the phenomenon of the youth bulge. In terms of demographics, Africa is the world's youngest continent, and the statistics are poised for an upward trajectory. For instance, in 2015 youth aged 15–25 years comprised 1.2 billion people, accounting for 1 in every 5 persons in the world (UN

2015). Other statistics place those under the age of 35 years at 77% of the population (WEF 2020). With the population in urban Africa projected to grow to 2.4 billion in 2050, the number of young people comprises a significant proportion of African cities (AFD 2019). On one hand, this means that any meaningful ministry engagement within the continent must consider Africa's young people.

However, young people in African cities face various challenges. These include challenging transitions into adult life including issues surrounding youth unemployment, volatile political contexts, breakdown in family institutions and a culturally complex situation, protracted by the globalization of the world that creates a plural worldview context (Ndereba 2021c). Second, young people in the continent are not monolithic but are diverse in their representation (Knoetze 2017). In Kenya from the current census for example, we have young people in rural and urban areas, young people of international backgrounds and those of local Kenyan ethnicities, young people who are religiously affiliated and those who are increasingly defining themselves as "religious nones" (KNBS 2019). Other issues relevant to ministry among young people include mental health issues, the proliferation of new and social media as well as the divergent sexualities that are transforming youth identity in urban cities (ILO 2020). The question arises, how do we minister effectively to these young people? The key research gap that this article addresses is the changing worldview context and the emerging apologetics issues that must be engaged within any contemporary African youth ministry.

The foregoing paragraphs have noted the various approaches in engaging youth in the continent. Youth can be approached from anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspectives. However, this article embeds youth studies, and in particular, youth ministry within the purview of theological reflection. The researcher explores the challenge of ministering effectively to contemporary African youth by engaging the research in youth ministry with a contextual lens. In particular, this paper is situated within the framework of practical theology. Practical theology considers the interplay of theory and praxis, in order to strengthen both theological reflection and practical ministry (Osmer 2008; Swinton & Mowat 2016). This essay uses an empirical methodology that will collect data from

youth leaders in various Christian denominations in Kenya and explore apologetic themes pertinent to youth ministry.

2. The need for an empirical approach

Holistic approaches to youth ministry must consider the young people within their socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual contexts. However, this article focuses on the spiritual context that young people find themselves in. Because of globalization, young people are interacting with divergent ideologies and even worldviews. The complexities of worldviews are protracted by the increase of new media and the religious transformations that arise from the digital landscape. The problem is that because of the plural religious and worldview context of Africa's youth in urban areas, Churches have struggled with helping them to form a Christian worldview that can aid them in their transition to adulthood. Churches are called to equip them to negotiate the different worldview contexts in a compassionate, thoughtful, and winsome manner.

Thus, this essay seeks to explore how apologetics, as the discipline that helps Christians to give a reason for the faith that they hold in a respectful and winsome manner, is a non-negotiable asset in youth ministry today. In particular, this article seeks to explore the following issues:

1. To explore the contemporary research in youth ministry in an African perspective.
2. To use an empirical method to explore the state of youth ministry in Kenya.
3. To outline apologetic themes among youth leaders engaged in youth ministry.
4. To explore the implications for contemporary youth ministry in the 21st Century context.

This article seeks to answer these questions by utilizing an empirical methodology. By and large, empirical methodologies, as diverse as they are, help theologians to consider the specific issues that people face in their everyday lives (Root 2016:46). Because of the nature of practical theology as an approach that seeks to integrate the relationship between faith and the

unique contexts that face different people, empirical methods utilize social sciences as a dialogue partner in order to expand theological reflection beyond textual fundamentalism into the wise discernment of how God may be at work in a “concrete situation” (Cartledge 1999:101). While noting the over-reliance that empirical methods could default to, as Root (2016) observes, this article aims to explore apologetics themes from the actual ministry among young people in Kenya. This allows this article to offer fresh insights from the everyday lives of youth leaders and their young people, and their interaction with the apologetic literature.

3. Apologetics in youth ministry research

In international research, youth studies have commonly been approached from anthropological, psychological, and sociological perspectives (MacDonald & King 2020; Sommers 2012). Sommers (2012) for instance explores the common concept of rural-urban migration of African youth through an ethnographic study of Rwandan youth. However, within the field of theology, youth ministry has received much scholarly attention in the 20th century. Initially located within the sub-discipline of Christian Education, youth ministry is now engaged within the discipline of Practical Theology (Nel 2013). The reason it was located in Christian Education was because youth ministry arose in the context of para-church organizations, and usually as an off-shoot of youth engagement in schools. The history of para-church organizations such as Young Life and Youth for Christ support the last point (Senter 2014:52). However, as Churches began thinking of how to engage youth in light of what was happening in the wider culture – including issues to do with the world wars, the cold war, and the advent of industrialization (Root 2017) – scholars started to pay attention to the theological perspectives surrounding work with young people. Consequentially, within the North American context, scholars began to advocate for a “theological turn” to youth ministry (Root & Dean 2011). One of the networks that brings together scholars and practitioners in youth ministry is called the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM), and their African region gathers for a conference every two years.

Within the African context, practical theologians have engaged with a variety of issues in youth ministry. Aziz, Nel & Davies (2017) for instance have considered the office of youth pastor and advocated for policy frameworks that can lead to the implementation of youth ministry as a valid vocation. Cloete (2012, 2015) has explored the issues of sexuality and digital cultures within congregational contexts in South Africa. Chiroma (2015) has considered the role of mentorship in effective youth ministry and in formation of ministers in theological education. Chiroma & Muriithi (2019) have explored how youth ministry education should be embedded in higher educational institutions. They offer practical theology, youth and technology, critical thinking, youth ministry as topics that can be included in theological curricula, if theological education and contemporary ministry are to have an effective engagement with the continent. Ndereba (2021a:2) has also explored how a youth-inclusive perspective can empower the Church's ministry by having young people involved in all the facets of Church ministry. Elsewhere, he argues how the concept of ubuntu can be used in apologetics methodology that bridges the affective and cognitive aspects of young people (Ndereba 2021b:2). Nel (2018) also explores youth from a missional perspective, and unpacks theological themes such as covenant theology, trinitarian doctrine and their interface with youth ministry. Thus, practical theologians have formulated theological approaches in the critical and specialized ministry to Africa's young people.

What is lacking in the research is how youth ministers and theological education can effectively answer the unique questions of Africa's contemporary youth cultures and sub-cultures. Within the classical apologetics approach, questions of the faith have included the existence of God, the problem of evil and suffering and the relationship between faith and reason. Several authors have provided the following definitions of apologetics:

- Craig (2008:15) and Geisler (2012:68) focus on apologetics as the rational justification or defence of what Christians believe.
- Dulles (2005:xix), taking a historical approach, views apologetics as the task of giving a reason for the hope of the gospel as the Christian faith meets various challenges of each age.

- Baucham (2015:20) defines “expository apologetics” as the art and science of answering questions with biblical truth.

From the above, it is clear that apologetics is envisaged as an intellectual enterprise. Secondly, it is approached from different methodological perspectives. These include historical approaches, philosophical approaches, presuppositional approaches and evidentialist approaches (Cowan & Gundry 2000; Geisler 2012). This essay does not seek to critique these approaches but to consider how they may be applied within African contexts. Whereas they are engaged with predominantly North American contexts, much more can be said with regards to giving a reasonable defence of the gospel in light of youth cultures and sub-cultures in Africa.

Within the African context, young people are asking how the Christian faith responds to our colonial history, how faith relates with African culture and identity, how they should respond to those who identify as LGBTIQAA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, Aromantic, in addition to other acronyms that represent expanding gender and sexual identities in wider society) and how Christian faith can help them navigate issues to do with marriage in a “come-we-stay” culture or how to pursue career direction with divine purpose.¹ These questions are popular among this cohort of adolescents and young adults who are transitioning into adulthood. The recent scholarship in emerging adulthood is revealing how young people are taking longer to adjust to adult roles and responsibilities, compared to generations before (Arnett 2010; Wood et al. 2018). These issues are complicated by the massive digital shifts, fragmented and hybrid cultural identities as well as conflicting worldview claims. What Christian ministry must help young people to do is to move from a convenient faith, labelled as MTD (Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism) to a more engaged faith, that is reasonable and helps young people in their faith formation (Dean 2010; Ndereba 2021b; Weber 2015). More broadly, the Kenyan apologist Kigame (2018) notes that the following issues in African societies necessitate apologetic responses: academic hostility, African traditional religions, heresies, pluralism, occultism, moral relativism, Islam, and world religions. This article explores some of the questions that young people in

1 Anecdotal evidence from my own youth ministry practice as well as that of fellow youth workers in the African context.

Kenya are asking and how apologetics can be seen as a contextual youth ministry approach in contemporary Church ministry.

4. An empirical methodology used in this study

This essay is grounded in an empirical and qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology allows for a deep exploration between apologetics and pertinent youth issues arising from youth ministry in Kenya (Creswell 2014). Rather than blanketing apologetics or youth ministry in a generalized manner, this research seeks to explore meaning between theological data and practical ministry experience (Swinton & Mowat 2016). As such, this research utilized an empirical questionnaire to explore the apologetics themes arising from specific ministry contexts. The researcher designed a questionnaire and collected data using an online form from 23 youth leaders within two ministry networks in Nairobi, Kenya. These networks are the Nairobi Youth Workers Network (NAYNET) and the PCEA Youth Workers Network. The form was live from the 13th to 21st of June 2021. The following section captures the results from the empirical research and will then end by offering recommendations and further areas of research. The researcher informed the research participants on the voluntary nature of their participation as well as the confidentiality of their responses. Consent was given through their participation in the research.

5. Results and discussion

This section summarizes important data from the research instrument. It paints a picture of the youth ministry context in Kenya, from this qualitative and focused study. It reveals the age of youth leaders, the segments and size of youth ministry served by youth leaders or youth pastors, the denominational representation, the emerging apologetic issues, and the views of youth leaders concerning how effective they think the Church is in engaging young people. It ends with a discussion on how the Church can respond to some of the arising apologetic issues in youth ministry.

5.1 Age of youth leaders

52.27% of the youth leaders are between the age bracket of 25–35 years, 26.1% are between 20–25 years and 21.7% are 35 years and above.

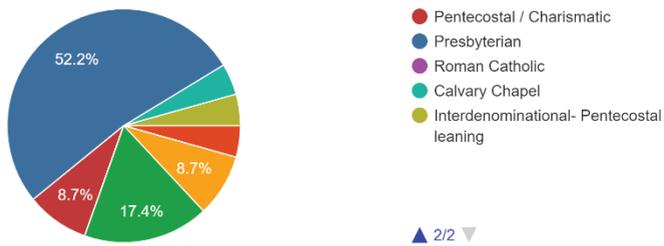
5.2 Denominational representation

The pictorial below shows the majority denominational representation of the youth leaders:

- 52.2% were Presbyterian.
- 17.4% were evangelical.
- 8.7% were Pentecostal.
- 8.7% were Baptist.

Figure 1: Church denominations of youth leaders in the research sample

Your current church tradition / denomination
23 responses



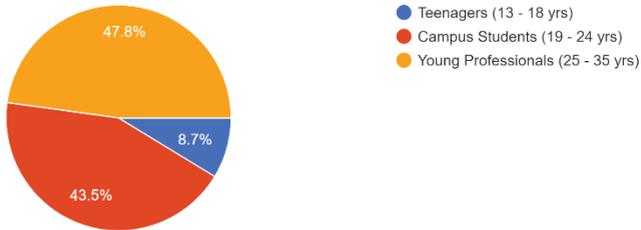
Churches and denominations represented in the research included Mamlaka Hill Chapel, Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Africa Inland Church (AIC), CITAM, Kahawa Sukari Baptist Church, Nairobi Chapel, Gospel Centres International, Living Waters Fellowship, Gospel Mission Church, Nairobi Baptist Church, Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), and Kenya Assemblies of God (KAG).

5.3 Age cohort of youth ministry members

In terms of the cohort that youth leaders primarily serve, the pie chart below shows the age demographics.

Figure 2: The youth ministry age groups served by youth leaders

I primarily serve:
23 responses



5.4 Church’s effectiveness in youth ministry engagement

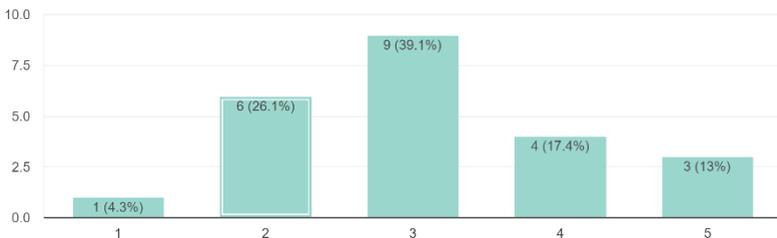
One of the questions was designed to establish whether the youth leaders think their church or denomination is ministering effectively to young people. It used a Likert scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) The following were the top four results:

- 9 were neutral
- 6 moderately disagreed
- 4 moderately agreed
- 3 strongly agreed

The infographic below represents the responses from the research.

Figure 3: Youth leader responses to whether their Churches are ministering effectively to young people

I think my church is doing enough to minister effectively to young people:
23 responses



Based on the follow-up questions, the issues surrounding the effectiveness of youth ministry in their congregation emerged as follows:

- Presence of or lack of youth inclusive programmes or approaches.
- Structural or youth policy issues in the local congregation.
- Discipleship materials that are contextualized to young people.

5.5 Key apologetics issues in youth ministry

The leading question surrounding the main theme of the research was phrased as follows “I think that one of the key issues in youth ministry is for the church to explain and defend what Christians believe in light of other belief systems”. In terms of the responses, 15 strongly agreed, 6 moderately agreed and 2 were neutral. The following themes were the top issues in the area of apologetics.

5.5.1 *Biblical issues (39.1%)*

Most youth leaders noted that the primary apologetics issue has to do with interpreting the Bible to engage youth issues. The issues raised included teaching young people sound biblical interpretation; distinguishing between false and true teachers of God’s Word; dealing with seeming contradictions in the Bible and applying the Bible in ethical and epistemological issues. One of the prominent issues raised in epistemology was the question of moral relativism. Kigame (2018) has engaged the issue of how the Bible compares with other revelations. On the charge that the Bible has been used as a tool to oppress the African, Felder (2018) has offered an apologetic response within the African American context. Welch (2019) has also explored the copious presence of African peoples and places in the Bible. These are some of the scholarly works in apologetics that can offer some responses to the various issues.

5.5.2 *Faith and science (13%)*

The second most common apologetics issue has to do with engaging Christian faith with recent developments in science. The Christian responses to scientific issues include rebuttals against Darwinism, a critique of scientism as an overall metaphysical framework, new research in the area of neuroscience and the soul as well as the compatibility of faith

and science in light of the history and philosophy of science (Moreland 2018; Moreland, Meyer, Shaw & Grudem 2017).

5.5.3 Pain, evil and suffering (8.7%)

The last two common issues included atheism, and what in apologetics is called theodicy, or theistic responses to the problem posed by pain, evil and suffering. On the issue of atheism, respondents noted the rising community of Atheists in Kenya (AIK) and the challenges they pose to Christian faith and practice in Kenya. Another youth leader observed how atheism is becoming prominent as a result of the advent of new media that allows for the free flow of secular ideologies. On the issue of theodicy, some youth leaders noted how the COVID pandemic has impacted the Church's responses. Moreland & Craig (2017) help us to distinguish between the logical or intellectual problem, and the emotional problem posed by evil and suffering.

A proper grasp of the doctrine of God helps people to reconcile a good, loving, and powerful God with the presence of evil and suffering. Theistic responses have also noted the place of human responsibility in the problem of pain, evil and suffering. Within the African continent, pain, evil and suffering takes the form of immoral graft, political assassinations, and ethnic cleansing, which make the conflict much more complex. Interestingly, African theologians who have addressed these social evils that lead to the tearing down of the society have engaged the issue from a holistic perspective. For instance, whereas 1 Peter 3:15 functions as a “locus classicus” in apologetics, Katongole (2011, 2017) uses it as part of how to reconstruct a political theology of hope for Africa's societies grappling with entrenched violence. The emotional problem of theodicy requires pastoral care and presence, which can help Christians with a deep and meaningful engagement of pain, evil and suffering. Christian scholars have also explored the place of lament and the restoration of dignity as viable responses to pain, evil and suffering in the lives of individuals and communities (Katongole 2017; Magezi & Magezi 2016; Nyambura 2017).

5.5.4 Atheism (8.7%)

One leader noted how the growing atheist community is challenging the claims of Christianity in light of scientific knowledge and how the Church needs to equip her members to respond to them. Atheism as the ‘absence

of a belief(s) in God' has historical precedence in the West and scholars have approached the topic from multiple perspectives (Bullivant & Ruse 2013). The New Atheists movement in the 21st century, advanced by leading atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, has found a home within Atheist societies in African cities including Lagos (Nigeria), Johannesburg (South Africa) and Nairobi (Kenya) among others. Responses to atheist arguments have been proposed by several Christian philosophers and theologians, from metaphysical and epistemological grounds (Craig 2008; Moreland 2018; Plantinga 1977, 1993). Within Africa, these arguments will be critical in engaging the rising generation of Africans who are distancing themselves from any religious belief.

6. Recommendations and further research

The researcher was surprised that the challenge of African Traditional Religion was not as common as hypothesized. However, this issue may be hidden or assumed in the challenge of the rising atheist community. In the researcher's interactions with them, they tend to question the validity of the Christian faith as a "white man's religion". This is underpinned by elements of our colonial past that creates difficulty in distinguishing between missionary and colonial enterprises. However, this research reveals that global apologetic issues are also common in Kenya. The reason could be the effect of globalization that has somewhat "equalized" the cultural climate, especially as a result of the ubiquitous nature of social and new media.

The researcher recommends that these issues be introduced within theological education in Kenyan universities. If the role of theological education is to develop Church leaders and future theologians for the African church, then in order to be conversant with the issues in practical ministry, theological education must embed both youth ministry and apologetics issues into the curriculum. Secondly, churches should support youth leaders, workers, and pastors in theological training. All the respondents said that the Church should train her leaders in these issues. This training can either be conducted through platforms of theological education within local churches or outsourced to theological institutions who may have the needed capacity to conclusively accomplish this. Third,

empirical methods should be a part of theological reflection as they help theologians to reflect and propose viable solutions that are biblical and contextual in nature and yet informed by different societal contexts.

In terms of further research, scholars can incorporate the use of diverse research methods. These include, and are not limited to, longitudinal approaches, quantitative approaches and other multi-disciplinary approaches that can enrich the research. For example, a city-wide or country-wide quantitative survey can help to draw out conclusions that are representative of the youth population in Kenya. This research merely explored the emerging themes. However, expanding the context of the research to be more representative of the African continent could widen the scope of further research. Multi-disciplinary approaches could use adolescent development theories or emerging adulthood theories, to explore whether different questions are asked by different cohorts of young people based on their stage of transition. Additionally, specific doctrinal loci could be incorporated in further research. For instance, the doctrine of God and the issue of theodicy; or *sola scriptura* and the epistemological foundation for scientific inquiry.

7. Conclusions

This article argues that engaging the issues that young people are asking, in this case apologetics questions, are critical to meaningful youth ministry in the long-term. Granted that youth comprise a majority of the population, engaging in mission means that churches can use the contemporary issues as bridges to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. This article engaged the population demographics of Africa and concluded that the Church has a mandate in reaching out to the young people, particularly through answering the questions that they are asking.

This research also very briefly explored the challenges in ministering to young people. As those who are transitioning into adulthood, they face challenges with regards to the family breakdown, healthy transitions into the labour market, access to education and healthcare, and an absence of policies that can support their well-being. Fortunately, within the Kenyan public policy space, various documents reveal that the government is working towards these issues. However, the Church must also engage these

issues as a bridge towards ministering the gospel to the next generations. The most formidable challenge explored by this essay is the place of conflicting worldviews, necessitating an apologetic approach to youth ministry.

Further, this research used the tools of practical theology in order to bring real ministry insights to bear on theological reflection. More specifically, the empirical approach used brought data from practical ministry youth leaders as a critical basis for theological reflection. There remains a gap in contextualizing youth ministry more broadly and apologetics more specifically within theological curricular in Kenyan theological institutions (Ndereba 2021a:5–6). Thus, training youth leaders in apologetics is a matter that must be taken up by churches and theological institutions. The research revealed that the following youth ministry issues are common in youth ministry: 1) Issues surrounding the Bible, including interpretation and application; 2) the relationship between Christian faith and science; 3) the twin issues of pain, evil and suffering as well as responding to atheists in Kenya, and Africa at large. This article shows that apologetics is a critical tool for youth ministry in Kenya and Africa and will be a non-negotiable asset in doing any meaningful work with young people inside and outside of ecclesial communities. Further research that can engage specific themes from this article will contribute to this critical body of work.

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