HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Youth agency and intergenerational solidarity: The case of multicultural congregations in the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa

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Dates:
Received: 20 Mar. 2026
Accepted: 20 July 2026
Published: 11 Sept. 2026

How to cite this article:
Andrew, D.N., Botes, L.J.S. & Schoeman, W.J., 2026, 'Youth agency and intergenerational solidarity: The case of multicultural congregations in the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11394. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11394

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After 30 years of democracy in South Africa, a lot is said about the plight of the youth, whether they are the ones left behind in society or whether their voices are muted in shaping the future of the country. These questions and more are not just asked in society in general, but also more particularly within the context of faith communities. Studies carried out within multicultural congregations in the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFMSA) show evidence of the potential and possibilities of igniting youth agency and harnessing intergenerational solidarity among different age groups when the five conditions of intergroup contact, namely inclusion, belonging, participation, leadership and shared values are met. The study utilised intergroup contact theory and social cohesion theory as a basis and a framework to investigate how the category of age is addressed within multicultural congregations in the AFMSA. A qualitative research methodology is followed consisting of focus-group interviews with participants of five multicultural congregations.

Contribution: The study reports on the findings, illustrating that the youth has agency, thus fostering intergenerational solidarity between all age groups. Through intergroup contact, the youth can turn faith communities into repositories of social cohesion in both church and society.

Keywords: intergenerational solidarity; intergroup contact; multicultural congregations; social cohesion; youth agency.

Introduction

The saying, 'youth is the future of tomorrow' is greatly challenged by scholars in youth studies (Beukes 2022; Nel 2015b), and rightly so, because it places the agency of youth in the future and does not locate who they are (being or ontology), what they know (knowledge or epistemology) and what they can do (capability or agency) in the present.

Youth ministry functions as a subdiscipline of practical theology, and Aziz (2019) argues for a descriptive youth ministry that is informed about youth culture, their lived realities and experiences. Weber (2015) accentuates that youth ministry research in practical and missional theology should be contextualised within the (South) African context, thus guarding against uncritically supplanting the local context with global models that do not take its intricate challenges into account. In another contribution Aziz (2017) argues that youth ministry praxis as a part of a practical theological discipline should honestly reflect upon God's involvement in the lived realities of young people, as well as upon God's will to transform their circumstances.

The study is guided by the main research question, how faith communities can contribute to social cohesion, with a first sub-question, how does social capital theory and intergroup contact theory assist with social cohesion building, a second sub-question, how youth are represented in the membership, leadership and ministry in multicultural congregations, and a final sub-question, whether multicultural congregations can be spaces of belonging, inclusion, participation, legitimacy and authority, and shared values for youth.

Firstly, the article focuses on *youth marginalisation*, *intergenerational solidarity* and *intergenerational justice*. This is discussed to provide a background to the need for a study that focuses on youth agency and intergenerational solidarity. Secondly, the article situates the study within *faith communities* and, more specifically, *multicultural congregations* and the

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religious and spiritual capital they produce that can be helpful to address youth agency and intergenerational solidarity. Thirdly, the article turns towards the *empirical research that was performed on youth in multicultural congregations*, outlining the research methodology and research design that were followed, and reports on the sample, data collection, findings and the themes that emanated from the research. The final part engages the findings for its *relevance to the current challenges with youth ministry as place sharing in a ministry of belonging*.

Youth marginalisation

In 2024, South Africa celebrated 30 years of democracy, but the youth in the country was sceptical about it. They claimed that the first 30 years brought political liberation and reconciliation, but not much has changed to better the plight of the youth. The youth was concerned that they were the ones left behind in society and were critical about their voices being muted in shaping the future of the country. These concerns are not just asked in the broader society but also within the context of faith communities.

Everatt (2024a) remarks that the youth is a generation lost under democracy. They are the hardest hit by *unemployment* (60% of young people in the cohort of 15–24 in late 2023; and among the group aged 25–34 dropped to 39.8%), *lack of opportunities* and *alienation*. Everatt (2024b) reports on research that was carried out on youth marginalisation in the transition period to democracy (1990–1994) and today (2024), 30 years after democracy, observing that the optimism that was characteristic of early post-apartheid South Africa has vanished. Utilising the South African marginalisation tool that was developed during the period under discussion, Everatt (2024b:194) describes the youth marginalisation model as an uncomfortable twinning between youth and marginalisation that looks at interior and external contexts within which the youth operates that are flexible and open to change to circumstances.

Youth – a ticking time bomb or cash in hand for the future

A report by the *Institute of Justice and Reconciliation* offers two views to describe the youth, firstly as a ticking time bomb, viewing the youth as a liability: frustrated, dissatisfied, largely unemployed (Lefko-Everett 2012). This description of the youth is not only applicable to the youth in South Africa but also in the rest of Africa where 'youths constitute the biggest social group in Africa and are therefore a ticking time bomb if we continue to exclude them from such important matters' (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA] 2017). Secondly, as a demographic dividend, seeing the youth as 'cash in hand for the future – a rich pool of potential waiting to have their talents channelled' (Lefko-Everett 2012:1). These two images about the youth imply that they can either become a lawless group or a benefit to their generation and the generations to come.

Intergenerational solidarity

The term 'intergenerational' refers to the basic mechanism by which persons of different generations collaborate to nurture and support one another (Newman et al. 1997). Bengtson and Oyama (2007) define 'intergenerational solidarity' as the 'social cohesion between generations'. Traditionally, it means within a family system, that the older generation share their wisdom with the younger generation, while they receive nurturing and care from them (Newman et al. 1997:xi). Today, with the complexity of modern culture, gaps remains about how intergenerational solidarity is perceived by the older and younger generation.

Intergenerational solidarity is best understood within the context of shared expectations and obligations regarding the ageing of individuals and the succession of generations, a *contract across generations* and age groups represented by the norms operating at a micro- and macro-social level of the social structure within a historical context (Bengtson & Oyama 2007:5). Perspectives on solidarity and conflict in intergenerational theory mostly emphasise the conflict aspect or so-called 'war of the generations' at the expense of solidarity, which refers to the social bonds that link the generations.

The solidarity aspect is needed in intergenerational relations, especially for the re-negotiation of the balance between continuity and innovation that happens over time among successive generations. In a contract across generations, certain norms and expectations are met; firstly, at a biosocial level, families are involved in the education of the next generation; secondly, at a gerosocial level, resources are made available in the form of financial and emotional support between the older and younger generation; and finally, at a geriatric dependency level, care-giving and support are lended to the older generations by the younger generation (Bengtson & Oyama 2007:5).

Unfortunately, amidst the pandemic, decisions were made that had huge implications for youth, but due to the lack of youth participation in decision making, older people took decisions on their behalf (Loyed-Sherlock 2022). Decision-making was with the older people, because youth are under-represented in political leadership, and in that way their voices are ignored, which make them more vulnerable during risk periods. An important take away from this period was how essential it is 'to avoid simple assumptions based on age stereotypes and to foster a shared community of interest between children, older people, and everyone aged in between' (Loyed-Sherlock 2022).

The COVID-19 reversed the progress made in health, education and employment and left a lasting effect on the mental health, economic prospects and access to essential services for youth (United Nations [UN] 2025). Marginalisation of women, children and persons living with disabilities were even deepened by the pandemic, especially in terms of removing barriers in education and access to other services.

Intergenerational solidarity in the local church is as old as Christianity (Seibel & Nel 2010):

> Congregations whose basic ministries were thoroughly intergenerational have a significant impact on the faith growth and commitment of young people. In these congregations, young people are welcomed and expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making. (Roberto 2012:108)

The church is called to endure patiently in faithful witness from generation to generation (Eph 3:21), and it implies an intergenerational traditioning, which entails a witness that is appropriated for each generation and an empowering of these generations with the freedom to make their mark in their generation. This reminds us of the words in Acts 3:36 (NIV), 'Now when David had served the purpose of God in his own generation, he fell asleep, he was buried with his ancestors and his body was decayed'.

Intergenerational justice

Among the age groups in South Africa, it seems more a case of conflict between the generations than solidarity, because they feel left behind and see the need to take their future in their own hands (like the Arab Spring and the #FeesMustFall campaign demonstrated).

The images these events created about the youth are that they are prone to violence when things are not going their way. However, on a positive note, it reminded young people of the potential inside of them to be active and engaged change-makers (De Visser 2022), and the agency present in the youth as activists (Nel 2015a). Segalo (2015:78) observes that, if we are to imagine true cohesion, we need to create the spaces for multiple converging and diverging stories to be told, and it is at these uncomfortable intersections that true healing and reconciliation are initiated.

Youth agency

Whether we see youth as a ticking time bomb or, more positively, as cash in hand for the future (social capital), both views express one thing, youth have agency. Capability theory teaches that the true nature of poverty can only be understood when one looks beyond the amount of money or goods available for a person to every aspect of a person's life, thus going beyond the state of opportunity and goods towards their functioning (Nussbaum & Sen 1993). Robeyns (2006:351) agrees with the capability approach, the wellbeing or quality of a person, judgements about equality or justice and the development of communities. It should not focus primarily on resources, but on the effective opportunities people get to have valued lives.

Aziz (2017) opines that youth ministry cannot just be a spiritual exercise; it should value the role that youth agency plays in their lived realities and experiences. Youth ministry can be a descriptive agency; firstly in how it functions as a hermeneutic agency (which will help them to discern how God works in their lives, and to reflect on it), and secondly, how it is grounded in empirical research about their lived realities (understanding the context of young people). Youth agency is described as deeply participatory, driving innovation, advocacy and social renewal, meaning that youth are not passive spectators, but they can play an active role in the present shaping the future (Cloete 2025:7). Youth agency should not only be limited to congregational involvement, it should also be extended to a commitment to address challenges facing the whole of society and all generations such as climate change (Van Vliet & Beukes 2025:112).

Faith communities and social cohesion

Social capital theory, is defined as the structure and quality of relationships, constituting a positive product and resource of social interactions for individuals, social groups and society as a whole (Tsounis & Xanthopoulou 2024). Starting from the initial individualistic understanding of Bourdieu and Coleman towards the more communal approach of Putnam, the social capital theory appears to connect them together for the common good of all. Social capital exists in social networks and shared resources promote cooperation for the collective good (Tzanakis 2013). The importance of social networks and networks of trust are vital to maintain intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion. Faith communities are described as repositories of social capital and hold the potential to be incubators for civic skills, civic norms, community interests and civic recruitment, thus facilitating social capital and civic engagement (Putnam 2000:79). The contributions that faith groups make to create those networks of trust, guidance and support are described as religious capital (Barker 2008).

Barker (2008:20) describes religious capital as the mutual belonging and trusting of one another in the in-group. By each being extended towards the other, the religious community thus becomes a source of confidence and makes social mixing possible in a context of believing and belonging. Cox, Orsborn and Sisk (2014) also use bonding social capital (strengthening within group ties), and bridging social capital (strengthening between group ties), to assist divided societies in peace building.

Agbiji and Swart (2015:11) apply religious capital as a lens in the African context, claiming that it provides a public space that fosters honesty, integrity, openness, forthrightness and tolerance. Burger and Van der Watt (2010:393) claim that, within the South African context, religious groups are able to cultivate bridging ties between marginalised groups. Burger, Louw and Van der Watt (2010:68) confirm that it holds immense potential to help with bridge building in the broader society, especially among governments, community groups, businesses, among others.

Cloete (2014) agrees that congregational partnerships and networking with government and other non-governmental institutions can enhance bridge-building

social capital. De Beer (2014) points out that social cohesion cannot be achieved unless the 'collective woundedness' of South Africa is taken into account; without healing and reconciliation, it is not possible.

Before we turn to the question whether multicultural congregations can be spaces of belonging for young people, what does Pentecostal congregations say about intergenerational relations. Yong (2020) finds in the Lucan narrative (Ac 2:17–21) an indication of what an intergenerational Spirit-filled community looks like, describing it as just, equal and democratic. In such a community there is a place for 'sons and daughters' and for 'old men' (and of cause also women), thus intergenerational solidarity. Bar (2024) goes further by calling Pentecostal churches safe spaces for marginalised young people in the Guatemala context. In such spaces they can be resocialised and rehabilitated into society. Bringing it closer to home, Strecker and Naidoo (2018), find in multicultural ministries a safe space for youth, where genuine friendships are cultivated and transformative spiritualities nurtured. Let us now turn to question whether multicultural congregations can be such spaces, and what conditions make it possible.

Multicultural congregations: Spaces of inclusion and belonging

Schoeman (2015:77) describes the congregation as a faith community that should take social realities seriously and ask the question: 'what is going on', which is posed by Osmer (2008) in his first descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation. Hendriks (2004) encourages congregations to engage in contextual analysis that aims to address the needs and challenges of society. Pieterse (2014) agrees that religion has the potential to change the position of people in society and the church as an institution can be an agent of change.

Naidoo (2017:2) describes multicultural congregations as places that recognise, embrace, utilise and celebrate the diversity represented in the community and the church. This is in line with Mostert's (2018) view of multiculturality as a vehicle to bring together diversity within a dialectical eclipse, a non-threatening space that goes beyond complexities of race, ethnicity, culture and language.

The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa: Multicultural and intergenerational?

For most of its existence, the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFMSA) was a race-based church, although it was not the case at its inception in 1908 (Kgatle 2016; Nel 2019). The church later developed a white mother church, with three daughter churches, consisting of black, mixed race and Indian members. Structural unity of the AFMSA took place in 1996 and although racial equality took a long time to realise, the church is now one, with one constitution, and a multicultural leadership and membership (Kgatle 2017:9).

The AFMSA also have national and regional structures for men, women, children and youth. Unfortunately, all groups do not experience the unity the same. For women the unity did not mean inclusion and equality in all spheres of leadership (Kgatle 2019), and for young people it was the same, especially in traditional contexts.

The segregation that lasted over 80 years in the AFMSA, also kept the youth within the racial enclaves of the apartheid state. Kgatle (2017) describes how the unity struggle unfolded and culminated into one structure where members were empowered to have cultural sensitivity and appreciate their cultural diversity. Youth were just mentioned in the discussion about the work done in the mixed race section (Kgatle 2017:5).

After the 25th celebrations of unity in the AFMSA, Kgatle (2021) identifies the formation of the non-geographic regions and the struggle for a united theological education institution as some of the biggest challenges. What is missing is the continued separation between the women, children and youth ministry departments in the AFMSA, which have developed into almost black only institutions from the former Composite Division. More empirical research needs to be carried about the state of unity within these structures of the AFMSA. Multicultural congregations have become non-racial in their ministry to the youth, but it might be construed as a class unity, because of the middle class settings in which these congregations exist.

Social cohesion and intergroup contact as theoretical framework

The concept of social cohesion implies that there are certain societal conditions that must be met for a society to function well, and when that does not happen, a sense of the society falling apart or deteriorating is created (Jenson 1998:3). These conditions have become part of the eight dimensions embraced by the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC 2012), namely belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, legitimacy, shared values, cooperation and belief.

The five optimal conditions of intergroup contact theory (equal status, common goals, cooperation, and support from authorities) developed by Gordon Allport (1954) indicate that prejudice and bias can be reduced when these conditions are met. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) confirm in their research that these conditions can have a positive effect on reducing prejudice, but claim they only act as a facilitation condition. Later on, Pettigrew et al. (2011) find that these conditions not only facilitate, but that it is no longer essential; other conditions such as institutional support, attitude change, greater trust and forgiveness are also becoming positive conditions.

An interesting development is that it can also be extended to other groups such as persons living with a disability, same-sex persons and, in the case of our study, the youth (Bornman 2011). Reporting on the effect of intergroup contact on subgroups mentioned above, Van Assche et al. (2023:773) views contact as a valuable tool in interventions that aims to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict.

The dimensions of social cohesion theory and the optimal conditions from the intergroup contact theory provide a valuable theoretical framework for the study. Mseleku (2025) explains how social capital theory through bonding capital (family relations) and bridging capital (with individuals and groups) can have positive effects for youth unemployment. McKeown, Vezzali and Stathi (2025) illustrate how effective intergroup contact theory work among adolescents, the way in which contact reduce prejudice in divided societies. Combining the dimensions of social capital theory, and the conditions of intergroup contact theory becomes both a lens and a framework to develop themes to interpret the data.

Research methods and design

The study use the qualitative research methodology and research design, which is described as a generic research approach in social research according to which research take as its departure point the insider perspective on social action (Babbie & Mouton 2001:270).

The qualitative approach will help us to construct a detailed description of social reality; provide flexible research designs; data sources are determined by the information richness of settings; provide holistic units of analysis that concentrate on relationship between elements and contexts (Fouche & Delport 2002:81).

Qualitative research has the habit of intimately connecting context with explanation and thus capable of producing very well founded cross contextual generalities (Mason 2002). When these various features of qualitative studies (naturalism, insider perspective, thick descriptions, contextualism) are added, the study takes on an inductive approach to the object of study (Babbie & Mouton 2001:271).

Research question

The study tries to answer the question whether faith communities have anything to offer towards social cohesion within congregations and in broader society, and whether insights from social capital theory and intergroup contact theory can be helpful theoretical frameworks to address it. The study also investigates whether youth are effectively represented in membership, leadership and ministry in multicultural congregations and whether spaces of belonging, inclusion, participation, legitimacy and authority, and shared values are significant for them.

Sample profile

'Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. The researcher does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way' (Bryman 2012:418). The participants were purposefully selected from five multicultural congregations, from the five regions in the Western Cape, and these are the Western Cape region, West Coast region, Boland regions, South Peninsula regions and the Southern Cape region.

The congregations were a mix of urban and rural churches, English and Afrikaans speaking churches. Ten persons were selected per congregation for the five focus group interviews, ranging between the ages of 18 years and 70 years, and consisted of both men and women.

Participants were chosen in collaboration with the leader and the governing bodies of the congregations, but did not participate in the focus group interviews to prevent bias and create a safe space for members to express their views freely. The sample presented an opportunity for the different generations that worship, work, lead and minister together, to make contributions.

Data collection strategy

'A major reason for conducting focus group research is the fact that it is possible to study the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed within each session' (Bryman 2012:504). Data were collected through focus group interviews, consisting of between 6 and 10 participants in a focus group. Interview questions ranged from personal details about their background, and the main research question whether contact between members reduced or erased prejudice among members on a generational level.

The focus group interviews took place in the setting of the local congregation and the questions were posed to the group and every participant was free to answer the questions from their personal experience of contact with members of the congregation. Their responses were written down by the moderator and also recorded on a recording device, which was transcribed verbatim.

Data measurement and analysis

Data were analysed inductively (See Bryman 2012:24–27), allowing research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data. The aim is not to measure but to interpret the data. The study follows the more generic data analysis strategy whereby five phases interact, starting with the first step that describes the sample and participants. The second step is organising the data into data sets that is clearly marked and labelled, followed by the third step, which is to transcribe the recoded verbal and non-verbal responses of participants. The researcher read and re-read the text, memoing the data and write responses in a reflective journal after which data is saved in files to make coding of data easier.

A computer data analysis program, ATLAS.ti was used to do the coding of data. The process of coding entails reading carefully through transcribed data, line by line and dividing it into meaningful analytical units, marking the segments of data with symbols, descriptive words or unique identifying names. Inductive coding was followed whereby codes are developed while data are examined directly. Using the inductive approach allows one to read through the identified codes and find the themes or issues that recur in the data, which allows the categories to emerge from the data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Free State, Human Research Ethics Committee (No. UFS-HSD2019/0241/2806). Because of the sensitive nature of questions, an ethical consideration was to have a psychologist available in case questions required professional guidance and counselling. Letters were sent to the National Office Bearers of the AFMSA, the Regional Office Bearers of the participating regions, and the Pastor and Governing Body of the local congregations. Approval letters were received from these levels of governance in the AFMSA, and participating members were provided with letters of consent, which they had to sign in order to participate in the study. Participants were also requested to give permission for recording of the focus group interviews and the strictest confidentiality was upheld with the recording, transcribing and reporting on the participants' responses.

Results

After the data were collected, an inference process unfolded whereby the conclusions and interpretations were made on the basis of collected data in the study (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009:288). The methodological requirements of reliability, validity and representativity were tested and represented in the research process. Interpreting data have as an ultimate aim to come to findings and draw conclusions and in relation to what is already known and bring new insights or corroborate existing knowledge (Nieuwenhuis 2007:113).

In the next section the themes emanating from the research are presented, followed by the discussion.

Themes emanating from the research

The dimensions identified in the social cohesion strategy of the DAC, which is a combination of both the dimensions of social capital theory, and the conditions of intergroup contact theory are used as themes guiding the research. Ultimately, it became the themes around which the responses of the participants were clustered. The themes are structured as follows: inclusion, belonging, participation, legitimacy and authority, and shared values.

Inclusion

Inclusion means that the youth is included in all social activities on an equal basis and have equal rights and equal access to all life opportunities (DAC 2012; Jenson 1998:16). Some youth members expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation, because the structure of their churches was not welcoming to young people. An adult participant said, 'the structure of traditional churches have a tendency to make young people feel unwelcome' (Congregation One, Interview, FGD). In other congregations young people feel included in every sphere of ministry and are given roles to make them more responsible and accountable at a young age. A young person said, 'I feel very welcome, it is wonderful to serve in a church like this one' (Congregation Five, Interview, FGD).

Belonging

Belonging is defined as youth having the experience of being part of and having a sense of affiliation to the community and the larger society (DAC 2012; Jenson 1998:16). It is difficult to detect the characteristics of belonging. Religious groups '… constitute just one of many possibilities people have to satisfy their need to belong, hold, and profit from a social identity' (Saroglou 2011:1327). There is an affinity between personal religious orientation and the membership of a religious community. In some congregations young people feel they do not belong there, because there are not enough young people in the church. A young person responded, 'too few young people in the church' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD) and another one said, 'the youth group does not appeal to me' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD). Another concern is that class differences exist among young people, which threaten a sense of belonging. An adult respondent said, '[M] y son withdraw from the youth … the class they are from is different from his own' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD). In other congregations they experience a sense of growth, where 'five years ago the youth was a handful of 5–6 on Fridays … all of a sudden from 7 to 35–40 young people' (Congregation Three, Interview, FGD).

Participation

Participation means that the youth is actively involved in community and social activities, programmes and events (DAC 2012; Jenson 1998:17). In some congregations there are not enough young people, and outreaches are launched in areas far away from the church to bring young people into the youth ministry of the church. An adult responder reported that 'the profile of the youth have changed … focus is now on mission, go and fetch children from gangster areas providing them with safety and nutrition' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD). Another adult participant observed that 'the youth of the church are very much involved in the church … involved in the Sunday school, dance ministry, youth on Fridays' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD). In some congregations youth participation was not only limited to youth ministry but also included support to other ministries, a participant responded, 'youth are involved in both men and women courses for ministry' (Congregation Four, Interview, FGD), 'some of the 20 to 40 year olds are in the management team of the church' (Congregation Four, Interview, FGD), and when there is a lack of support in children ministry, 'my daughter decided to take care of

children during the main service' (Congregation Five, Interview, FGD). Participant responses vary between the lack of involvement, and active involvement, in their respective congregations.

Legitimacy and authority

Legitimacy and authority refer to the integrity and social legitimacy of public bodies and leaders that represent the community (DAC 2012; Jenson 1998:17). A youth participant observed that 'the youth is on Fridays … the pastor is also there … interact with the youth' (Congregation Three, Interview, FGD). Another youth person responded that 'we have the covering and the backing of the church' (Congregation Three, Interview, FGD). In one of the congregations, the youth ministry almost collapsed because of the youth pastor leaving for another assembly for financial reasons. Another youth participant said, 'financial problems had the youth leader go … and when the youth pastor left, the youth fell apart' (Congregation Two, Interview, FGD). It is evident that support from congregational leadership for youth ministry, is crucial for its survival and impact.

Shared values

Diverse societies have diverse cultures – thus diverse and divergent values – and they subscribe to a basic set of shared values such as democracy, freedom, respect, justice and tolerance, among others (DAC 2012). A youth participant observed that 'the church should adapt to the new world, the message should be adapted … new generation churches are attracting our young people' (Congregation One, Interview, FGD). Talk-shows initiated between youth, parents, ministry leaders and whole congregations become an important medium to transfer values and negotiate common goals for the congregation. One of the adult participants remarked that it is good 'to see in the church milieu how old and youth are transformed' (Congregation Five, Interview, FGD). Certain values that was accentuated by the participants includes them becoming equipped to be accountable and take more responsibility, 'it is all about equipping and responsibility' (Congregation Three, Interview, FGD), 'they want us to be more accountable' (Congregation Three, Interview, FGD).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that congregations accommodate young people differently. In some cases, the sense of *belonging* is evident, while in other cases the church structure does not accommodate them. Swart and Yates (2012:1) confirm that the youth is sometimes put at the margins of the public sphere in spite of their societal interactions and transformations. Newman et al. (1997:16) argues for better intergenerational relations that will bring collaboration in support and nurturing between the generations. It has implications for intergenerational solidarity and is important in the re-negotiation of balancing continuity and innovation between successive generations (Bengtson & Oyama 2007:4).

Measuring belonging is not easy, given the complexity of intergenerational relations. Seaman (2026) reports on the Belonging Barometer that was developed to measure the state of belonging among families at the Messy Church. In addition, there is also a Belonging Benchmark that can help families to identify what they need to help them to belong more. Although it remains hard to know, how and when people really feel a sense of belonging, the aim towards 'hospitality' so that they can say with integrity they belong to this family, corroborate the need for true belonging that emanates from the study, and multicultural congregations can provide such a space.

Inclusion of all age groups in the ministry of the congregation is supported by most participants; however, there are concerns that traditional church structures are not always accommodating of young people. A contract is needed across generations, and part of that is acceptance of gender equity between generations. The generational perspective of interdependence that developed as a result of the so-called war between generations' perspectives should also be embraced (Bengtson & Oyama 2007:5).

Young people participate less in the ministries of congregations when older groups are dominant and prioritised over them. Respondents claim that an openness exists in congregations towards the participation of young people in ministries. Ferreira (1999) observes that demographic and health transitions extend longevity. Theron (2013) asserts that an opportunity is created for the church to have a different view of the web of life. The talk-shows organised by one of the congregations is a wonderful platform to create a hermeneutic of listening, which is important in practical theological interpretation (Swart & Yates 2012:1).

The leadership role of the pastor provides *legitimacy and authority* to youth ministry and mediates the connection between age groups. Transformative and servant leadership is evident from the responses by participants, which is described by Nell (2018:7) as important in multicultural contexts. A remixing is needed, where older and younger generations engage in a process of integration and contextualisation (Nel 2015a:549). Authority here also refers to family relations where the faith is lived and passed on by parents and caregivers, which entails both modelling of religiosity and emotional bonding where young people feel close to them (Bengtson, Putney & Harris 2013).

Some of the *shared values and common goals* emanating from the research is the need for institutional change that accommodates the ministry of young people. In order to retain young people, change is inevitable and it has implications for the message and ministry of the church. Nell (2018) believes that a spirituality of priestly listening foregrounds a spirit of attendance that gives full attention to the pain and suffering of the other. The shift towards missional programmes that are inclusive and attending to the spiritual and material needs of young people points us towards the *Missio Dei* [Mission of God].

Conclusion

Faith communities are repositories of social capital, providing much-needed bonding (for those within the group) and bridging capital (for those outside the group) as well as providing valuable networks of trust. Through these networks there is a linkage with other dimensions (culture, gender, economic and generations) and through its intersection, possibilities exist to make reconciliation radical, going to the root of injustices and finding ways to address them from the bottom up.

When bonds of solidarity are created between diverse groups, young people included, these groups can have a sense of belonging, feel included, can participate on an equal basis, are recognised by authority structures, and share values that respect differences and celebrate diversity. The main point of this article is that faith communities can offer the space to create the social capital needed to end generational injustice that continues in the present generation through youth unemployment, narrow interests served through corrupt activities and the persistence of the legacy of inequality.

Given the youthfulness of the African continent, with the populations having the most young people in comparison with the rest of the world, youth do not just want to be seen but they also want their voices to be heard. Faith communities are in a fortunate position, with having many young people being part of their youth ministries, they can be repositories of social capital, that provide the energy and passion needed to transform society.

Unfortunately youth cannot do it on their own, as a bird needs two wings to fly, intergenerational solidarity is most needed in (South) Africa, where youth and the older generation work together. There is no more room for the war between the generations. As the call from the prophet Joel and the apostle Luke still remind us, there is space for both 'your sons and daughters' and for the 'old men and women' in the vision and dreams we have about the future. It is a call for an intergenerational Spirit-filled youth ministry, and there is a space for everyone.

The need for more social cohesion in society and within faith communities, can be effectively addressed by the spiritual and religious capital that the youth can offer. Faith communities can be places of belonging, inclusion, participation, shared values and legitimacy, and when these conditions are met, inequality and injustices are addressed and reduced. Instead of marginalising youth ministry, intergenerational solidarity can restore both wings in congregations, in such spaces the agency of the younger generation are welcomed and the experiences of the older generation are celebrated.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Daniel N. Andrew: Writing – original draft. Lucius J.S. Botes: Writing – original draft. Willem J. Schoeman: Writing – original draft. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of reasons of sensitivity, and are available from the corresponding author, Daniel N. Andrew, upon reasonable request.

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