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Let them Come to Me: A Youth Inclusive and Missional Perspective in Presbyterian Context

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Abstract

The contemporary context creates complexities for the young person. These include the political and socio-economic realities of African states, the cultural renaissance of Africanism and the reality of postmodernity. From both a practical theological perspective as well as experience in higher education, the author claims that ministers in the Presbyterian Church lack a missional perspective to the contemporary African (Kenyan) youth. The author proposes that theological education in Kenya must seriously consider youth ministry education. Second, Presbyterian ecclesiology must be missional minded by moving from an inward posture to a missional posture that considers the African (Kenyan) youth. This reflection will engage practical ministry and higher education experience, as well as an inter-disciplinary literature survey, to offer a missional perspective for the church and theological education.

Keywords

ecclesiology – missional – postmodernity – practical theology – Presbyterian – theological education – youth inclusion – youth ministry.

1 Introduction: Impaired Vision of Seeing Youth

The problem that this paper seeks to address is the implicit exclusion of youth, more broadly from the church's ministry and particularly from the leadership

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positions in the church. While the response given may be that young people lack the capacity to lead, the gap in mentoring young people reveals that the church's priority is not focused on the now or next generations. This paper suggests that the main issue is how the African church, in particular the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), views children and youth. The first reason is the nature of the historical context of the church. Founded through the missionary efforts of a bygone error, such churches have developed comprehensive structures and much energy in the church's ministry is expended in the management of these structures. The second reason is a lack of understanding of the missionary thrust of reformed theology. I will explicate this as the paper progresses. The third reason is the African worldview of respect of elders even at the neglect of the young people. This paper seeks to recover the missional hermeneutic at the heart of the Scriptures and explores how this hermeneutic can inform theological education of ministers as well as the church's ministry with and to youth. By doing this, the church can move beyond its impaired vision by casting a vision that includes young people at the center of the life and mission of the church.

Blindness impairs vision. Jesus Christ, time and again, rebuked those who claimed to see, yet were blind. The elementary teaching about the Kingdom of God includes humility at its core (Matthew 5:1–12, 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16). In New Testament context, the Jewish culture marginalized children (and by extension young people) based on their age (Keener 1993:97). However, Jesus reminds those who are culturally blind to let anyone, who dares come to him, to come. Our norms and traditions must never hinder anyone from coming to Jesus Christ. For the purposes of this paper, "youth" is defined as both children and young people under the age of 35 years. Conversant with the United Nations definition, this present demarcation is informed by the African complexity of defining the young person by age. The Kingdom of God, as envisioned in the New Testament, is inclusive of all people regardless of age, as long as they are submitted to the Lordship of Christ and its implication for all of life.

This is the missional thrust of the entire Scripture – That God, as the agent of mission, has sent his Son for the redemption of mankind and reconciliation of all things through his Spirit (Niemandt 2012:2). Engaging with the work of missiologists such as Bevans, Schroeder, Henriot and Guder, Reginald Nel (2019:2–3) envisions missional praxis as pursuing discernment and explores how this applies to the youth movements in the South African context. This missional praxis is not a static repetition of creed, but a practical involvement with God in everyday life (Nel 2019:2). Being missional then means participating in this mission of the triune God in light of the realities of the world. This mission is not limited by the concept of age but includes both young and old as both the co-agents of mission as well as the mission context. Within African societies,

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there is a certain hierarchy of age that leads to blindness as far as the missional mindedness of the Church is concerned. The reason is that older people have the requisite experience tested over time to navigate various issues. Yet, biblical revelation teaches us that spiritual maturity is a factor of our obedience to God's will – "I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts" (Psalm 119:99–100). The Old Testament contains numerous examples of young people who were co-agents in God's mission, among them, Joseph, David, and Isaiah. The virgin birth of the Messiah was through the instrumentality of a young woman, Mary. The pastoral epistles are focused on the Church's mission through Titus and Timothy, Paul's youthful disciples. In addition, Church history affirms that the Church's mission critically involved and was geared towards the youth. This is not to denigrate older members of the Church, but to remind the Church of the inclusivity of young people in Scripture.

A second reason of blindness towards the African youth is based on the cultural complexities of young people. Strecker & Naidoo (2018:163–165) illuminate our understanding of the multicultural landscape that informs the African young person. Based on migrations and movements due to political instability, economic opportunity or family concerns, cultural plurality among the youth is a given. The two theologians see diversity and plurality at the core of multiculturalism. This is especially true in the urban setting of my church ministerial practice as a youth pastor. The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), like other Church traditions or missionary denominations, born out of the missionary enterprise of the early twentieth century began in specific geographic locations thereby leading to mono-cultured churches. In the Kenyan context, the same may be said of other denominations such as the Methodist Church of Kenya as well as the Quakers (Friends Church). Over time however, the PCEA has slowly pushed for ethnic inclusion by reforming the liturgical language from the traditionally *Gikuyu* language to Kiswahili and English. Additionally, the burgeoning youth ministries in urban towns are ethnically diverse, compared to their rural counterparts, because of the rural-to-urban migration. This is one level in which multiculturalism is a reality in many youth ministries, and the question posed is how the Church will respond to this multicultural milieu. The temptation may be to foster shallow engagement or to altogether reject those who are different:

> When confronted with difference, otherness, the unfamiliar or foreign, it often seems logical, after some initial excitement, to retreat, be suspicious or even discriminate and exclude instead of being brave and embracing the other person or people group.
>
> STRECKER & NAIDOO 2018:178

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In view of this understanding, how can older people respond to those who are younger, and hence, those who are "different" from them? Ministry practice in African context continues to foster blindness in the context of age. This blindness is based on the cultural context of the majority who are oftentimes biased in their hermeneutics of age. To what end might the changing multicultural context influence missional ecclesiology or intercultural dialogue? Nel (2015a) has used the provocative language of "remixing" to show how our post-colonial context must be multiculturally fluent. Nel's post-colonial vantage point is no mistake, as he traces youth activism in the history of South Africa and its import for youth ministry today. But even in 2020, a similar trajectory is necessary. This has become very evident in light of the church's response to the COVID pandemic. The church's reliance upon her younger members to spearhead digital ministries and still be mission minded when churches were physically closed has been an interesting observation. When churches were tempted to merely transfer their offline services into the online media, youth helped them to understand the different media platforms and how to use them effectively (Cloete 2020:29). Campbell (2020:8) argues that what the COVID pandemic has shown us is the need for theological education to prepare ministers with the digital literacy required to reach out to digital natives. The PCEA has certainly set a precedence through the first ever virtual national youth conference in the week of August 19–24, 2020 which was planned largely by its youth pastors and reached out to thousands of viewers. This missional mindedness towards the next generations must be lauded and transferred within church structures and especially among the critical leaders of the PCEA church, that is, ruling and teaching elders.

Thus, the church must be willing to engage the digital cultures that are a part of the younger generations. Since the digital space is where young people are, for the purposes of education, connection and identity formation, the church is called to engage with young people where they are. Consider that the African youth in 2020 has to find her own African identity in light of Africa's sensitive past. Consider also, that with increased globalization comes increased pluralism. This not only affects political ideology but also religious and moral ethos. In the area of spirituality, the young person can now choose from a cacophony of concoctions and from a variety of voices in the era of social media. In addition to this, there is the concern of family breakdown in most societies. This confluence of issues confounds the identity of the young person (Counted 2016:88). Agreeably, Knoetze (2015:8) observes that such a "missional hermeneutical key" must view these complexities in light of the triune God's mission with and through the family unit and youth ministry. In

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other words, missiology must be engaged with practical theology (youth ministry) as there is a dearth in framing a theology of youth in the area of the Church's mission.

Thus, the Church must then be willing to engage, not only a culturally diverse young population, but also a spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically diverse young population. It is argued that the complexity of the situation pressurizes the Church to offer pragmatic solutions that are not firmly embedded in the *Missio Dei.* The author suggests that ecclesiology must be rooted in missiology, and specifically mission to the youth population in Africa. Whether this lacuna is as a result of forgetting the Church's intrinsic "missionary dimension" or "missionary intention", that is, methodologies for outreach, a crucial solution must consider theological education and ministerial formation (Crocker 2013:77).

2 Re-envisioning Youth: Theological Education and the Church

2.1 *Transforming Ministerial and Theological Education*

All variables held constant, missional praxis is dependent on church leadership, that is teaching elders or ministers within the Presbyterian church; and the caliber of ministers is dependent on the theological training that they get. In the African context, many have pushed for contextualized theological education, with Hendricks (2012) and Labuschagne (2019) in South Africa and Gathogo (2018) and Nkonge (2013) in the Kenyan context. While Gathogo considers the influence of St. Andrew's College Kabare, Nkonge considers other Anglican institutions such as St. Paul's Theological College, Berea Theological College and Bishop Hannington Theological College among others. Both scholars note the triad of mentorship, peer-to-peer reflections on practical ministry and training in practical ministry as tools for effective engagement of the African context. However, Nkonge (2013:156) remains skeptical as to whether theological education is relevant to the needs of the continent. His proposal of a curriculum that would be "relevant" envisions the complexities of ministry practice such as administration, pastoral care, preaching, counseling, ethics, and sexuality. Yet, there remains no mention of youth studies or youth ministry, as a distinct category. The same is true for the Diploma Programme at St. Paul's University, the foremost Presbyterian institution (in partnership with the Anglican and Methodist Churches) (Nkonge 2013:155). The only theological institution with a Diploma in Youth Ministry is Pan Africa Christian University, which largely trains ministers for the Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM),

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a Pentecostal denomination. As an adjunct faculty in the Diploma of Youth Ministry, there is much that the mainline and reformed Churches can borrow.

Hendriks (2012:4) notes the paradigm shift that is required for the Church to respond to some of the challenges mentioned earlier. By engaging the sociologist Manuel Castells, Hendriks (2012:6) proposes that congregations can become missional by "plunging" into God's action in the world. The consequential question then becomes, what might God's action be in the "new" Kenya? Synonymous of many other African nations, there is a bulge of the younger generations. By 2050, African youth are poised to grow beyond 1 billion, and if children (those aged under 15 years according to the statistics) are considered, then the number is likely higher and would create a considerable majority of the population. As of 2010, the continent comprised about 70% young people (under 30 years). Yet, if one considers that in 2007, 3.2 million of them were dealing with HIV, 3,500 deaths were caused by young people trying to cross the Mediterranean sea in such of opportunities in 2015 alone and that 40% of those who join rebel groups, do so on the basis of a crunching unemployment rate of 50% in some countries, the African young person is of many colors and stripes.[1] Part of the Church's mission must involve this critical demographic. Using Hendrik's metaphor, we must "plunge" into the world of the young African person and consider how we must incarnate the gospel hope to them.

Additionally, if we take as a presupposition that the world of the young person is influenced by social media, then technology must be utilized in a missional perspective. Nel (2015b) for instance observes how young people's engagement in social media is a fertile missional ground for academic exploration. Cloete (2015:6) raises concerns for how the Church can communicate to the world in this digital age. With mobile penetration in Kenya standing at around 76% as of 2012, current internet traffic from this East African hub sits at 80% with almost 41 million Kenyans, making up about 72% of the adult population, having mobile phones.[2] This ranks Kenya among the highest in the globe. In an age of relativistic morality and blurriness in the area of sexuality,

1 AFDB, "Jobs for youth in Africa strategy for creating 25 million jobs and equipping 50 million youth 2016–2025". https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Boards-Documents/Bank_Group_Strategy_for_Jobs_for_Youth_in_Africa_2016-2025_Rev_2.pdf; UN. 2016. *World youth report*. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr/2015/report.pdf; UNDP. 2017. "Promise or peril? Africa's 830 million young people by 2050." http://www.ke.undp.org/content/kenya/en/home/blog/2017/8/14/Promise-Or-Peril-Africa-s-830-Million-Young-People-By-2050.html.

2 ihub Research. 2012. "Mobile phone usage at the Kenyan Base of the Pyramid"; Business Daily. 2018. "Kenya tops in phone internet traffic globally". https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/corporate/tech/Kenya-tops-in-phone-internet-traffic-/4258474-4349966-3m4lrez/index.html.

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how can Church be missional in this digital era? Theological reflection on the impact of technology on spiritual formation and Christian discipleship abound, but this must of necessity be part of any relevant theological education curriculum.

Theological education must therefore embed youth ministry theory and practice into its curricular. Chiroma and Muriithi (2019:3–6) have suggested critical areas of youth ministry in higher education. These include and are not limited to adolescent/youth growth and development, youth ministry theory and praxis, mission to/with young people, youth cultures, youth and technology, youth and sexuality, preaching in a multicultural context and pastoral care in a digital age. These are suggestions that could be considered in engaging a missional lens to theological education. Such a missional focus would have the double task of, in Hanciles' (2014:128) words, addressing "the travails and concerns of the human society" in non-western worlds and also integrating the "deadening dichotomies" of the western theological enterprise. Integration of theology (systematic, biblical, and practical) and social sciences, or other crucial disciplines such as psychology and humanities may give a broader base for mission to young people (Senter 2014:103). In view of these, then ecclesiological transformation would be possible.

2.2 *Transforming Ecclesiology: Missiology Should Shape Ecclesiology*

Elsewhere, Hanciles (2018) observes that theological education and church ministry should be conversant with the concepts of migration and mobility. In 2017 there were 258 million international immigrants, rising from 173 million in 2000. 15% of the immigrants were below 20 years of age, 36 million came from Africa, 106 million from Asia, 61 million from Europe and 38 million from Latin America and Caribbean. Their median age is 39 years and comparatively lower in particular regions.[3] In my own ministerial context, in the year 2017/2018 from the core youth leadership of 6 members, 3 migrated for economic and vocational reasons – One moved to Sudan and the other two moved to Meru and Nakuru to work in different industries. This provides useful insights for mission. Rather than obsessing over retention of young people, how might a missional mindset engage with these young people? How can local congregations prepare them for their assimilation in and transformation of other cultures and spheres with the gospel?

3 UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2017. *International Migration Report 2017: Highlights* (ST/ESA/SER.A/404). https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/international-migration-report-2017.html.

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In terms of ecclesiology, many youth ministry thinkers and practitioners have argued for an incarnational or relational approach (Root 2007, 2014; Root & Dean 2011). And while this is the first level engagement with young people, a second and crucial level must be missional. This is one of the approaches of missional thinking based on studies in the past decade around missional ecclesiology (Niemandt 2012). Niemandt (2012:8) observes that other missional approaches include kingdom of God, imago Dei and local community, among others. Griffiths (2013) notes that the youth minister does not have the luxury of time to build very deep connections with young people due to the transitory nature of young adulthood – either because of family dynamics, vocational reasons or economic concerns, as earlier stated. Thus, the youth minister, and by extension Church ministry, must have a missional perspective at its core. In addition to incorporating young people into its life, the Church must also incorporate young people into its mission. Malan Nel's (2018) book, *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach* has bridged the two tensions of balancing discipleship and evangelism in youth ministry by proposing an "inclusive missional approach". Elsewhere, he has explored the connectedness of preaching and missional congregations, as a Festschrift in honor of the practical theologian Julian Muller (Nel 2014:1). Interacting with the work of Guder, Nel (2014:2) compares the terms 'missionary' and 'missional'. He notes that 'missionary' may carry a lot of baggage given the historical context of the mission enterprise, and in my addition, require a level of apologetics in youth ministry in light of the questions on African identity that young people are asking. Therefore, youth ministry, as an expression of the church ministry cannot be divorced from a missional thrust. This means that youth should be included and accepted within the covenantal community of faith and youth ministry be designed in a differentiated way to meet their context (Nel 2018:329–331). Additionally, the local church is called to be a transformative agent as her disciples are being transformed in the image of Christ. Thus, missiology and ecclesiology must not be separated in the understanding of the Church's mission with/to young people today.

Presbyterian polity must recapture this interrelationship of missiology and ecclesiology. God's mission for the redemption of all things is the basis for the Church's participation in this mission (Acts 1:8, 2:1–13; Jn 17:14–26; Eph 3:1–12; Col 1:24–29). Yet, Presbyterian polity in the East African context is much more concerned about a static ecclesiology than a missional ecclesiology. This may be based on the reformed ecclesiology of its founding fathers, including John Calvin. In his fine work the *Institutes of Christian Religion,* a foundational systematic theology, he explains how reformed ecclesiology responded to the medieval Roman Catholic excess of power, unwarranted sacramental

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understanding as well as priestly abuses. Calvin (2014:727) for instance notes that:

> Here we have a clear account of the ecclesiastical power, which is conferred on pastors of the church, whatever titles they may bear. That is by the Word of God, whose stewards they have become, let them boldly dare to do all and to compel all this world's glory, grandeur, and power to obey and submit to the divine majesty.

As all theology is contextual in nature, Calvin's views on the Church was anchored on a biblical and systematic theology. As those from this Reformed heritage, we do well to acknowledge the uniqueness of reformed ecclesiology in light of abuses and excesses. Reformed presbyterian polity envisions church governance implemented through church courts. This include the local level (parish sessions), presbyterial level and nationally in General Assemblies, through a system of representative leadership and accountability. This court system for one acknowledges the voices of the Church while abrogating final decisions to the Church's leaders. On the other hand, it protects the church from subjective and individualistic impulses that continue to ache other Church polities. Yet we must also consider the charge levelled against us: are we too static in our ecclesiology? Was this the foundation of the reformed fathers? In addition to the pure administration of the Word and ordinances (Lord's Supper and Baptism), the *Westminster Catechism* notes the missionary nature of the church in its twenty fifth chapter – that the Church is the vehicle of salvation to mankind citing Acts 2:47 and that Christ's calling to the church is for the "gathering and perfecting of saints, in this life and to the end of the world" (WCF 25.2, 25.3).[4] The case to be made is that reformed ecclesiology was based on a particular medieval context, one that we do well to follow, but reformed ecclesiology today must also answer particular questions of our day, especially in our African context.

Many churches are seeking to answer some of these questions. In Kenya for instance, the evangelical tradition has birthed many churches that have a missional ecclesiology geared towards the mobile African generation. These churches include Mamlaka Hill Chapel, Mavuno church and Nairobi Chapel. Pentecostal churches have also developed robust youth ministries that continue to attract many young people to them such as CITAM, ICC and Deliverance Churches. Yet, I argue that reformed ecclesiology can make several

4 WCF, *Westminster confession of faith* 25.2 (chapter twenty-five, article 2) etc.

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distinct contributions in youth mission. First, I think that confessional integrity may deepen the faith of young people who live in a fragmented cultural milieu. By taking history and theology seriously, the reformed tradition offers young people a deep heritage for exploring the Christian faith in a way that is distinct from most evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Second, reformed Presbyterian polity protects the Church from individual subjectivism that may endanger the Church's doctrine and practice. Of course, one of the obstacles we face is the turnaround time for implementation of decisions given the proper decision-making channels. However, I wonder whether this stems from a misinterpretation by a culture that is obsessed with instant solutions. Third, though unconsidered, reformed Presbyterian polity protects the Church from a mono-culturally urban focus by engaging rural populations that are a majority of most developing continents and regions. Thus, the Church can be truly global and local at the same time because of the breadth of reach of the PCEA for instance. These pointers are not to mean that there are no obstacles to missional engagement in this context, but the author has considered what may be unique in the Presbyterian context in comparison to other contexts. Our contemporary situation calls us to continue to learn and build on the strengths of others, an opportunity which if pursued, can strengthen the Church's unified witness in our world today.

3 Implications and Recommendations

More broadly, we have argued that missiology must also be a basis for ecclesiology. Church structures must never be subservient to the gospel call, but church ministry must always ask – how can our structure and methods be servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can we understand and run our churches in a manner that is faithful to what God may be doing in the world as it is? Not the world of our own making but the world as it is. Considering our current world as it is, engaging the youth is a non-negotiable. Is the Church willing to participate with God in his mission with/to the next generations today? Or will the Church stubbornly marginalize its young people and pursue a mission that is not in line with what God is doing in our world? This paper has pursued several answers along the lines of theological engagement and missional praxis in congregations. This paper has suggested that we can do this by first, having a youth-inclusive mindset in congregations. Second, theological education must include youth ministry and studies as key components for training ministers. Third, ecclesiological understanding and practice must seek to hear from the triune God's missional impulse today, as we discern Him in the Word and in

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His world. These will be helpful tools to help the African church, like Jesus, to say to her younger members, "Let them come to me!"

Author Bio

After working as an electrical engineer, he serves two congregations as a Presbyterian youth pastor in Loresho parish, Nairobi. A co-founder of Apologetics Kenya, he is involved in apologetics research and training and teaches youth ministry and theology at Pan Africa Christian University. He is undertaking a PhD in Practical Theology at UNISA researching faith formation and youth culture. He is married to Jessica and are together raising their son Noah.

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