

Digital Discipleship: Investigating Youth Participation in Online Church Services in FGCK Meru South District, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the level of youth participation in online church services in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya, Meru South District, Kenya. This study focused on the youth group within Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK) in Meru South District. A descriptive research survey design was used, guided by Mediatization theory. Information was gathered from the youths, youth leaders, youth Pastors and church members. Data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The study targeted a population of 3089 with a sample size of 282 youths, 4 youth leaders, 4 youth pastors and 56 church members in FGCK Meru South District. Data was analysed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. The study found there is a paradigm shift in youth discipleship, with many youths increasingly preferring online services over traditional physical church attendance. The findings reveal that youth participation in online church services is high; however, the findings reveal a gap in relational aspects of discipleship, like mentorship and accountability. The research contributes to the discussion on technological solutions in community development and religious innovation, aligning with the theme of leveraging technology for sustainable development. The study is relevant as faith-based organisations strive to remain impactful and inclusive in an increasingly digitised world. The findings provide valuable insights into how churches can adapt to emerging trends without compromising the core values that define their identity.

Key terms: Digital discipleship, Full Gospel Churches of Kenya, Meru South District, online church services, youth participation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Online church service plays a great role in meeting the younger population's spiritual needs where and when they need them. In understanding the adoption of online church service, Williams (2008), in the study of Baptist local churches in the USA, found that there is a change in worship participation with the onset of online media platforms. In the US, there are over 800 mega-churches with over 2000 people attending terminus services. In these churches, the sermon is translated via wireless headphones within the sanctuary, power and data are provided, and worshippers download sermon notes, PowerPoint presentations, and Bible passages (Sim, 2009). Stetzer (2015) observed that most American Christian youth listen to sermons online, access online scriptures and have online access to biblical texts.

In the modern church, it can be noted that the youth find technology-based biblical teachings interesting and inspirational and offer an alternative to physical church (Campbell, 2020). Online media platform use has led to the expansion of Christian communities with the ability to reach a more youthful audience. The use of online media platforms is expected to remain in the 21st century among USA churches and beyond (Wyche, 2008). Further, Wyche showed that pastors used online media platforms to inform the congregation of upcoming events. However, despite the church adopting the use of online media platforms, the church is faced with the challenge of how to better engage the youth in online church service (The Lutheran World Federation, 2020).

Phillips, Lewis, and Bruce (2013) reported that in the United Kingdom (UK), advances in technology have fundamentally changed the communication media in the church. They noted that, among younger age groups, face-to-face communication is no longer their favourite means of communication. They further found that the church ought to embrace online media platforms for communication and reaching out to its youthful faithful. The report also advises the church to identify challenges and change what is being used to enhance its online church services. This implies that the young generation benefits more when biblical teachings are available and directed to them online. As a precaution, the study states that if the church does not choose to embrace the advances in online media platforms and the digital space, it would be ignoring one of the biggest communication spaces and opportunities that exist among the 21st-century youth. In Spain, and as a result of the COVID-19 effects, the Catholic Church had to take huge and unprecedented steps towards the digitalisation of church services (Gauxachs et al., 2021).

In Africa, online media platforms are used to enhance worship by providing opportunities for online church services and drawing the youth to church activities (Kesia, 2019). Online church services take various forms in which Christians partake in learning, interacting with church sermons, singing, dancing, bible study, communing and praying. It is noted that Christianity has been one of the first religions to adopt and profit from technologies (Daniel, 2018). Jones (2020) notes that technology provides an alternative medium for sharing the word of God among the youth.

However, there is a need for the church to appraise the use of online media platforms and identify better ways of engaging the youth. Paul (2019) showed that churches in Nigeria have adopted the use of modern communication media.

This explains why in the 21st century, there are new worship practices compared to the past. There are mobile and computer applications which allow believers to access and download scriptures, music, and

prayers using smartphones, tablets, and personal computers. The church may need to review its approaches to the usage of online media platforms to attract more youth to online church service (Adaja & Ayodele, 2013).

In their study, Chukwudi et al. (2016) observed that online media platforms facilitate networking and are the pillars of evangelism and gospel dissemination in the 21st century. They note that the youth have shown more interest in the adoption and the use of online media platforms in the church. According to Lawton (2021), the generational gap might be the skewed representation of the youth in favour of the older church participants. To this, Lawton opines that alternative media, such as the use of social media platforms, may offer alternative options for youth in participating in church activities remotely. In addition, he found that the majority of pastors interviewed suggested that social media platforms contribute to a decline in in-person attendance for younger generations but increase flexibility for online church participation.

Kenya, on the other hand, is leading the continent in smartphone penetration and internet usage (Namunwa, 2019). Most churches in Kenya have adopted the use of online media platforms for organising online church services, organising prayer groups, bible studies, tithes, and offerings. Some bishops of leading urban churches rely on an Android mobile application to communicate with their members (Mungai, 2018). This provides the church with opportunities to share the gospel with the youth using online platforms. Mungai (2018) observed that in Kenya, several churches stream their activities over the internet. This has gained acceptance among many conservative churches, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this shift, the church has not been able to address the challenge posed by other non-church social content, which is considered a distraction to the young congregants from and during online church services (Suleiman, 2016).

During the COVID-19 period, most churches around the world were forced to close in-person services due to the need for social distancing as a way of mitigating the spread of the virus. This implied that traditional churches had to decide on the adoption of technologically driven forms of church attendance. This phenomenon rebirthed the need for scholars and theologians to assess the provisions of how church worship can be done online (Campbell, 2020). Further, as a way of understanding the role of the church in accommodating its congregants, Oliver (2022) noted that the church needed to accommodate its congregants now and to prepare new ways of church participation (Oliver, 2022). This unique moment has revealed the central role played by online church platforms, which afford flexibility and comfort, especially among the youth.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also made most churches innovate in streaming their sermons through Facebook, podcasts, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

Within Kenya and specifically in the FGCK Meru South District, the shift to online church services represents both a response to global challenges like the pandemic and an opportunity driven by the growing internet accessibility among youth. Churches here have increasingly adopted platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to stream services. Yet, challenges remain, including low youth involvement in creating and leading digital content and varying levels of comfort with technology (Bwire et al., 2022).

As Kenya's youth population continues to grow and digital access expands, investigating how online church services influence youth participation in the FGCK Meru South District is timely and important. This study seeks to explore ways digital discipleship can be enhanced to foster active and meaningful spiritual engagement among young people in this community.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Church Services and Youth Participation

The use of online media by FGCK has gained prominence with the onset of COVID-19. Omondi (2020) opines that FGCK had to upscale its online media reach by enhancing its online presence. As such, FGCK has utilised several internet platforms to preach the gospel to all its congregants. During such pandemics, church members worshipped virtually. More so, the FGCK youth stood as the largest beneficiaries due to their strong online presence, especially in online media platforms (Omondi, 2020). In pursuing her mission, which is nurturing FGCK youths, contributing to their holistic growth and setting them on the path to becoming agents of change on campus, within the church and in the communities around them, FGCK leadership has continued to keep in close contact with her members through Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. However, despite the online presence, most of the members seem distracted by the presence of other media content.

The rise of online media platforms has also heralded new opportunities for people, governments, and organisations to reach out to their audience with speed and flexibility. In his study, Wiseman (2015) noted that church services in the USA are already utilising YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook pages for online prayers, blogging, and live-streaming sermons. He further stated that the adoption of online church services through Facebook streaming enables interaction in worship through texting and group chats. According to Wiseman, the use of online media platforms complements physical church services. Despite technological advancement, both Alvin (2021) and Earls (2019) noted that most youth prefer not to attend church services when they go to college and/or as a result of being judged differently by the older congregation.

Russel (2016), in his study of the elderly online church participation, concurs with Wiseman that online church services create flexibility and convenience for the older church congregants. He, however, noted that online church service can be more beneficial to the young congregation. This is a result of annual surveys in the USA, which showed some decline in physical church participation and religious affiliations among the youth ages 30 and younger, as opposed to the adult congregation. The study, however, was qualitative and focused on elderly church participants, whereas the current study explored the participation of youth in online church services. Kolapo (2019) asserts that the use of online media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp enables churches to keep in touch with the younger generation and enables them to look up to the church for moral direction, motivation, and acceptance when in need or facing challenges through its blog sites or private chat rooms. However, the study fails to demonstrate the ideal means of promoting worship among the youth as suggested by Wiseman (2015), who suggested that for the church to enrich its online service, there is a need to involve the youth in content development, such as videos and songs, to enrich democratisation of worship and not by merely allocating responsibilities. The current study, therefore, explored how FGCK involves the youth in its online church service, content development and participation.

Ebenezer (2015) further asserts that more churches in the last decade have continually improved their presence on the web, but his study did not address the need for the church to continuously monitor youth participation online. Arasa et al. (2010), on the other hand, recommended that online media platforms such as Twitter can be used to educate and inform the youth on religious issues, among other educational initiatives for other members of the congregation (Gauxachs et al., 2021).

The church is expected to listen to the youth, show interest in their activities, and patiently understand their needs to build the future church (Chang-Ho & Tameifuna, 2011). Online media platforms are an important tool for advancing religious issues, and religious information can be prepared to suit different groups of audiences, such as the youth. The youth also have access to the latest mobile gadgets that can be used to access spiritual guidance through online media platforms available on modern devices (Dyikuk, 2017). However, Njoroge (2019) is concerned that older church members, thus denying the youth the opportunity for involvement, lead most of the church services. The current study, therefore, explored the best ways in which the youth can be involved in planning for online church services.

The church that keeps pace with technological innovation is likely to draw more attendance and provide flexibility to existing members without losing them altogether (Mateus, 2017). Online media platforms can assist in overcoming barriers faced by church members, such as limited and costly transport, time, and safety, since online media platforms are accessible regardless of location and with the use of alternative technologies. Smit (2020) concurs with the need for online church service but observes that in his study in Canada, parents recommended that Organisers should keep online church services simple and that 30 minutes was ideal for the service.

As society continues to socialise with emerging technologies and development, Mugambi (2010) asserts that such process-change is positive and constructive for religion to influence society and hence social transformation among the youth. It can thus be inferred that online media platforms, as a product of technological advancement, can contribute immensely to the spread of the gospel if the youth are involved in planning and organisation. Online church services are effective if the youth have a voice in the church and are allowed to express their creativity and opinions (Clarke, 2014).

In one study, Dankasa (2010) states that 83 per cent of Catholic youth prefer the use of internet sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Weblogs to watch video webcasts or clips. The study concluded that the modern church has enormous online media platform opportunities that can be considered to appeal to the young audience. His study, however, did not discuss the strategies the church used to enhance youth engagement in online church services.

Dunaetz (2019) states that the use of online media platforms is a preferred medium of communication because of anonymity. He opines that the use of online media platforms as a medium helps reach out to church members with unrestrained criticism associated with the sharing of the word of God among Christians and unbelievers. In concluding the study, Dunaetz (2019) recommends that, due to the dynamic nature of technology and culture, the youth ought to be consulted. Sytsma and Vogel (2020) suggest that for such an endeavour to be successful, there is a need to discuss with the youth on common ground for making choices about what content to include in the service.

Participation transcends mere attendance. It encompasses spiritual disciplines, leadership, decision-making, and missional engagement. Lim et al. (2020) assert that meaningful young participation necessitates venues that enable adolescents to be contributors rather than mere consumers in faith-based discussions. Many online church services, however, are primarily oriented towards adults and lack material or interactivity aimed at youth.

Hanna (2020). The involvement of youth in online church services has emerged as a significant issue amid advancing digital technologies and changing societal norms. Ojo et al. (2024) assert that the incorporation of technology into church services has substantially altered the engagement of young individuals in religious activities. Their research, centred on Nigerian churches, revealed that digital platforms provide a more accessible and engaging environment for young people, resulting in heightened involvement and a stronger connection with religious material (Ojo et al., 2024). This study investigated the comparison of this setup with the Kenyan model, specifically focusing on FGCK.

In his doctoral dissertation on youth transitions and social transformation in Kuwait, Alnaser (2018) emphasised the conflict between tradition and modernity, especially with religious rituals. He noted that traditional religious gatherings frequently failed to captivate the youth; however, online platforms offered an environment for young individuals to harmonise their cultural identities with their religious convictions, resulting in increased participation in religious activities. Evidence regarding the efficacy of online church services and youth engagement in a specific church, such as FGCK, was sparse. Consequently, this work addressed this deficiency.

John (2018) performed contextual research of Kerala Pentecostal churches in Kuwait and discovered that transnational religious organisations leveraging online platforms effectively sustained a robust connection with their younger members. These digital platforms facilitated ongoing engagement, even in the absence of physical attendance, illustrating the capacity of online church services to enhance youth involvement. Nevertheless, the research had not adequately examined the efficacy of young involvement and engagement in online church services. Consequently, the study addressed the deficiency in FGCK.

Marshall (2018) examined young people's interaction with religion and spirituality over the past twenty centuries, highlighting the transition from traditional to digital channels. The study revealed that adolescents are more inclined to interact with religious content online, where they may connect with peers, exchange experiences, and partake in discussions that reflect their personal and spiritual lives. However, a question persists: are these engagements efficacious? This study examined the efficacy of youth engagement in online church services at FGCK in the Meru South District. Marshall (2021) examined the impact of the transition to internet platforms on teenage participation with religion in the 21st century. Her findings indicated that young individuals are more predisposed to engage in religious activities when they are available via digital platforms. Online church services offer a flexible and participatory setting that resonates with the digital practices of contemporary youth, promoting enhanced engagement. Marshall noted that flexibility is a crucial element drawing young individuals to online church services. This study assessed the extent of youth engagement in online church services within the FGCK Meru South District.

The study conducted by Rifat et al. (2022) affirms that digital sermons on social media platforms are a means through which youth interact with religious activities in Bangladesh. The study revealed that these

online tools facilitate youth engagement in religious discussions and the dissemination of religion, indicating that platforms significantly contribute to young people's involvement in various texts. Thus, a study on online church services and youth engagement in the FGCK in Meru South District is warranted.

Hanna (2020) elucidated the patterns of young participation in local churches, suggesting that access to online church services could enhance the longevity of their involvement. The study done in churches throughout the United States revealed that online attendance was perceived as a means to sustain connections with faith communities, especially during periods when physical attendance was challenging. The study in the FGCK Meru South District has corroborated this discrepancy.

Amankwa and Awuku-Gyampoh (2022) asserted that the youth play a crucial role in the creation of the 21st-century church, emphasising that internet platforms are essential for engaging with young individuals. The study conducted in Ghana concluded that the church should leverage digital technologies to facilitate and incorporate youth engagement in its future. Nonetheless, the efficacy of this needed to be evaluated by research of this nature; hence, the study examined youth participation in online church services within the FGCK Meru South District.

Dzirasa-Payne (2024) examined the influence of digital technology on ecclesiastical communication during the COVID-19 epidemic, highlighting the notion of hybrid faith. This research, which examined church groups worldwide, especially in Africa, demonstrated that the pandemic expedited the implementation of online church services, resulting in heightened youth participation. The study emphasised that digital platforms enabled churches to sustain connections with their younger congregants, even in the absence of physical gatherings, thus reinforcing the significance of technology in contemporary religious activities. The current study has concentrated on adolescents but neglects the distinctive methods by which they engage with services and the efficacy of online church services. The gap was addressed in the study undertaken at FGCK Meru South District.

Blanes and Zawiejska (2020) examined the Pentecostal anti-revolution in Angola and its influence on church practices, highlighting the significance of digital technology in moulding young engagement. Their research indicated that although conventional worship techniques remained crucial, internet platforms provided an alternate venue for adolescents to articulate their religion, consequently augmenting their total involvement with the church. However, what was the efficacy of these worship methods? This question was examined in the study.

Hekking (2018) investigated the relationship between religion and identity in a globalised Morocco, focusing on the convergence of traditional and contemporary religious activities. The research indicated that digital channels, such as online church services, were essential for sustaining youth involvement in an increasingly globalised world. Churches maintained the engagement of their younger members with faith by offering a platform that aligned with the digital lifestyle of youth (Hekking, 2018). The scholar significantly enhanced the study by highlighting the aspect of youth engagement. Nonetheless, this study addressed the hitherto unexamined disparity in their level of engagement.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the procedures and strategies employed in conducting the study, Digital Discipleship: Investigating Youth Participation in Online Church Services in FGCK Meru South District, Kenya. It details the research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures, supported by scholarly sources.

This study utilised a descriptive research design, which is ideal for obtaining information concerning the current status of a phenomenon and for describing the existing conditions as they are (Kothari, 2004). The design enabled the researcher to systematically explore the trends, experiences, and perspectives of youth participation in online church services and their influence on digital discipleship. It further facilitated both quantitative and qualitative data collection, offering a broader understanding of the subject matter (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The target population means all the respondents who are likely to be involved in the inquiry study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The target population for this study included the entire group where data were obtained (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). In this regard, the target population for this study was the members of FGCK in Meru South District of FGCK (Appendix VI). According to statistics obtained from the FGCK headquarters in Meru, these churches have an approximate population of 3,089, which forms the target population of this study. The sample should be as representative as possible of the population it is drawn from (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013). Moreover, sampling involves selecting a smaller group to serve as a representation of the whole population (Wimmer & Dominic, 2010). A purposive random sampling technique was employed to pick 1083 per cent of all congregations, a number as recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2013). Thus, the number of congregations considered for this study was 4 out of the 38 within Meru South District. These 4 congregations included: Nkubu, Kathera, Keria, and Mitunguu, picked from both town and rural setups to examine the prevalence of online services and youth participation in a broader perspective. From a target population of 3,089, the researcher got a sample size of 346 respondents as per Kathuri and Pals (1993)'s recommendations. Among these respondents, 282 were youths, 4 youth pastors, 4 youth leaders and 56 church members. To arrive at a focused group discussion for church members, the study utilised two groups per congregation, one for women and the other for men. Each group comprised 7 members, which gave a total of 56 church members from the four congregations. The youth pastors and youth leaders were purposively selected due to their leadership roles and to provide a broad perspective on online church services and youth participation.

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data was sourced from relevant literature such as journal papers, reports, books, and magazines, among others. On the other hand, primary data was collected from respondents in FGCK through questionnaires, interviews and Focused Group Discussions.

The study employed both closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions were used to collect specific information, while Open-ended questions allowed the respondents to express their opinions. Increased freedom to the respondents offered an opportunity to yield honest and frank replies since anonymity was maintained during the completion of the questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered to the 282 youths. The questionnaires were designed to capture quantitative data on the level of youth participation in online church services, including the frequency of participation, the preferred online

platforms, and the perceived impact of these services on their spiritual growth. The use of questionnaires allowed for the efficient collection of data from a large number of respondents.

In-depth interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data involving the 4 youth leaders and 4 youth pastors. These interviews focused on the respondents' perspectives on the effectiveness of online church services in youth participation, the challenges faced, and the strategies employed to enhance participation. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the qualitative aspects of youth participation, complementing the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) are a valuable qualitative research tool that enables the collection of rich, in-depth data through group interaction and discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this study, FGDs were used to explore the perceptions and experiences of selected church members regarding youth participation in online church services. In this study, the researcher discussed with two groups per congregation, one for women and the other for men. Each group comprised 7 members, giving a total of 56 members.

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analysed using SPSS Version 25 and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and percentages) were generated to summarise youth participation patterns. Tables and charts were used to identify correlations between variables such as age, frequency of participation, and spiritual discipline practices.

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed using thematic analysis. Recorded responses were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes, opinions, and contradictions. The analysis was framed within the Mediatization Theory, allowing interpretation of how media reshape religious practices and participation among the youth.

An ethics approval letter was obtained from the Chuka University Ethics and Review Committee. Thereafter, an introductory letter from the Director of the Chuka University Post Graduate Studies on behalf of the applicants was received. The National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) was contacted in order to get a research license. In order to maintain the credibility of the research procedure, the study was conducted in accordance with stringent ethical norms. Informed consent was sought from the participant, and they were assured that their response would be used for academic purposes only. The study was carried out in a manner that is both respectful of the participants' right to privacy and in compliance with the ethical standards that are applicable to research that involves human beings. In addition to that, the findings of the study were examined and presented in a manner that is both clear and detailed. Additionally, the researcher conveyed gratitude to each and every individual who played a role in the accomplishment of the study. At the end of the process, the researcher ensured that all the cited literatures were included in the reference section. Also, plagiarism and Artificial Intelligence (AI) tests were done, and the final report attained the required similarity index.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of data collected from 282 youths. The findings are presented in alignment with the study's objectives, with relevant literature integrated to enhance interpretation.

Online Church Attendance

A survey was conducted to determine the extent of participation in online church services among respondents. The findings revealed that 218 (65.9%) reported attending online worship, while 113 (34.1%) did not, as presented in Figure 1.

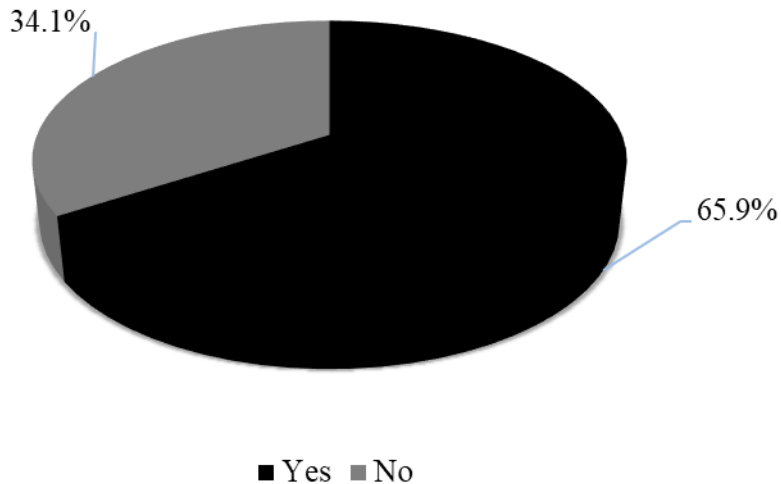


Figure 1: Online Church Attendance

This constitutes compelling evidence of a substantial transformation in worship behaviours, suggesting that individuals are progressively participating in religious practices online. This mode of engagement in online religious services can be elucidated by numerous factors. Firstly, the growing accessibility of digital technology and its resultant convenience, alongside the church's response to evolving societal situations. This aligns with findings reported by Bwire et al. (2024) in their study on youth involvement in the Anglican Church in Kenya, which indicated that digital church services have become essential for maintaining spiritual engagement, with the youth being the primary beneficiaries. Their study observed the adaptability and convenience of online platforms that have augmented religious participation, especially in metropolitan regions with elevated internet access.

Similarly, Lawton (2022) observed that the decrease in conventional physical attendance at churches compelled many congregations to reassess their outreach strategies, leading to novel approaches using online offerings to maintain member connectivity and spiritual engagement. Technology is regarded not merely as a remedy for declining attendance but as an evangelistic instrument for reaching new audiences who might otherwise be excluded from conventional worship settings.

McDonald (2021) concurs with this assertion, emphasising that young individuals favour digital modalities of religious engagement, allowing them to access spiritual information according to their personal tastes and schedules. The research into Emmanuel Church revealed that the church's comparatively low physical attendance among youth was being augmented by online engagement, signifying a broader generational shift in the manner in which religious events are accessed and experienced.

Youth Members' Response to the Level of Youth Participation in Online Church Services

The researcher collected data from 267 youth members to investigate the level of youth participation in online church services. Findings were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Response about the Level of Youth Participation in Online Church Services

Statement	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Mean	Frequency
I am as engaged in online church service as I would be in physical service.	30 11.2%	52 19.5%	45 16.9%	89 33.3%	51 19.1%		267 100%
Youth participate in additional online activities, e.g. Bible study.	25 9.4%	33 12.4%	40 15.0%	108 40.5%	61 22.8%		267 100%
Youth have high levels of content consumption from online church services.	22 8.2%	40 15.05%	50 18.7%	101 37.8%	54 20.2%		267 100%
The church encourages youth participation in online church services.	18 6.7%	28 10.5%	42 15.7%	117 43.8%	62 23.2%		267 100%
Online church services are for the rich or learned.	71 26.6%	64 24%	48 18.0%	49 18.4%	35 13.1%		267 100%

The initial statement presented to the respondents, "I am as engaged in online church service as I would be in physical service," received a majority response. Of the respondents, 89 (33.3%) expressed agreement, 15 (19.1%) indicated strong agreement, 52 (19.5%) disagreed, 30 (11.2%) strongly disagreed, and 45 (16.9%) remained neutral, implying that many youths perceive a degree of engagement with online services, yet do not entirely equate this engagement with that of physical church attendance. This corresponds with the findings of Bwire et al. (2024), which indicate that although online services enhance accessibility, the level of involvement frequently does not match that of traditional environments due to the absence of physical connection and a communal atmosphere. This reflects the scriptural principle articulated in Hebrews 10:25, "Let us not forsake assembling together, as some are accustomed to doing, but rather encourage one another, and all the more as you perceive the Day approaching."

To further comprehend the extent of youth participation, the researcher solicited the respondents' opinions on an additional statement. The majority of youth engage in supplementary online activities, including Bible study. 108 (40.5%) concurred, 61 (22.8%) strongly concurred, 33 (12.4%) dissented, 25 (9.4%) severely dissented, and 40 (15.0%) maintained neutrality, showing a favourable trend wherein young congregants actively pursue more spiritual engagement beyond the primary online services. This corroborates Ojo et al. (2024), who highlighted that technology-enabled platforms promote additional spiritual activities that enrich faith development and maintain youth involvement in church participation. This aligns with Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," confirming that youth are seeking guidance from God's Word, even through digital platforms.

The author investigated whether young individuals exhibit a high level of information consumption from online religious services. A majority of 101 respondents (37.8%) concurred, 54 (20.2%) strongly concurred, 40 (15.0%) disagreed, 22 (8.2%) strongly disagreed, and 50 (18.7%) remained neutral regarding the perception that youths engage extensively with content from online church services, thereby substantiating the notion that online platforms proficiently disseminate a diverse array of spiritual content.

This corresponds with 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which asserts, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is beneficial for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." This discovery aligns with Nagy (2024)'s assertion that the accessibility of recorded sermons and various multimedia resources facilitates ongoing learning and spiritual development among youngsters outside regular service hours.

The study also examined whether the church promotes youth participation in online services. The replies were as follows: 117 (43.8%) respondents concurred, 63 (23.2%) strongly concurred, 28 (10.5%) disagreed, 18 (6.7%) strongly disagreed, and 42 (15.7%) remained neutral. The data suggest that several teenagers recognise institutional support for their online participation. 1 Timothy 4:12 admonishes, "Do not permit anyone to disparage you due to your youth, but rather exemplify for the believers in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity." Pramono and Manuputy (2025) emphasise the significance of ecclesiastical leadership in actively advocating for digital worship projects to mitigate the decline of adolescent spirituality, particularly in the advancing technology landscape of Society 5.0.

The study examined the youth's perceptions of online church services. The responses were as follows: 71 (26.6%). 96 Sixty-four respondents (24%) strongly disagreed, forty-eight (18.0%) disagreed, forty-nine (18.4%) agreed, thirty-five (13.1%) highly agreed, and a portion stayed neutral, indicating concerns around accessibility and inclusivity. James 2:1-4 cautions against favouritism, reminding the church that "God has selected those deemed poor by the world to be affluent in faith." This indicates that despite the expansion of online services, obstacles such as technology literacy and internet accessibility may remain marginalising certain adolescents, a concern identified by Bwire et al. (2024), who emphasise the digital gaps impacting equitable participation. The results indicate a predominantly favourable disposition towards online church participation among young people, particularly with ancillary activities and institutional support. Nonetheless, the marginally reduced engagement equivalence with physical services and apprehensions regarding accessibility reflect overarching themes in contemporary literature highlighting the necessity of reconciling technological advancements with inclusive, community-oriented strategies for youth spiritual development (Ojo et al., 2024; Bwire et al., 2024; Nagy, 2024; Pramono & Manuputy, 2025).

Youth Leaders' Perspectives on Online Church Participation

From the study findings, 4 pastors and 4 youth leaders were interviewed on their perspectives on online church participation. They were to give their opinions on how long the youth stayed engaged in online church services. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Average Engagement Duration during Online Church Services

Engagement Duration	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 15 minutes	2	25%
15–30 minutes	3	37.5%
30–45 minutes	2	25%
Entire service (1+ hour)	1	12.5%

The study reveals that youth rarely stay for the full duration of online church services. The most common attention span is 15–30 minutes, reported by (37.5%) of leaders, suggesting that long-format services are not ideal for youth engagement. Only (12.5%) said youth stay engaged for the full session, indicating that

traditional one-hour service formats may not suit online platforms. The short attention span calls for condensed, dynamic content tailored to youth behaviour online.

While attendance at online services is relatively high among youths, their levels of active engagement remain limited, particularly in interactive elements such as chat discussions, unless the content is especially engaging, like worship music or interactive segments (Ojo et al., 2024). As the Apostle James exhorts, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”* (James 1:22). This pattern mirrors findings by Bwire et al. (2024), who noted that youth engagement peaks during worship sessions but tends to wane during more traditional sermon parts, often resulting in shorter attention spans of approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

The study sought to find out the preferred content during online church services. The pastors and youth leaders responded as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Preferred Content Type during Online Church Services

Preferred Content Type	Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Worship music	7	87.5%
Interactive sessions (Q&A, polls)	5	62.5%
Short, youth-friendly sermons	4	50.0%
Testimonies/youth-led content	3	37.5%
Bible quizzes or games	2	25.0%

The majority favoured worship music, with 7 out of 8 respondents (87.5%) indicating this preference. This indicates that young individuals connect with expressive and emotionally uplifting material. Five leaders (62.5%) indicated the use of interactive formats such as Q&A sessions and surveys, highlighting a demand for engagement rather than mere passive listening. Four respondents (50.0%) prefer brief sermons over lengthy theological discourses. These must be pertinent and applicable to the everyday experiences of youth. Some individuals also appreciate peer-led content and gamified Bible instruction, indicating that inventiveness and peer relatability are essential for maintaining online engagement. Young people's content preferences underscore the significance of dynamic and visually captivating formats. Worship music, live question-and-answer sessions, and brief sermons are especially preferred, along with Nagy's (2024) suggestion to integrate multimedia and interactive methods to sustain young engagement and spiritual development. Notwithstanding these aspirations, various obstacles hinder greater engagement. Jesus exemplified this by employing parables and vivid imagery (cf. Matthew 13:10-17), demonstrating that spiritual truths can be effectively communicated through formats that resonate with the audience's "language."

To find out the challenges youth face when accessing online church services, 4 pastors and 4 youth leaders were interviewed. Their responses are shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Challenges Youth Face When Accessing Online Church Services

Challenge	Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Poor or expensive internet	6	75.0%
Lack of personal devices or shared gadgets	4	50.0%
Competing distractions (social media, TV, etc.)	4	50.0%
Limited digital literacy (esp. rural areas)	2	25.0%
Low motivation without peer presence	3	37.5%

Connectivity concerns are the most frequently reported challenges identified in the study findings. 6 (75.0%), indicating that infrastructure and price constitutes significant obstacles to online church access for youth. Device sharing or absence of smartphones 4 (50.0%) constitutes an additional limitation, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged homes. Young individuals encounter numerous online diversions, like TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube, which vie for their attention throughout digital services. Two (25.0%) leaders saw that a lack of digital literacy results in three (37.5%) youths losing enthusiasm and discipline in participating in virtual church services. These insights emphasise that effective online ministry must account for youth's access to technology and their digital behaviour patterns.

Elevated internet and data expenses, restricted access to personal devices, and distractions in the home environment present substantial obstacles to continuous online engagement. The challenges are exacerbated by diminished motivation resulting from the absence of physical fellowship and communal engagement, which are essential for the spiritual development of youth (Pramono & Manuputy, 2025).

The researcher aimed to ascertain the prevalence of online compared to physical church attendance. Four youth leaders and four pastors provided responses. Table 5 presents the responses.

Table 5: Frequency of Online versus Physical Church Attendance

Attendance Pattern	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Less frequent than physical services	5	62.5%
Same frequency as physical services	2	25%
More frequent than physical services	1	12.5%

The data indicate that 5 (62.5%) of respondents noted that youth participate in online church services less frequently than in-person services. This indicates that online church has not yet supplanted actual fellowship for the majority of youth. Twenty-five per cent of respondents attend online church services, which is equivalent to their attendance at actual church services, indicating a balance between the two formats. Only one responder (12.5%) reported increased online attendance, potentially attributable to convenience or safety considerations; however, this occurrence is infrequent. The data indicate that digital church services presently function as a complement rather than a replacement, with physical services constituting the primary medium for youth spiritual engagement. Youths exhibit a distinct preference for in-person religious services over physical attendance, as these events offer a more immersive and socially

engaged atmosphere conducive to profound spiritual and communal experiences (Bwire et al., 2024). Online church participation is typically limited to special events or when young individuals have designated roles, highlighting its function as an adjunct rather than a replacement for traditional worship. This distinction highlights the broader issues identified by Ojo et al. (2024) and Pramono and Manuputy (2025) on the inadequacies of digital worship in mirroring the communal and relational aspects essential to young faith development.

Although online church services have broadened accessibility and implemented novel methods to engage youngsters, active involvement is still moderate and rather passive due to technological, environmental, and motivational obstacles. In-person church attendance provides a more profound and interactive spiritual experience for youth, indicating that a hybrid model integrating both physical and digital components may more effectively cater to the varied needs of young congregants (Nagy, 2024; Bwire et al., 2024; Ojo et al., 2024; Pramono & Manuputy, 2025).

Church Members on Youth Involvement in Online Church

To know whether online church services are offered in FGCK in Meru South District, 56 church members were asked, are online church services offered regularly in FGCK? The frequencies were computed into percentages and were presented in Figure 2 below.

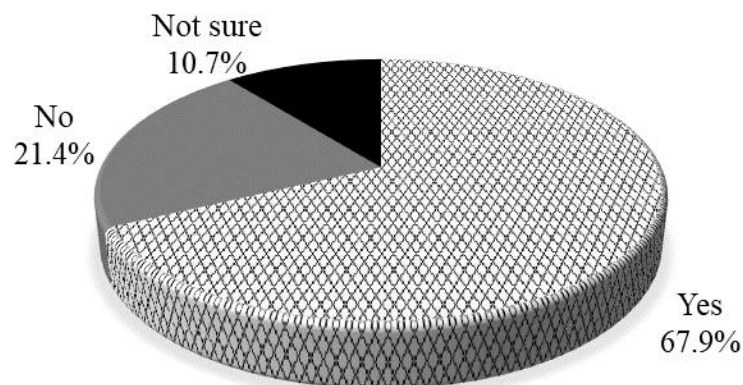


Figure 2: Are Online Church Services Offered Regularly in FGCK

A significant majority (67.9%) of church members confirmed that FGCK offers online church services regularly in Figure 3. This indicates that the digital platform has been institutionalised or made a routine practice in many congregations. However, (21.4%) stated “No”, suggesting that in some branches or regions, online services might be irregular or unavailable. The (10.7%) who were unsure could reflect limited awareness or engagement, especially among those who do not frequently use digital platforms.

The thematic analysis of youth responses about online church services in FGCK indicates that these services are generally not offered on a regular basis but tend to be concentrated around special events such as youth Sundays or church conferences. The frequency of online services varies significantly across different church branches, often depending on their access to and capacity for technology (Bwire et al., 2024). This observation invites youth pastors and leaders to consider how the spiritual vitality of the youth is expressed and perhaps hindered through online mediums. Romans 12:11 admonishes us to be “*Not*

lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." Yet digital fatigue, short attention spans, and reduced communal motivation suggest that many youths struggle to maintain fervency in the absence of physical gathering. This irregularity affects the consistency of youth engagement and spiritual formation through these digital platforms.

The researcher sought to get a deeper understanding of the reasons why many youths participate in online church services. A question, "What do you like most about online church services?" was asked to 56 church members. Table 6 below shows the various responses given.

Table 6: What Church Members Liked Most about Online Church Services in FGCK, Meru South District

Positive Aspects Liked	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Convenience and flexibility (time/place)	22	39.3%
Access when physically unavailable	14	25.0%
Ability to re-watch or pause content	6	10.7%
Safe during health concerns (e.g., COVID-19)	5	8.9%
Less time spent commuting	4	7.1%
Broader reach and inclusivity	3	5.4%
Continuous spiritual nourishment at home	2	3.6%

The study reveals that the most appreciated feature was convenience and flexibility (22 (39.3%) out of 56 responses), showing that members value being able to attend services from home or on the move. 14 (25.0%) members mentioned that online church allows participation when one is sick, travelling, or distant, highlighting the platform's accessibility. A smaller number noted the option to pause or re-watch services (6 (10.7%) responses), which is unique to online settings. Some (5-8.9%) appreciated the health safety it provides, especially during pandemics, while 4 (7.1%) valued reduced travel, 3 (5.4%) wider inclusivity and 2 (3.6%) continued spiritual nourishment at home. These responses suggest that online church enhances accessibility, safety, and autonomy in spiritual participation. Despite these limitations, youths expressed considerable appreciation for the convenience and accessibility that online services provide. Particularly for those who live far from the church or have challenges attending physical services, online platforms offer an important alternative to maintain spiritual connection (Ojo et al., 2024). The youth also responded positively to content tailored to their interests, especially when it includes contemporary worship music, interactive discussions, and creative presentations that resonate with their cultural and social realities (Nagy, 2024). This youth-centred approach aligns with strategies that foster meaningful engagement and faith formation in digital contexts.

The study engaged 56 church members on what they dislike about the use of online church services in FGCK. Table 7 shows the various responses.

Table 7: What Church Members Dislike About the Use of Online Church Services in FGCK

Negative Aspects Disliked	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of fellowship or face-to-face interaction	20	35.7%
Network/internet challenges	13	23.2%
Reduced spiritual engagement/distractions at home	9	16.1%
Limited participation or interactivity	6	10.7%
Poor video/audio quality	4	7.1%
Excludes elderly or digitally illiterate members	3	5.4%
Lack of altar/prayer experience	1	1.8%

The primary issue, cited by 20 respondents (35.7% of 56 total), was the loss of in-person companionship, which many church members regard as fundamental to worship, as illustrated in Table 11. This indicates that physical presence is highly esteemed for spiritual connection. Thirteen (23.2%) participants reported technical issues, including inadequate internet or network connectivity, which might hinder participation and illustrate the digital divide, particularly in rural regions. Nine respondents (16.1%) reported a decline in spiritual attention or increased distractions while viewing from home, suggesting that the church's physical atmosphere may enhance spiritual engagement. Additional issues encompassed restricted involvement (6-10.7%), subpar media quality (4-7.1%), and the marginalisation of senior members (3-5.4%), underscoring obstacles to comprehensive inclusion. One (1.8) respondent indicated a longing for altar calls and prayer sessions, implying that specific spiritual practices are more challenging to reproduce online.

However, several issues hinder the efficacy of online church services for adolescents. Regularly cited technical obstacles included inadequate internet access, exorbitant data costs, and limited access to personal hardware, echoing concerns previously articulated by Bwire et al. (2024) regarding how the digital divide hinders equitable participation in online worship. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 states, "Two are superior to one...if one falls, the other can assist in lifting them." The church's communal relationships, particularly vital for young individuals, tend to diminish in virtual gatherings. Moreover, online services were characterised as less spiritually uplifting and engaging compared to attending church, being viewed as tedious, uninspiring, and devoid of human interaction. This aligns with the broader findings of Pramono and Manuputy (2025), indicating that church leaders face challenges in maintaining the spiritual engagement of youth in contemporary digital worship environments.

Young individuals' involvement in online offerings was frequently passive until they undertook leadership roles, such as moderating discussions or conducting worship. Participation levels were markedly elevated in the presence of interactive components such as live chat, surveys, or online games, underscoring the importance of interactivity in digital religion environments (Ojo et al., 2024). These observations align with Acts 2:42, which depicts the early church as "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The essential nature of spirituality, which transcends the personal and private, is fundamental to discipleship, especially for young Christians. This study indicates that although online church services offer advantages in logistical ease and audience growth,

there is a need for strategic guidance, innovative content, and interaction that stimulates rapid congregational engagement.

Online church services at FGCK in Meru South District present both benefits and drawbacks for youth engagement. To be effective, church leaders must address infrastructure-related challenges and adopt innovative methods for content delivery that aim to replicate the relational and participatory aspects of physical worship, fostering spiritual growth and community among younger congregants (Bwire et al., 2024; Nagy, 2024; Pramono & Manuputy, 2025).

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Young people are open to connecting with the church online, especially when there are additional options and institutional support. But the findings also reveal the shortfalls of virtual worship as a way of fully replicating the spiritual communion of in-person assemblies. Scripture teaches the individual nature of seeking faith, as well as the collective nature of the church. As Proverbs 27:17 says: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." Or as you find in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: "Two are better than one, if either of them falls down, one can help the other up."

Church leaders need to intentionally be working on combining technology and community building, spiritual care, and be a part of the church experience, hopping on technology. This is just what Christ did, ministering one-on-one to the masses (cf. Luke 5:15-16), and appeals to His Body today to do the same, round and round, gathered in churches, leaders and pastors in sanctuaries or people all over the earth sheltering in place and tuning in to screen after screen.

Youth pastors and youth leaders are thus charged to reflect upon and address these developing patterns theologically as well as practically, such that they see both into the heart of God and the needs of the world. 1 Peter 5:2-3 commands: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, not because you must... not because you are not because you want to but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." Leading young people in a digital era demands an intentional approach to embrace online creativity and incorporate face-to-face interaction in order to facilitate lifelong faith formation.

Recommendations: In light of the above conclusions, the study proposes the following recommendations to guide FGCK and similar congregations in nurturing future youth engagement:

FGCK should continue offering online services as a complement to physical gatherings, not as a replacement. This blended model can serve youths who face temporal or geographical barriers, while maintaining the sanctity and communal power of live worship. Churches should invest in developing interactive and spiritually rich digital content, including live chats, virtual prayer rooms, Q&A sessions, and personalised pastoral support, to enhance online engagement and spiritual formation. Church leadership must prioritise mentoring and discipleship through physical gatherings, ensuring that youth receive consistent face-to-face guidance that cultivates accountability and Christian character.

To deepen understanding and inform future ecclesial practice, the following areas are recommended for further theological and empirical investigation: Comparative study on spiritual growth outcomes between youths attending physical church versus those engaging primarily through online platforms. The role of

hybrid church models in post-COVID ecclesiology and their theological validity. Impact of digital discipleship on long-term Christian commitment and leadership development among youth.

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