

The Church as an Agent of Behavioural Change: A Study on Christian Youth Participation in Political Activities

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ABSTRACT

The church is tasked with the responsibility of being a transformative agent. Societal transformation is an integral part of the church's mission that is complementary to the focal mission which is relay the Good News of Jesus Christ, invite populations to repentance and cultivates faith alongside baptizing them. Minimal studies exist that suggest practical mechanisms that the church can use to discourage Christian youth from engagement in unproductive political activities. This paper explores ways in which the church can affect behavioral change among young people in an effort to guide the young people who decide to engage in political activities. The main objective was to establish on how the church can become an agent of behavioral change. It is evident that some young people are bribed to engage in negative behaviour in times of political electioneering. They accept the money because they are unemployed and generally live below the poverty line. The article explores what the church can do to change this trend. The study established that some Christian youth who engage in political activities do so because of dire conditions that threaten their survival. Additionally, the church has a significant role to play as an agent of behavioural change and subsequently guide the youth to engage in productive politics. The study recommends that youth should be guided through structured workshops, trainings, and mentorship programs to help them make the right decision on whether or not to engage in unproductive political activities.

KEYWORDS: Church, Christian, political, participation and Youth

I. INTRODUCTION

The environment that the church operates is distinct from past decades. The changing dynamics and attributes have compelled the church to admit the reality that it is not just about what the church believes but the actual actions is what makes sense to believers. Subsequently, community transformation is an imperative mission and should be a core part of the church ministry (Pillay, 2017). The church is tasked with the responsibility of being a transformative and change agent. Societal transformation is an integral part of the church's mission. Jesus. However, this is not always the case. The church therefore needs to constantly teach and guide the society and young people in particular on how to be and behave according to their faith teachings in all situations. This includes volatile political situations. That way, the Church can assert its position as an effective agent of behavioral transformation (Brown, 2008).

Individual transformation is not only beneficial to the person but also has apposite impact on society. Thus, the focus should not be on preventing youth from participation in political activities. Instead, their engagement in all forms of political activities whether voting, voter education, participation in protests or political party membership should reveal the difference between Christian and non-Christians participants in the political process.

The church is expected to be a change agent. The theory of change describes how an initiative, policy, or program contributes to a change in behaviour through a series of stages over duration of time. From an early age most of us are taken to church and we are taught about faith and taken through church doctrine. It is from this point that our foundation becomes rooted in church principles. The church can help us to

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construct a social reality where we begin viewing realities from the church's perspective. Our world view becomes modeled around it so much so that the boundary between individual perspective and institutional becomes blurry. Ultimately, the reality constructed by the church will become the basis for making decisions. The church as an institution can create positive social realities such as focusing on peace creation and maintenance regardless of the circumstance or situation. That can be inculcated in an individual from an early age and reinforced through to adulthood. Thus, the church can positively influence the youth regardless of the stage at which they became Christians to engage productively in political activities.

Some studies have explored on Christian youth participation in politics and the role that the church should play in the process. However, minimal studies exist that suggest practical mechanisms that the church can use to discourage Christian youth from engagement in unproductive political activities. Some of them include: (Naishoo, 2021; Kedogo, 2016; Goldsmith, 2015; Embry and Lyon 2008)). The current study attempts to fill this gap by exploring on how the church can act as an agent of behavioral change and subsequently guide the young people who decide to engage in political activities. In doing so, the voting behaviour of the youth will change resulting in positive societal transformation. The youth will also be enlightened so that they desist from involvement in violent political protests usually aimed at attaining individual interests. Additionally, they will also be tolerant towards each other despite their membership to different political parties among other differences in political ideologies.

II. Christian youth and political participation

Political participation is a voluntary action that involves the public and individuals engage with the objective of either influencing public policy towards a given direction or affecting a given people who hold certain position and either make or influence the making of policies in the nation (Uhlener, 2015). Such actions comprise but are not limited to petitioning, lobbying, voting in elections, participating in campaigns, financial support to parties of interest, protesting peacefully or otherwise, contacting and and/or working with people on given issues.

Young Christian people have a significant role to play in the political sphere. There is definitely a space for Christian youth in the political space and discourse if social transformation and development are to be realized. In any case, the essence of Christian faith is

to help in making the world a better place for all to reside in (Pillay, 2017). What better way to do so than from the leadership arena? Probably, there would be fair distribution of resources and fair systems of employment and justice among other critical institutions if we had a significant number of Christian leaders. Political activities can threaten social cohesion and destroy social capital (Saud, Ida & Mashud, 2020). Social good is the quintessence of the gospel that Jesus Christ evangelized.

Notably, some Christian youth who engage in political activities do so because of dire conditions that threaten their survival such as coming from a humble background and long-term unemployment. In such a context, the church has a significant role to play as an agent of behavioural change. Young people should be guided through structured workshops, trainings, and mentorship programs to help them make the right decision on whether or not to engage in political activities. For instance, they are sensitized on the need to consider many consequences of political involvement other than just the financial help they are likely to get.

Conventionally, the youth are often marginalized and dismissed in political issues and governance. Globally, politics has over time been perceived as an affair of those who have advanced in age alongside possession of both political mileage and experience. Subsequently, the youth are excluded from being political candidates. The Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU] (2021) reports that individuals of the ages between 20- and 44-years account for up to 57% of the entire globe's voting age population with only 26% of the same being Members of Parliament (MPs). In addition, young people under the age of 30 years account for only 1.9% of the whole world's population of MPs with more than 80% of all upper houses of Parliament in the world lacking even a single MP who is aged below 30 years. Despite these statistics, the youth have a great potential to engage in productive politics. They are endowed with immense abilities to make a positive impact on decision-making if given an opportunity (Ojibara & Omede, 2017). Rather than being used as tools for individual selfish interests of politicians, they can be used as instruments to cause positive change in the political arena.

Studies on political participation have undergone significant developments overtime. That has triggered many disciplines to contribute to the discourse leading to broadening of our understanding on the concept. However, input from the multiple disciplines has led to the blurring of the underlying fundamental assumptions and definitions that wholly defines the

term (Weiss, 2020). Youth engagement in political affairs comprises many activities from voting behaviour, civic education, membership to political parties, vying for posts, and involvement in protests among other related activities (Dabesaki, 2015). Regardless of the political activities the youth decide to engage in, the objective is always to realize social change, development, and advancement. Politicians are always away of this desire and unfortunately exploit it for their individual gain. Youth engagement in productive politics is important for nations as it ensures the sustenance of democracy and good governance. Study findings have proven that politics is a critical element of the societal social structure at all levels. That is because it involves individuals of all ages, different ethnic affiliations and education levels alongside family structure.

The discourse on the schism between the church and politics and their effect on each other has advanced over the years (Nieuwenhuis, 2012; Abbink, 2014; van Klinken, 2018; Kamaara, 2000). Study findings have unveiled the importance of religion as a social force in influencing behaviour and decision making. Given the vulnerability of the youth because of the developmental stage, the church has an important role to play in helping the population make informed decisions regarding political participation (Amoateng, 2020). Religion impacts on an individual's identity and subsequently influences their world and general behaviour. Hence, due to the undeniable influence that the church has on pro-social behaviours of individuals, the institution is strategically placed to provide proper guidance to the youth in the realm of politics. From the biblical perspective which is a predominant reference material in the Church, the Christian faith and the government are closely linked and need not be viewed separately. According to Martin (2016), religion and particularly Christianity has been very influential across the globe. Notably, in some cases it has been the root cause of violence. A good illustration for this would be the violent behavior of the Roman Catholicism on its Protestant subjects in Bohemia. Further, religious beliefs have also been used as a political tool by individuals to gain and retain their political prowess in various political terrains.

The dichotomous presentation of the youth, particularly in Africa, with regard to academic and policies is of importance in seeking to understand their role and position in the political affairs of their nations. The perspective describes them as both violent troublemakers and peace seeking activists, perilous and promising, while being a challenge on one hand, and an opportunity on the other (Kedogo,

2016; Goldsmith, 2015). In most cases, the youth have been faced with a lot of alienation and marginalization in active politics and governance but misused for political gain by individual politicians.

Driskell, Embry and Lyon (2008) underscore the importance of the church in influencing behaviour and general lifestyle. They argue that the evaluation of the church impact can be determined through the observation of religious behavior and how that influences engagement with politics. The findings of their study revealed that the macro beliefs of a religion significantly relate with the politics of the nation. Christian beliefs and traditions are very important especially bearing in mind that some specific beliefs have a very profound impact on how and why Christian youth choose to participate in politics. They further observed that Christian beliefs are of much value in one's participation in politics and subsequently impact on other social aspects of life such as justice and politics. Christian beliefs transcend denominational difference and as such, the church can be a powerful influencer for the youth to actively seek social and economic justice as they engage in political activities.

Notably, across the African continent, there have been significant landmark events orchestrated by the youth that have not only defined but have also changed the practice in the political and governance arena (Golda, 2017) For instance, in Nigeria the young people are pushing for the enactment of legislation that allows for change in political participation and better governance. That will enable them to have a voice in political processes where they were previously ignored. In North Africa, the Jasmine Revolution and the Arab Spring demonstrate that the youth can also protest peacefully.

The church has an essential role to play by shaping behaviour to facilitate proper engagement of youth in political activities. There are many factors that compel the youth to engage in politics. The church needs to design an effective system that will ensure that their youth's engagement in politics is for a good course and will result in social transformation and development. The study will probe on the role of the church as a behavioural change agent. The factors that compel Christian youth to participate in politics will be identified. Further, the study will discuss the strategies that can be utilized to ensure peaceful youth involvement in political activities.

III. The church's role in influencing positive behaviour change development

The church has an important role in influencing behaviour given the significant level of influence it has on individuals. That means that it can positively

influence the youth in regard to their political engagement. The ultimate is the development of positive attitudes and behavior in many spheres of their lives including political participation (Amoateng, 2020). The church has a role of serving as a significant conduit of political information for the youth. The institution is an important element in the youth's engagement in politics as they provide their members, inclusive of the youth, with the opportunity to actively, and in a guided manner, participate in politics.

Largely, churches have taken advantage of their institutional resources as well as their theological traditions. In doing so, they have forged a cohesive public theology that they use to teach and enlighten the masses about the kind of citizenship and political engagement that they participate. The clergy like pastors and priests share messages with their masses through sermons. On the other hand, the youth who attend these church services alongside other forms of church activities get exposed to these messages on a regular basis. Consequently, they can be shaped and enlightened to engage in politics in a defined way.

Christianity, as a religion in Kenya, takes the lion share of the populous with an estimated 83% of the entire population (Kenga, 2016) being Christians. Churches have joined together and formed organizations such as The National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) through which they express their grievances. Such an institution also acts as a mouthpiece to intervene for the marginalized and advocate for overall society's benefits. Christianity has in effect taken advantage of their large population and has influenced political activities in the nation. Despite this conspicuous visibility, there are some churches like the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) that have distanced themselves from politics and as a result, their congregation comprising of youth have to stay away from political participation. The lack of involvement by these churches in politics portrays a picture of a God whose only interest is the salvation soul of his peoples but He is not interested in their socio-economic welfare (Kenga, 2016).

In Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) has launched a Christian youth program in preparation for the 2022 general elections dubbed "Vijana Twaweza". This awareness and leadership training program is meant to help the youth remain focused and vigilant on development issues and speak up rather than engage in needless ethnic violence in the general electioneering times (Naishoo, 2021). The NCCCK reiterated that the youth are a vulnerable population particularly during political times. As such, they either become agents of violence or peace.

The NCCCK holds that when the youth are embraced and given the necessary resources, they become the solution to social, political, and economic challenges in the society. It, therefore, urges the Christian youth to be at the forefront in addressing societal issues and setting standards that would lead the community and country towards a better future.

Notably, the church in Kenya has been under a lot of critical scrutiny on its role in political and socio-economic contribution in the country. That is because it has to operate within boundaries that are characterized with not only high levels of political instability but also destructive ethnic conflicts, poverty, and corruption (Kararach, Hanson, & Léautier, 2011; Kamaara, 2000). According to Deacon (2020), the church and the Christian youth have for a long time been intimately engaging in politics in Kenya either through individual and/or organized churches. The church and their youth actively participate in community and social activities with an aim of triggering development through participating in activities and events that attempt to influence the thinking and behavior of the community from the national level all the way to the grassroots level. Through engaging in community activities such as burials and weddings, the youth get exposure and a forum to directly influence and voice their desire in political matters at such levels. Notably, some Christian youth who engage in political activities do so because of dire conditions that threaten their survival such as emanating from a humble background and long-term unemployment. In such contexts, the church has a significant role to play as an agent of behavioural change.

IV. Conclusions

The church can have a positive impact on youths' political participation. It has a crucial role of becoming an agent for behavioral change. There are many factors both positive and negative that compel youth to engage in politics including poverty, unemployment, and the desire for social and economic advancement. There are several strategies that the church can use to ensure productive youth involvement in political activities. Some include regular workshops and seminars for enlightenment. The youth can also be engaged in extra-curricular and recreational facilities to keep them engaged and focused for effective decision making. Ultimately, the church plays a vital part in ensuring that the youth are not only used when mobilizing votes but also form part of political beneficiaries.

V. Recommendations

1. Youth should be guided through structured workshops, trainings, and mentorship programs to

help them make the right decision on whether or not to engage in political activities.

2. There is need for churches to develop a local approach to addressing the needs of youth to prevent them from being vulnerable for manipulation and exploitation by politicians.
3. The clergy should adopt better structured frameworks that will encourage youth participation in church activities so that they get a suitable forum for providing them with the much needed direction.

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