


Exploring the nexus between children and youth ministry

**Author:**Nathan H. Chiroma^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Transformational Church and Youth Leadership, Theology, PAN Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya

²Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Nathan Chiroma, nchiroma@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 01 June 2019

Accepted: 20 Aug. 2019

Published: 26 Nov. 2019

How to cite this article:

Chiroma, N.H., 2019, 'Exploring the nexus between children and youth ministry', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40(1), a2024. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.2024>

Copyright:

© 2019. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The aim of this article is to gain a proper understanding and relationship between children and youth ministry. The article sought the understanding of the relationship between children and youth ministry among children and youth workers in some denominations in Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative approach through focus group interviews. A total number of 70 respondents participated in the study: 35 children workers and 35 youth workers. Data for the research were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The empirical research findings indicate among other that many children and youth workers see their ministry as completely detached from each other. The study further reveals that there is a disparity in the understanding of both children and youth ministry among the respondents. Several conclusions were drawn from the study, firstly, children and youth ministries are an integral part of church ministry. Secondly, there has to be meaningful engagements and conversations between children and youth workers for the purposes of intergenerational ministry. Thirdly, children and youth workers must be intentional to reduce the dichotomy that exists between the two ministries. Given the research findings, the article suggests ways in which children and youth workers can work together to enhance the faith formation of children and youth. In conclusion, practical ways are proposed for enhancing the relationship between children and youth workers.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The intra- or interdisciplinary implications of this article are found in the call to have a conversation between children (child theology) and youth workers (youth ministry) in the quest to minister to both. It is also implied that children and youth workers come from different fields of study, mainly social work, psychology and theology.

Keywords: children ministry; youth ministry; nexus; practical theology; church.

Introduction

A very important (and often overlooked) part of children and youth ministry is ensuring that the transition from children ministry to youth ministry takes place effectively. Similarly, the dividing line between children and youth ministry is often very thin in most African countries – especially in Nigeria – which sometimes leads to role confusion between children and youth workers. The right understanding of the nexus between children and youth ministry in Africa will enhance the relationship between children ministry and youth ministry. Through empirical study, this article seeks to shed some new light on the traditional understanding of children and youth ministry among church leaders, and among children and youth workers in some parts of Nigeria. The article will further discuss the theological and practical nexus between children and youth ministry in Nigeria. Subsequently, ways to enhance the relationship between children and youth ministry will be proposed. Although much has already been performed in the area of children and youth ministry, a better understanding of the relationship between children and youth ministry is required if we are to enhance the advancement of children and youth ministry in Africa, especially in Nigeria.

Methodology

This research was conducted from a practical theological perspective. It reflects on the relationship between children ministry and youth ministry. Heitink (1999:102) defines practical theology as 'the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation for the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society'. The study engages mainly practitioners in the field of children ministry and youth ministry in some parts of Nigeria. Anderson (2001:23) argues that practical theology demands a specific understanding of the nature of theology. It demands that the theologian hold the practitioner accountable to the truth of God's revelation in history and that the practitioner

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

hold the theologian accountable to the truth of God's reconciliation in humanity. Practical theology could be described as living theology, helping people make sense of their reality in light of who they are in God's economy. Hence, practical theology is basically an everyday part of the life of the Christian community. Willow and Swinton (2000:11) succinctly remind us that the task of practical theology should not be to simply retell and appropriate disjointed theological truths, but rather to investigate theological understanding in the light of contemporary experience, so that people's meaning and experiences within God's redemptive movement in the present can be developed and assessed. Osmer (2008:4, 7) reiterates that, as practical theologians, we need to ask four critical questions while engaging in research, namely:

- What is going on?
- Why is this going on?
- How might we respond?
- What ought to be going on?

Ward (2017) expands on this notion as follows:

Christian theology is, therefore, the attempt to express the truth of Jesus Christ in human terms. Practical theology is the extension of this practice of expression into concrete, social and cultural forms. (p. 29)

Methods

A qualitative research design was used to obtain data for this research, as, according to Patton (1990:16), qualitative research reveals a target audience's range of behaviour and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues. It uses in-depth studies of small groups of people to guide and support the construction of hypotheses. The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive. A further justification for the use of qualitative research for this study is based on the understanding that qualitative methods seek to interpret meaning from data that will help understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places.

Focus group interviews were used to collect data from the participants. Greyton (2003:140) articulates that a focus group interview is a type of in-depth interview accomplished in a group, whose meetings present characteristics defined with respect to the respondents, size, composition and interview procedures. The focus or object of analysis is the interaction inside the group. The participants influence each other through their answers to the ideas and contributions during the discussion (Loder 2015:45). Focus groups provide insights into how people think and provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied. Focus groups' interviews provide the researcher the possibility to capture in-depth information more economically than would be possible with individual interviews. Focus groups provide space for people's involvement and homogeneity among participants with respect to research interests, the generation of qualitative data and discussion focused on a topic, which is determined by the purpose of the research (Krueger 1994):

We invited people with similar experiences to share their perceptions and ideas on this topic. You were selected because you have certain characteristics in common, which are of interest to us. (p. 25)

Research questions

The questions that guided this study were:

- What are the perceived understanding of children ministry and youth ministry?
- What is the perceived relationship between children and youth ministry?
- How could the relationship between children and youth ministry be enhanced?

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study comprised 70 respondents: 35 children ministry workers and 35 youth ministry workers across five Northern Nigeria states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja (Bauchi, Kaduna, Gombe, Taraba, Zamfara and Abuja), who have been involved in children ministry and youth ministry for more than 10 years because of their experience. The respondents were men and women who were spread across six different denominations in Northern Nigeria, namely the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) (15 respondents), Baptists (15 respondents), the Lutheran Church of Nigeria (LCCN) (10 respondents), Anglicans (10 respondents), the Church of Christ in all nations (COCIN) (10 respondents) and the Redeem Gospel Church of God (10 respondents). These denominations were chosen because of their records and achievements in children ministry and youth ministry over the years. The focus groups were conducted in the various state capitals because of security and proximity purposes.

Data analysis

The data for this study were analysed using thematic analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke (2006:70) define TA as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data'. Thematic analysis is a widely used method of analysis in qualitative research. In 2006, Braun and Clarke published an article that described to novice researchers how to use TA in a step-by-step manner. Braun and Clarke (2006:71) state that TA is a foundational method of analysis that needs to be defined and described to solidify its place in qualitative research. According to Guile (2013:47), TA is a widely used qualitative data analysis method. It is one of a cluster of methods that focus on identifying patterned meaning across a data set.

To appropriately use TA and to extract adequate meaning from the qualitative data, the study adopted Rogers' (2011:56) six phases of TA, as outlined below:

- Familiarisation with the data: This phase, according to Rogers (2011:56), involves reading and re-reading the qualitative data, to enable the researcher to become immersed and intimately familiar with the content of the data.

- **Coding:** This phase of the TA requires generating succinct labels that categorise significant features of the qualitative data that might be relevant to answering the research question or questions. It involves coding the entire data set, and after that, collating all the codes and all relevant data extracts, for later stages of analysis.
- **Searching for themes:** This phase of TA involves examining the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning and identifying potential themes. It also involves assembling the data relevant to each theme, in order to work with the data and review the viability of each of the potential themes.
- **Reviewing themes:** This phase involves checking the themes against the data set, to determine that they tell a convincing story of the data, and one that answers the research question. In this phase, themes are typically refined, which sometimes involves them being split, combined or discarded.
- **Defining and naming themes:** This phase involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each theme, determining the 'story' of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme.
- **Writing up:** This final phase of TA involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

This process was followed in the analysis of the data gathered for this study, and it was chosen because it would enrich the study and at the same time give fair representation to the voices of the respondents.

Theological framework

This study, as indicated earlier, was guided by practical theological methods. To provide a framework for this study, it is important to have a theological grounding to issues pertaining to whatever ministry one is involved in. Root and Dean (2011:40) aptly note that our own ministries in the world are truly ministries only if they are connected to God's continued ministry, and theology is constructive (and helpful) only if it is performed in the context of God's continued ministry in the world. Hence, King (2006:11) stresses that the core of successful children and youth ministry is theology – teaching young people the Word of God and guiding them into his presence. Children and youth ministry, like any other ministry in the church, must be grounded within a theological framework as Hunt (2003:2) rightly states: 'We must think through an issue theologically, because our ministry is a reflection of our theology'.

Children ministry

Our theology and theological understanding of children shape our understanding of how to do ministry with and to children. Children are an integral part of the covenant community (Gn 17:6–14; Ex 12:4–27; Dt. 6:4–9; Dt 31:12–15; Ps 78:1–8), and God expects the church and parents to bring

them up in the ways of the Lord. In the Old Testament, God enters into covenants with his people. These covenants and their corresponding blessings included children. Therefore, our understanding of children shapes our understanding of the gospel and our theological reflection. Grobbelaar and Breed (2016:62) argue that the distinctive emphasis of child theology is that the child or children are at the centre of theological reflection. Our understanding of children therefore also shapes our understanding of the God who calls not on the basis of our capacity but by his sovereign choice (Rm 9:10–18). Similarly, Bunge (2006:550) adds that our theology helps us understand the authority of the Bible and the place of children in our theological engagement, the wisdom from other related disciplines and understandings and the mission of the Christian church. In the New Testament, Jesus taught us to welcome and not to despise children. He invites children to be with him, and according to White and Willmer (2006:27), the church must follow his lead. Jesus taught us that children are to be valued and that the gospel of the kingdom of God and the mission of God are for children (Mt 18:10; 19:13–15). Similarly, in Mark 9:33–37, Jesus states that in order to welcome him, one must welcome God's children. Then, he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me'. Mountain (2011:266) concludes and suggests that caring for children is a privilege which God entrusted to the church and community, not just parents.

From the foregoing, we argue that the Scripture is very clear on the fact that children are part of the covenant community. For example, if a child were born into an Israelite home, the child is born into the covenant community; if a child is born into a Christian home, the child is born into the covenant community. Therefore, children born into the covenant community are to be taught how to live as members of the covenant community, God's church. Children ministry in local church must be informed by the theological understanding that children are part of God's visible church. Piper (1999:122) observes that Christ did purchase privileges for the children of believers (or) it would seem to be pointless to say, 'The promise is for you and for your children' (Ac 2:39), and to say, 'His righteousness is to our children's children' (Ps 103:18), God has ordained, repeatedly and more often than not, to work through these means for the salvation of the children of believers. Knoetze (2015:222) concludes that African child theology must be faith-seeking understanding of the abundance of the truth, revealed by God in Jesus Christ, within and through the life of Africa's children.

Bunge (2006:1) warns that theologians and interested lay people in churches, schools and universities should take children seriously in the construction of theology and in our life as people of faith and conscience. Children ministry exists therefore to communicate the love of Christ to the children of the world. With this understanding, children ministry should

not be thought of as something that takes place at church, but it can be much more than that. Arnold (2016:5) suggests that children ministry can extend to all walks of life, including organisations that are reaching children globally for the cause of Christ. It is very important to God that children are reached, nurtured and disciplined for his kingdom.

Youth ministry

Youth ministry is crucial in shaping and moulding young people in their faith journey. Youth ministry helps to integrate young people into the larger, intergenerational community of the church. King (2006:10) stresses that youth ministry focuses on inviting those young people who are not already part of the church into the deeper narrative of God's plan. It reminds the church that young people are not marginalised members of the body, but as Aziz (2017:6) puts it, they are co-creators and conspirators in the divine work of the church and youth ministry must therefore be hermeneutical in nature. Hence, King (2006:11) urges that an authentic atmosphere should be created for young people where they can seek the truth and discover who they are in Jesus Christ. He says that the ultimate goal of youth ministry should not be only to get the youth to attend meetings about Christ; it should first and foremost be about getting youth to connect to Christ (cf. also Dunn 2004:17). Furthermore, Dunn (2004:17) mentions the 'heartbeat of youth ministry' when he states that the ultimate goal in every home and youth ministry should be to pull youth into a place where they have developed an intimate relationship with God.

Investing in our young people is necessary for growing the body of Christ. Empowering young people in the church to grow in their relationship with the Lord prepares them to serve Christ in all they do. As a result of this service, the congregation is nurtured and that prepares the ground for the church to flourish.

Ministry to young people not only prepares them to become future leaders but also provides them with an opportunity to contribute to the church. Weber (2015:6) rightly notes that young people must only be empowered to own their faith, but should also move beyond owing the faith to implement their faith into their values and potentials. This is seen many times in the Bible, as God often has used young people to do great things (Samuel, David, Saul, Timothy, Demas, etc.). For example, God used Timothy to pastor and lead the Ephesian church when he was a teenager – 1 Timothy 4:12 says, 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity'. Therefore, ministry to and with young people is pivotal for the truth of the gospel to be passed down from generation to generation to grow the body of Christ. Ultimately, helping youth to grow spiritually in their formative years will equip them to make an impact for Christ both now and in their future. Cloete (2012:8) concludes that 'if youth ministry really wants to be of value to the youth it must understand the value of community across generational lines'.

Family ministry

In order to have a meaningful conversation regarding children and youth ministry, a discussion on family ministry is crucial as it redesigns both children and youth ministry. Richards (1988:14) rightly notes that attending to the spiritual welfare of adults for the sake of children and youth is the most strategic effective children and youth ministry. Furthermore, according to Hoskins (2014:1), evidence suggests that family environments constitute the basic ecology where children's behaviour is manifested, learned, encouraged and suppressed. For strategic outcome in the life of children and youth, a radical turn needs to be made in order to redesign both children and youth ministry to have family focus. Therefore, there is a need to consider family-based relational children and youth ministry that empowers adults. In his book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, De Vries writes that 'the most damaging isolation that teenagers in our culture experience is from their own family ... teenagers seems to be inadequately prepared for the adult world'. Children and youth ministry must not operate in isolation, but it must move to community focus. Even as children and youth workers engage in their ministry, they must be reminded that the primary responsibility of raising children and youth from a Biblical standpoint lies mainly with parents (Dt 6:1–9). Children and youth ministry workers must strengthen the facilitation of children and youth's spiritual nurture at home where, according to Crosnoe and Cavanagh (2010:600), children spend more than 5000 hours and at school 2000 h compared to the church which has only 40 h on average to work with per year. Children and youth need the adult family members to help them grow as fruitful, persevering members of the faith community.

Ethical considerations

It was an independent research and ethical consideration was explained to the participants verbally.

Findings and discussion

Systematic qualitative TA initially revealed seven content categories emerging from the interviewee responses. These categories were further collapsed to reveal major themes that address the ways respondents conceptualise and understand the relationship between children and youth ministry. This section fits into Osmer's first and second questions 'what is going on?' and 'why is this going on?'

Themes in children ministry

In the area of the understanding of children ministry, four major themes have emerged from the respondents regarding the understanding of children ministry.

Theme 1: Sunday school

All participants described children ministry first and foremost as Sunday school. They all believed that foundational to children ministry is the church Sunday school. For example, one of the respondents said:

'Children ministry is all that we do in Sunday school. Trying to help children to come to a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.' (Joshua, male, police officer and children worker)

Another respondent echoed the same sentiments when she said:

'Children ministry is being involved with Sunday school in our various churches. It involves all that we do with children on Sunday and the various activities we prepare for them during vacation Bible School.' (Mary, female, class teacher and children worker)

In as much as the respondents feel that children ministry is Sunday school, there is more than just Sunday school in children ministry. This understanding limits the definition of children's ministry. Children ministry should not be limited to activities however must provide foundation from spiritual formation, discipleship and above all love and acceptance to the children we minister to. Additionally, children ministry must be committed to biblical teaching to help children grow in their love and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Theme 2: Caring for children

Thirty-five out of 70 participants described children ministry as caring for children. Respondents described either personal or church experiences with caring for children as children ministry. For example, one respondent said:

'Children ministry is all about caring for children – both children in the church and out of the church. It is fulfilling what Jesus said "Let the little children come to me".' (Beatrice, female, 55 years old, housewife)

Another respondent said:

'Children ministry is your passion for caring for children, if you don't have the passion you will not care for them. And for me caring involves many different angles, it can be spiritual, financial or otherwise.' (Catherine, female, 29 years old, lawyer)

Another respondent echoed this notion:

'When you think of children ministry, it is that action whereby you care for children, especially those in need.' (Bitrus, male, 48 years old, mechanic)

This implies that people doing ministry with children must have the same caring attitude as we find in Jesus. Children workers must care for the children they work with, they must let the gospel inform their love and care for children. Children are image bearers created by God for his glory (Is 43:6–7).

Theme 3: Shaping the spiritual lives of children

Twenty-one of the respondents alluded to the fact that children ministry is all about shaping the spiritual lives of children. One respondent said:

'Children ministry was all about shaping the spiritual lives of children, you can invest in worldly things for children, but once their spiritual lives are not shaped, it is like helping them to 'gain the whole world and lose their soul.' (Danjuma, male, 34 year old, banker)

One respondent added:

'Children ministry has to do with helping children to grow spiritually, we are spiritual beings – children included – we must strive to shape their spiritual lives because that is all that counts in the eyes of God.' (Naomi, female, 25 years old, nurse)

In addition, two respondents echoed that:

Children ministry is to fulfil the great commission, and the great commission is all about shaping the spiritual lives of people – children included. (Asabe, female, 34 years old, teacher; Grace, 30 years old, civil servant)

This was also echoed by Roberto and Pfiffner (2007:3) that children ministry must be at the centre of faith formation, providing children with opportunities to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition in order to shape their spiritual lives.

Theme 4: Preparing future church leaders

Another key dimension that the respondents pointed out regarding children ministry is that of preparing future church leaders. One respondent said:

'Children ministry is that opportunity we have to prepare future leaders for the church, we have been commanded to pass on the spiritual baton to the next generation, so when we do children ministry that is exactly what we are doing.' (Maimuna, female, 40 years old, tailor)

Another respondent added:

'The church is supposed to be intergenerational, hence we have been called to work for children in order to make sure that we have future leaders that will continue with the mandate of the church.' (Gadi, male, 40 years old, teacher)

Children ministry has been a great place of leadership development. It provides opportunity for teaching children how to be a leader at a young age by giving them the skills needed to be leaders both now and in the future. Many great leaders today attributed their success to an early preparation through children ministry.

Themes in youth ministry

Four major themes have emerged from the respondents regarding their understanding of youth ministry:

Theme 1: Empowerment

Forty-five of the respondents understood youth ministry as empowerment. They felt that youth ministry was to empower young people holistically. One respondent said:

'Youth ministry, in its ultimate end, is empowering young people to be what God wants them to be, and you can do that through all the programmes and activities with the young people.' (Gabriel, male, 28 years old, youth worker)

Another respondent added:

'The mistake we sometimes make as youth workers is to think that youth ministry is all about us and not the young people, but

we must be reminded that God has called us to empower these young people to serve Him and to serve the community.' (Mercy, female, 32 years old, nurse)

One respondent's view was as follows:

'Throughout scripture we see God empowering people to do His assignments; we see Moses, Joshua, the prophets, the kings, Jesus and the apostles. So the total summary of youth ministry is that it is simply empowering young people to be what God wants them to be – both now and in the future.' (Solomon, male, 30 years old, civil servant)

Youth ministry has been the centre of empowerment to many young people. Barna (2003:22) adds that the concept of youth empowerment in youth ministry must give young people the opportunity to be empowered holistically for service to God and the community. Youth workers have the privilege to encourage young people to take charge of their lives by giving them a voice and participation.

Theme 2: Mentoring

Twenty-five of the respondents understood youth ministry as mentoring. They regarded youth ministry as coming alongside young people in order to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. One respondent said:

'For me, I see youth ministry as mentoring and I practice youth ministry as mentoring. I am reminded of the life of Jesus and his disciples, He mentored them and at the end they were able to transform the world for His kingdom. The young people I work with are not mine but they belong to God, so my role is to walk side by side with them through mentoring in order to make them fishers of men.' (Asabe, female, 30 years old, civil servant)

Another respondent said:

'The book of Proverbs said that as iron sharpen iron so one man sharpens another, so youth ministry is mentoring young people so that they can be sharpened for their future, and through that process they also sharpen us as youth workers.' (Sophie, female, 40 years old, pilot)

Youth ministry cannot be divorced of mentoring, and young people need mentors who care about them and who challenge them to do their best. Chiroma (2015:80) notes that mentoring in youth ministry provides the privilege and responsibility of helping guide a particular young person along their journey.

Theme 3: Building the next generation for Christ

Three of the respondents agreed that youth ministry was all about building the next generation for Christ. One respondent verbalised this notion as follows:

'Youth ministry is there in the local church to promote intergenerational ministry, it is there to build the next generation for Christ.' (Anthony, male, 38 years old, medical doctor)

Another respondent added:

'Youth ministry is investing our time and resources to build the next generation for Christ, meaning we put in our time and our

resources to invest in the young people in the church today so that we can help them to grow; we help build them for Christ.' (Aisha, female, 26 years old, youth worker)

Youth ministry must be committed to the safeguarding of the faith for our offspring, and for others, they will persuade. Youth ministry must be committed to passing on the baton because we can stand the danger of losing the truth of faith in a single generation.

Theme 4: Spiritual formation

Fifty of the respondents, however, strongly believed that youth ministry was all about spiritual formation: *Youth ministry is forming young people to become like Christ*. One respondent captured this well when she said:

'Youth ministry is fulfilling Romans 12:1, helping young people to be transformed to the likeness and the image of Christ and not to conform to the standards of this world. In its totality, youth ministry is helping young people to be mature and complete in Christ through spiritual formation.' (Julie, female, 33 years old, social worker)

Spiritual formation forms an integral part of children and youth ministry. Children and youth workers must join hands with parents in creating an environment for spiritual formation. Children and youth workers and parents can become mentors in the process of preparing the teens for adulthood.

Themes showing the relationship between children and youth ministry

In this section, respondents were asked to share what they perceived to be the relationship between children and youth ministry.

Themes stating the relationship

Two major themes regarding the relationship between children and youth ministry have emerged:

Theme 1: Same but different

Sixty of the respondents said that children and youth ministry had the same goal but different purposes. The goal was for both the children and youths to become followers and disciples of Christ, but the focus was different in that they dealt with different age groups. One respondent said:

'I feel the relationship between children and youth ministry is the same but different, meaning we are all working on the same vineyard for the Lord Jesus Christ, but we are allocated different part of the vineyard to work, some with children and some with young people.' (Kevin, male, 34 years old, youth pastor)

One respondent added:

'Children and youth ministry is the same thing, however sometimes we make it so difficult for ourselves as children and youth workers, we create artificial divides between us to the

point that we don't even see each other as co-workers, we are doing the same thing – building lives for Christ – but with a different category of God's people.' (Rebecca, female, 50 years old, teacher)

Children and youth ministry must not just be about entertainment, but rather producing disciples of Christ. Ross (2012:7) adds to the conversation that children and youth ministry should not only be about programmes and keeping the young people busy, but rather it is the centre of discipleship.

Theme 2: No relationship because of church structure

Thirty-two of the respondents articulated that, in theory, children ministry and youth ministry were the same thing, but, because of church structures, there was no formal relationship in practice. One respondent angrily said:

'We don't even have a forum where we meet as children and youth workers, because church structures have so much divided us and made us feel so protective of our various ministries with either children or youths.' (Grace, female, 32 years old, banker)

One respondent said:

'Church structures are so divisive that we are encouraged and sometimes forced to just concentrate on our ministry with either children or youths. It may be a good thing to focus, but it causes a lack of proper understanding of the theology of ministry, hence sometimes it makes us not even talk to each other.' (Hannah, female, 36 years old, administrator)

In addition, one respondent said:

'Church structures and denominationalism has created a huge divide in the relationship between children and youth ministry, they create the impression that some ministries are higher than others.' (Enoch, male, 42 years old, lawyer)

There is a need for structural mechanisms regarding the relationship between children and youth ministry to foster intergenerational family-based ministry.

Themes suggesting enhancement

In the focus groups, themes also emerged regarding how the relationship between children and youth ministry could be enhanced:

Theme 1: Feeder

The first major theme that emerged from respondents regarding enhancing relationship between children and youth ministry is that the ministries should have a feeder relationship. One respondent suggested:

'The relationship between children and youth ministry should be that of a feeder relationship, meaning we must borrow from the concept of football teams, where the junior team is there to feed the senior team, in this case children ministry must relate with youth ministry in such a way that there are always children transitioning smoothly from children ministry to youth ministry and youth ministry must intentionally be providing teachers for

children ministry from youth ministry.' (Edwin, male, 27 years old, teacher)

Another respondent continued this train of thought:

'The children ministry must always be providing an opportunity for youth ministry to tap into what they are doing and the same with youth ministry; children ministry must be preparing children to join youth ministry, and youth ministry must be helping children ministry to get teachers and mentors from youth ministry.' (Hannah, female, 36 years old, administrator)

This is a very important concept provided by the respondents and will be discussed further in the recommendations.

Theme 2: Mutual

All the respondents agreed that there should be a mutually beneficial relationship between children and youth ministry. One respondent summarised it well:

'To enhance the relationship between children and youth ministry, we must have a mutual relationship that is coming from the understanding that we are all working for the same master, and that it is not our ministry but we are only stewards of God's ministry. Mutuality can be enhanced in having regular meetings together, creating material together and even planning together.' (Abigail, female, 52 years old, teacher)

Working towards mutuality should be intentional and maximised for the purpose of achieving unity and purpose of both children and youth ministry.

Theme 3: Intergenerational

The respondents agreed that to enhance the relationship between children and youth ministry, there must be an intergenerational relationship and both ministries must keep the intergenerational aspect in focus. One respondent said:

'We should be intentional in doing intergenerational activities together, we must create a forum where the children and the youths can come together and do things together, this will enhance and strengthen the relationship between children and youth ministry.' (George, male, 40 years old, driver)

Another respondent added:

'To enhance the relationship between children and youths, we must constantly maintain the intergenerational aspect in focus, we must create forums where we bring not only the children and youths together, but their parents as well. In that way we will begin to understand that it is a covenant community ministry with the goal of growing into the image and likeness of Christ.' (Mary, female, 52 years old, pharmacist)

It is also clear from the scriptures and other literatures consulted that intergenerational relationship is all-encompassing. According to Ross (2007:30), 'In the religion of Israel, all ages were not just included, they were drawn in, assimilated, absorbed into the whole community with a deep sense of belonging'. Similarly, Strommen and Hardel (2000:15) argue that the centre of the Bible is not on the family as collective unit, but on the relationship that exists between

the children and adults in any configuration of family that enhances intergenerational conversations.

From the foregoing rich data, we can see that understanding the nexus between children and youth ministry is an important aspect of church ministry, and we need to ask the question, What ought to be going on? It is clear that certain additional shifts are required to enhance the relationship between children and youth ministry.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be gleaned from the data gathered from the 70 participants in this study and the literature that was consulted and responds to Osmer's last two questions, 'how might we respond?' and 'what ought to be going on?':

- Children and youth workers need to redesign their relationship (theology and philosophy). The purpose of children and youth ministry is to point young people to God, and hence, children and youth ministry must be grounded with the right theology and philosophy. Children and youth ministry must be motivated a theology and philosophy that will lead young people to the kingdom.
- There is a need to create space for dialogue between children and youth workers. Children and youth workers form the bedrock of intergenerational ministry; therefore, a constant dialogue between the two will facilitate proper empowerment of children and youth.
- We need to challenge denominational understanding of children and youth ministry. The data from this study indicate that most of the denominations in this study do not have a proper understanding of children and youth ministry. Hence, there is a need to redefine the ecclesiology of children and youth ministry in the denominations. This is evident in the fact that most of the denominations depend on the volunteers to help them in children and youth ministry and they are not willing to invest resources both human and capital.
- There is a need for joint conferences involving children and youth workers. From the empirical data, most of the respondents do not seem to have a common ground of meeting to engage regarding their various ministries. Having joint conferences between children and youth workers will create a forum not only for conversations but also for meaningful awareness of what the other is doing and how to collaborate to achieve the goals of the various ministries.
- Emphasis must be placed on intergenerational children and youth ministry (OT/NT). In the words of Cloete (2016:5), children and youth ministry must therefore involve people of different generations that journey together in service of the King, taking responsibility for each other. Children and youth workers must ensure intergenerational conversations that will enhance the relationship between the two ministries.
- Families need to be educated about the place and nature of the relationship between children and youth ministry. It was clear from the study that many families are not aware of the relationship between children and youth. Children and youth workers must create a focus from the family-based children youth ministry approach that will provide proper education regarding not only their ministries but also the relationship between the two.
- Children and youth workers must embrace the feeder concept with all intentionality. The feeder concept discussed in the empirical findings allows youth workers to create a mentoring and recruitment system, where children can transition smoothly into youth ministry. More so, children workers can recruit workers from youth ministry. The intentionality that is required here must be both at the ecclesial and the ministry levels.
- The covenantal community is familial: we must equip children and youth workers to think biblically about the family–church relationship. Scripture does not present an isolationist, individualistic view of the family. Children and youth workers must create a clear biblical ecclesiology on family ministry that will warrant intergenerational relationship that will be part and parcel of the faith community. Often, members of the congregation are not aware of the strong biblical foundations of family-based children and youth ministry. A solid biblical ecclesiology of children and youth ministry will drive the older generations to invest in younger generations, in support of children and youth workers. Each nuclear family unit makes up the household of faith, the covenantal community. Cloete (2016:5) rightly notes that a family approach to children and youth ministry should not only be a programme that is predominantly driven by the church with particular people but should rather have what she describes as community focus that includes and respects the various forms of families. Children and youth workers must teach the interdependence of home and church. Community solidarity strengthens and protects each individual family and equips families to build homes that are little sanctuaries of grace. Parents must be seen as important key players in children and youth ministry. Nel (2000:19) calls for a radical shift in you ministry that must focus on parents, and she argues that parents must be seen as indispensable partners in the ministry, because youth workers will never replace the family context. The family must be seen as the primary hermeneutical space where children and youth can be disciplined to come to an understanding of themselves, others, the world and God.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to explore the nexus between children and youth ministry. From the literature and the empirical data, it is evident that there is a need to create a sustainable relationship between children and youth ministry. It is thus important that effective children and youth ministry should be all about connecting with God and

having a God-actualised approach rather than a self-actualised approach to ministry (cf. also Purves 2004:152). Ministry should be theologically driven and should teach children and youths about a personal relationship with the triune God, his Word and his kingdom – his gracious message of self-revelation and his dynamic reign. Therefore, children and youth workers must pursue a relationship with all intentionality to foster the kingdom of God among children and youths.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interest.

Authors' contributions

N.H.C. is the sole author of this article.

Funding information

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

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Anderson, R.S., 2001, *The shape of practical theology: Empowering ministry with theological praxis*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Arnold, 2016, 'Theology and children ministry', *Transformation* 19(2), 5–17.
- Aziz, G., 2017, 'Youth ministry as an agency of youth development for the vulnerable youth of the Cape Flats', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1745>
- Barna, G., 2003, *Transforming children into spiritual champions: Why children should be your church's #1 priority*, Gospel Light Publications, Ventura, CA.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2006, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bunge, M.J., 2006, 'The child, religion and the academic: Developing a robust theological and religious understanding of children and childhood', *Journal of Religion* 86(4), 549–579. <https://doi.org/10.1086/505894>
- Chiroma, N.H., 2015, 'The role of mentoring in adolescents' spiritual formation', *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14(1), 72–90. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-01401005>
- Cloete, A., 2012, 'Spiritual formation as focus of youth ministry', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 53(3–4), 70–77. <https://doi.org/10.5952/53-3-4-250>
- Cloete, A., 2016, 'Revisiting a family approach in youth ministry', *In die Skriflig* 50(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2078>
- Crosnoe, R. & Cavanagh, S.E., 2010, 'Families with children and adolescents: A review, critique, and future agenda', *Journal of Marriage Family* 72(3), 594–611. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00720.x>
- Dunn, S., 2004, *Bored with God: How parents, youth leaders and teachers can overcome student apathy*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Greyton, R., 2003, 'Semi-structured interviews and focus groups', *Key Methods in Geography* 9(3), 143–156.
- Grobbeelaar, J. & Breed, G. (eds.), 2016, *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*, AOSIS, Cape Town.
- Guile, D., 2013, 'Learning across contexts', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 38(3), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2006.00193.x>
- Heitink, G., 1999, *Practical theology: History, theory, action domains: Manual for practical theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hunt, S.J., 2003, *Alternative Religions. A sociological Introduction*, Ashgate, Hampshire.
- King, M., 2006, *Presence-centred youth ministry*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Knoetze, H., 2015, 'Together towards life and Evangelii Gaudium. Implications for African child theology today', *Missionalia* 43(2), 218–231. <https://doi.org/10.7832/43-2-96>
- Krueger, A.R., 1994, *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Loder, E., 2015, 'Understanding focus groups', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(7), 35–60.
- Mountain, V., 2011, 'Four links between child theology and children spirituality', *International Journal of Children Spirituality* 16(3), 261–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2011.617729>
- Nel, M., 2000, *Youth ministry: An inclusive congregational approach*, Kitskopie, Pretoria.
- Osmer, R.R., 2008, *Practical theology: An introduction*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Patton, M.Q., 1990, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, 2nd edn., Sage, Inc, Newbury Park, CA.
- Piper, J., 1999, "'Disaffected" young people: Problems for mentoring', *Mentoring & Tutoring* 7(2), 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361126990070203>
- Purves, A., 2004, *Reconstructing pastoral theology: A Christological foundation*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.
- Richards, O., 1998, *Children's ministry: Nurturing faith within the family of God*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Roberto, J. & Pfiffner, K., 2007, 'Best practices in children's faith formation', *Lifelong Faith* 1(6), 39–46.
- Rogers, B., 2011, "'They told me I had this personality disorder... All of a sudden I was wasting their time": Personality disorder and the inpatient experience', *Journal of Mental Health* 20(3), 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2011.556165>
- Root, A. & Dean, K.C., 2011, *The theological turn in youth ministry*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Ross, C., 2007, 'Being an intergenerational congregation', *Issues in Christian Education* 41(2), 24–32.
- Ross, P., 2012, *Messy church: A multigenerational mission for God's family*, David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Strommen, M.P. & Hardel, R.A., 2000, *Passing on the faith: A radical new model for youth and family ministry*, Mary's Press, Winona, MN.
- Ward, P., 2017, *Introducing practical theology: Mission, ministry, and the life of the church*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Weber, S., 2015, 'A (South) African voice on youth ministry research: Powerful or powerless?', *HTS Theological Studies* 71(2), 01–06. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2973>
- White, K.J. & Willmer, H., 2006, *An introduction to child theology*, Child Theology Movement, London.
- Willow, D. & Swinton, J. 2000, *Spiritual dimensions of pastoral care: Practical theology in a multidisciplinary context*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.