

# Spiritual Retreats: Implications for Practical Christian Living

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual retreats have a long history steeped in religious tradition and generally involve a separation from everyday life and entering into a new temporary experience. Retreats have been a means of help for people in all spheres of life, providing favourable outcomes such as spiritual growth and restoration. This study utilized Attention Restoration Theory and Activity, Setting, Experience and Benefit (ASEB) framework to explore the implication of spiritual retreat activities and experiences on Christian growth indicators, i.e., in the areas of establishing a deeper relationship with God, gaining a fuller understanding of self, applying personal faith in troubling life situations, and finding fulfilment in reaching out to fellowship with others. Data from 115 study participants were analysed using a mixed-method approach and demonstrated evidence of the beneficial effects of spiritual retreats on Christian growth. Spiritual retreats were shown to have a significant and beneficial impact on participants' Christian growth, particularly in the areas of abiding in Christ, living by the Bible and biblical principles, growing in faith and prayer, fellowshiping with other Christians, and service to God. The practical and theoretical implications of the findings of the study for pastors, church leaders, retreat centre facilitators as well as the general Christian community are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Spiritual retreats, Christianity, Christian growth, Renewal

## INTRODUCTION

Christianity has been described, not only, as a mere organized system of faith but also as a pattern of life (Alva, 2016). A Christian is someone who decides to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour by putting Christ's teachings into practice. As a result, a Christian offers his or her life to be refashioned according to Christianity's core demands and mandate. This may explain why modern charismatic and para-church movements demonstrate a strong yearning for God, to know His fullness and also entertain the desire to know His plans for their lives (Alva, 2016; Hocken, 2004; Lindhardt, 2018). According to Kessler (2006), the Christian charismatic movement is a truly religious phenomenon that influences all parts of a person's life since it is considered a "means of coping with the problems of modernization processes" by many people (Kessler, 2006, p. 4). This shows that at the centre of Christianity is a comprehensive transformation of life (Alva, 2016).

After becoming born again (also known as the new birth; as described in John Chapter 3), the Christian's life is meant to be marked by continuing transformation. A Christian's baptism marks his death to old ways of life and his rebirth to a new way of life once he has been born again (Alva, 2015). However, many Christians find it difficult to live a real and sincere Christian life in today's world, despite being reborn to a new and "heaven-worthy" life (Beyers, 2014). To a considerable extent, the impact of contemporary civilization and secularization in today's world appears to weaken religious authority and spiritual experiences (Berg, 2004; Beyers, 2014). According to Alva (2016), modern scientific and technological achievements, which are essential components of today's society, have always been regarded as anti-religious and unable to satisfy inner spiritual needs.

To reduce any negative effects of civilization and changing societal demands on their spiritual development or religious obligations, many historical and contemporary Christians resort to absolute or partial withdrawal from society, mundane lifestyles, or daily activities believed to prevent them from focusing on serving and pleasing God (Domenick Jr, 2018). A spiritual retreat has been considered an ecclesial practice in historic and modern-day Christianity which helps Christians to focus on spiritual renewal and to “keep the fire burning”, even in a rapidly changing world (Aubrey, 2014; Dietrich and Gross, 2017; Griebel, 2014). According to Ampaw-Asiedu (2010) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2007), the goal of these withdrawals (or retreats) to solitary places has been to “wait on God” or to encounter God in some supernatural way.

Historically, retreats provide a significant experience of conversion and create a good starting point for Christians to do more sustained work on their faith and spiritual lives (Beyers, 2014). Dietrich and Gross (2017) assert that retreats serve individuals or groups of believers who wish to deepen their relationship with God and live a sincere Christian life, the opportunity to do so with deep conviction. In a recent study, Gill et al. (2018) found that attending retreats have spiritual, social and even cognitive benefits for retreatants. Similarly, other findings by Newman et al. (2014) suggest that participating in retreats encourages reflection on life, and is important to maintaining proper well-being. Since retreats are normally held in a quiet setting away from the usual hustle and bustle of societal life. They also provide opportunities for learning, training, and reflection (Norman and Pokorny, 2017), personal development and transformation (Heintzman, 2013; Schutte and Dreyer, 2006) as well as spiritual and psychological restoration (Ouellette et al., 2005).

However, in a post-modern and secularised world, Christians are faced with the challenge of making several choices to follow Christ rigidly, as they adopt a counter-cultural stance. The pressures of a secularised society present obstacles to Christian living as many Christians are forced to live in opposition to the norms of the majority (Alva, 2016; Aubrey, 2014). With modernization and secularization gaining strength while spiritual values and Christian growth are becoming threatened, it becomes imperative to trace and study the role of spiritual retreats to determine how they contribute to individual spiritual resolve, commitment, spiritual renewal, and deep conversion of contemporary Christians.

### **Motivation and Research Problem**

Spiritual retreats have a long history steeped in religious tradition and generally involve a separation from everyday life and entering into a new temporary experience. Retreats have been a means of help for people in all spheres of life, providing favourable outcomes such as spiritual growth and restoration (Ouellette et al., 2005), transformation (Heintzman, 2013; Voigt et al., 2011), personal development (Schutte and Dreyer, 2006), healing (Nelson-Johnson, 2016), and spiritual renewal (Chun and Chong, 2011). Spiritual retreats (either private or congregational), in historic and contemporary Christian communities, have been considered “the last-ditch defence” of the Christian faith, particularly, in a time when world secularism seeps in with an insistent tide of television, ringing telephones, traffic, advertising, and all the confusion of modern life (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007b; Gill et al., 2018; Wintering et al., 2021). Today, the average person is constantly faced with tight daily schedules, which makes them hardly have time to get to know themselves, let alone other people, or let alone foment meaningful connection with God through devotion to listen to His quiet, small voice. To the genuine Christian, this situation requires an urgent need than ever before for them to withdraw and renew their perspective (Aubrey, 2014; Gill et al., 2019).

Spiritual retreats have become very popular for individuals seeking to experience personal growth (Wintering et al., 2021). Spiritual retreat programs have developed in many religious traditions and typically incorporate a variety of elements including ceremonial practices like prayer, meditation, and self-reflection, with countless people engaging in such retreats each year (Wintering et al., 2021). Spiritual retreats have been associated with spiritual transformation, and other positive emotional responses, including a reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improvements in well-being and other life-changing consequences of retreats (Falkenström, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2002). Moreover, Naidoo et al. (2018) recently

reported that a variety of retreat programs are associated with both short- and long-term improvements in spiritual, and other psychological measures. Montero-Marin et al. (2016) find that these spiritual and psychological improvements may be observed in those who are both novices and those who have had previous experiences with various spiritual practices.

There are various dimensions of spiritual retreats, such as prayer, meditation, as well as other practices that help retreatants attain some fulfilment (Wintering et al., 2021). Yet, the majority of studies have focused only on the short- and long-term effects of meditation practice on retreatants. According to Newberg et al. (2010) and Saggar et al. (2015), meditation, as one of the popular practices of spiritual retreats has both structural and functional changes on retreatants.

However, on a broader scale, there have been several publications on how retreats contribute to both spiritual experiences and psychological changes of retreatants (Beauregard and Paquette, 2006; Johnson et al., 2014; Wintering et al., 2021). In a psychological experiment, Beauregard et al. (2009) found that meditative retreats resulted in changes in the regions of the human brain known to be involved either in positive emotions, visual mental imagery, attention or spiritual experiences. Relatedly, Gill et al. (2018) explored the restorative benefits of spiritual retreats on some Christian clergymen and found that spiritual retreats have a significant and positive impact on retreatants' mental state and mental well-being and that annual spiritual retreats could be utilised both as a preventive technique to guard against mental fatigue and burnout, as well as an opportunity to support those whose mental wellbeing requires intervention.

Similarly, Chandler (2009) after investigating pastoral burnout and the impact of spiritual retreats for spiritual renewal found that certain specific spiritual practices, i.e., praying, fasting, and taking retreats are significant if Christians and Christian ministers must nurture an ongoing and renewing relationship with God to maintain life balance, reduce stress, and avoid burnout. Further, Lips-Wiersma (2006) applied the relevance of spiritual retreats to organizational culture and found significant value in organisations providing employees with structured retreats and reflection time. Participation in spiritual retreats was found to enable employees to become (re)acquainted with themselves, prioritise deeper values, make conscious choices based on such values and re-assess the balance between different roles and priorities (Lips-Wiersma, 2006). Despite these findings, at present, it is unclear how far spiritual retreats contribute to spiritual growth when applied to the Christian. Not much is established in the literature on how attending retreats might be able to expand the broader understanding of religious and spiritual phenomena, specifically, spiritual growth and development, especially in the Christian community.

Moreover, previous studies, as cited earlier, were founded on different dimensions of spiritual retreat such as meditation and yoga, which may be ungirded by fundamental guidelines unsupported in the Christian approach to retreat and meditation (Jain, 2014; Willis, 2015). The present study, by focusing solely on Christian growth, adopts a spiritual retreat common in historic and contemporary Christian lifestyles, e.g., the Ignatian retreat (Fleming, 2011; Tetlow, 2011). The Ignatian retreat has a long history with a well-developed structure, and the likelihood of creating strong spiritual experiences for retreatants, in a relatively short period (Wintering et al., 2021). The retreat is based on certain spiritual exercises developed by St. Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus known as the Jesuits. The Ignatian spiritual retreat utilizes a variety of elements including living in silence, performing prayer and meditation, worship, and personal reflection. The Ignatian retreat also has a specific Christian perspective focusing on topics during contemplative periods including sin, God's mercy, the life and passion of Jesus, and God's love as a means to facilitate spiritual growth or transformation. The transformation can come in the form of a deeper understanding of self, of one's relationship with God, and of the larger understanding of meaning and purpose in the universe (Fleming, 2011; Salai, 2016; Tetlow, 2011).

### **Aims and focus of the study**

This study attempts to investigate the potential of spiritual retreat experiences in improving Christian

growth. The study aims to explore the contributions of spiritual retreat attendance to Christian development, in the areas of establishing a deeper relationship with God, gaining a fuller understanding of self, applying personal faith in troubling life situations, and finding fulfilment in reaching out to fellowship with others. The study also explores the different implications of spiritual retreats on the measures of Christian growth, as well as compares the types of benefits or implications of retreats reported by participants. More specifically, this paper addresses the following questions:

- Does attending and participating in spiritual retreats have a measurable contribution to a retreatant's overall Christian growth experience?
- How do participants perceive the influence of attending spiritual retreats on their personal Christian growth and spiritual development?

## THEORY AND CONCEPTS

### Definitions of Retreat

Generally speaking, spiritual retreats describe time or days set apart where an individual or group of persons observe moments of quietness, rest, and solitude with God. Retreats are believed to remove the retreatants from noise and distraction, and into a place of spiritual refreshing and renewing, as they enter into the presence of God, and allow God to nourish their souls. For generations, people have gone on spiritual retreats to encounter God and experience spiritual renewal (Marks, 2016).

The Webster dictionary defines the word “retreat” as:

1. an act or process of withdrawing especially from what is difficult, dangerous, or disagreeable;
2. a period of group withdrawal for prayer, meditation, study, or instruction under a director, or a period in which a person goes away to pray, think quietly, or study;
3. a place of privacy or safety
4. the process of receding from a position or state attained.

In normal parlance, the very word, “retreat”, may suggest withdrawal due to weakness or vulnerability, however, it also represents vitality and a source of strength (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007b; Gill et al., 2019). Just as an athlete may withdraw into long hours of training and seclusion to gain fortitude and strength, soldiers falling back to re-strategize to launch a victorious attack, or an archer withdraws a bowstring before releasing it to fly an arrow, retreats connote very positive outcomes. A retreat is a natural principle; for instance, nature or the ecosystem retreats in winter and bursts with a new life in spring, farm fields are put through fallow periods to lead to higher and abundant harvest in the next planting season, and the human body rests to regain strength. The rhythm of retreats, signifying not only withdrawal but also strength is evidenced in basic life principles, just as God ordained the sabbath rest to help man renew his soul for the week ahead (Gill et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2006).

Although retreats have had a long association with a certain type of ascetic withdrawal under rigid leadership, the term has in recent years covered a great variety of occasions ranging from business meetings to workshops, to strategy meetings, to prayer meetings (Gill et al., 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018). Jenkins (2006) and Jones (2000) note that retreats are for the performance of certain spiritual exercises, thus, the retreatants are not merely spectators, nor audiences, but performers in the different activities that take place for the retreat. In a busy world, a retreat must be a strategic withdrawal. Retreats are not held simply as a getaway from it all. There is always a purpose for getting away and that purpose or strategy must always involve coming back. Everything involved in getting away and all that is done while away finds its focus in

coming back (Jenkins, 2006).

The concept of retreat can be further explained by employing the words *withdrawal*, *worship*, *perspective*, and *strategy*; suggesting that retreats are strategic withdrawals where believers get away from regular daily living (i.e., *withdrawal*) to deepen their relationship of sonship with the Heavenly Father (i.e., *worship*), to reflect on their lives from their Heavenly Father's perspective by deliberately ushering in one by one the issues and questions of their lives for careful examination through reflection and meditation, and discussion or dialogue with others (i.e., *perspective*), so as to return to their regular lives with a renewed sense of vocation and direction for living as disciples of God on earth (Gill et al., 2019; Jansen and Lang, 2012).

Moreover, the term retreat is applied to occasions that take place away from the scenes of daily living (Jansen and Lang, 2012). A retreat is "a place for quiet reflection and rejuvenation, an opportunity to regain good health, and/or it can mean a time for spiritual reassessment and renewal, either alone, in silence or a group" (Kelly, 2010, p. 109). Thus, retreats, in this sense, connotes going away or withdrawing to a place. Regarding the level of religious attachment to retreats, Voigt et al. (2010) found that spiritual retreats can be "non-religious or religious, but always include meditation in their various forms and focus on spiritual development or enlightenment" (p.547). Although retreats may vary in length and purpose, they follow a similar overall format in that participants travel away from their usual environment to a retreat venue; spend time in private contemplation; may attend group sessions; have simple healthy meals provided; and may have some minimal interaction with other retreatants (Norman & Pokorny, 2017).

### **Retreats: Biblical and Theological Perspectives**

The theological background for retreats, from a biblical perspective, is worth considering because it helps in understanding the variety of persons who engage in retreats and why they do so. The character of the individuals is as varied as are the reasons for which they decide to go on a retreat, as such, whereas some retreats are self-imposed, as the individual seeks the will of God or for the strength to carry out the will of God, other retreatants only find themselves placed in the act of retreat because of their impulsive actions, e.g., Jacob in the Bible (Gill et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 2000). This section, thus, presents a brief discussion of some biblical accounts of retreats.

#### **Jacob's Retreat**

After wrongfully desiring the promised blessing which had been given to Abraham and passed to Isaac, Jacob's father, and claiming it from Esau through deceit and trickery, Jacob became threatened with death by the wrath of his brother Esau, forcing him to flee his home and family and making a journey into another land. In her book, *Prophets and Patriarchs*, Ellen G. White, commented that Jacob set off on his lonely trek with a very disturbed heart. He was afraid that he had lost the original blessing that God had intended to give him for all time. He scarcely dared to pray since the gloom of despair pushed upon his spirit. But he was so lonely that he felt a need for God's protection like he had never felt before. With sorrow and intense humiliation, he confessed his wrongdoing and begged God for proof that he had not been completely abandoned. As years passed, he journeyed back to the place of his birth to encounter his brother, whom he had cheated. After sending his family ahead across the ford of the river, Jacob tarried alone behind, to spend the night alone in prayer with God. This experience of a retreat by Jacob was one of physical stress as he wrestled with the angel of the Lord seeking a blessing and forgiveness for his sin. He had fastened his trembling grasp upon the promises of God, and the heart of infinite love could not turn away from the sinner's plea. The retreats of Jacob were consummated by the acceptance of God, of this His erring son.

#### **Moses' Retreat**

Moses' preparation on the Sinai Mountain ranges was a period of protracted retreat when he found himself

in a self-imposed exile, after which he took the task that God had promised to perform into his own hands.

So, Moses made a retreat into the fields surrounded by nature to listen to God's word. Moses had learned a lot that he needed to unlearn. The forces that had surrounded him in Egypt had made a strong impact on his maturing mind and had shaped his habits and character to some extent. These impressions might be removed with time, a change of environment, and communication with God. And, although he was surrounded by mountains and alone with God In a meeting with God, Moses' pride and independence were washed away. The fruits of Egypt's ease and luxury vanished in the harsh simplicity of his wilderness life. Moses became patient, respectful, and modest, meek above all others on the face of the planet, yet strong in confidence in Jacob's tremendous God.

### **Elijah's Retreat**

After displaying unwavering strength and triumph over the king, priests, and people on Mount Carmel, Elijah the prophet succumbed to despair and departed his place of abode due to Jezebel's threats. Even though God did not abandon His prophet, he was forced to start on a journey to a remote location. During this time, God sent an angel from heaven with food to keep him going in the wilderness. After consuming the refreshment, Elijah was able to travel for forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, where he sought sanctuary in a cave. God noticed and knew Elijah's place of sanctuary and escape in the cave (White, 2015).

### **John The Baptist's Retreat**

The necessity for calm and solitude during John the Baptist's retreat was a preparation for the task that needed to be done for God. John made his home in a remote area surrounded by desolate hills, wild ravines, and rocky caverns. It was his choice to sacrifice life's pleasures and conveniences in favour of the harsh discipline of the wilderness. He might study the lessons of nature, revelation, and providence here, uninterrupted by the clamour of the world (White, 2021, 2017).

### **Jesus Christ's Retreat**

The retreats of Jesus Christ, notably the first encounter following His baptism in Jordan, are the most important of all retreats. Jesus Christ was pushed or led into the desert, to be alone, to consider His mission and task, rather than choosing to go on a retreat. He was to gird Himself for the bloodstained path He had to tread by fasting and praying. The brightness of the Father enveloped him. He was exalted beyond human infirmity as He was absorbed in connecting with God. Throughout His brief career with the disciples on earth, Jesus could always be seen heading out to the shady trees of the mountain side or the lakeside to either pray alone or to educate and prepare His followers for the task they were to accomplish.

### **The Disciples' Retreats**

Jesus' followers learnt a lot from Him, notably about retreats. "*Come apart by yourself to a desolate location and rest a while*", Jesus Christ commanded to His followers in Mark 6:31. This was following their return from a lengthy missionary trek. The disciples, like the patriarchs of old, wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives in order to commune with Christ, nature, and their emotions. After rising from the grave and preparing to leave His followers for His heavenly abode, Jesus made His last retreat with His disciples. Furthermore, the disciples' experience in the upper room following Jesus' resurrection highlights key features of seclusion. They prayed earnestly for the ability to meet men and continue the work Jesus had started with them. Those days of preparation, as they observed Jesus' command to "tarry in Jerusalem", were days of deep heart-searching, and thirst for God and His power (White, 2020).

## Retreats: Historical Perspectives

In a classical sense, the early developments of retreats date back to the era of the Catholic movement (Jenkins, 2006). Roman Catholics for years have conducted retreats in monasteries and retreat houses scattered throughout the world. Years after, St. Ignatius Loyola emerged in 1548 with his 'spiritual exercises' which gave an extraordinary impulse to a retreat movement at the time. These 'spiritual exercises' by Ignatius were designed for followers of his Jesuit order. Since then, classical retreats became usually centred on the use of these exercises, and in silent contemplation to achieve solitude or aloneness with God. Individual meditation and prayer took place in a quiet secluded spot where the retreatant could withdraw for rest, refuge, and shelter. The classic silent retreat of today still uses the spiritual exercises of Ignatius, designed to embrace all means of disposing the soul towards ridding itself of every ordinate affection, and, having removed them, of seeking and finding the divine will for the salvation of the soul in the disposition of its own life (Jenkins, 2006).

Besides, St. Benedict and his followers also appointed a slightly different approach to retreats by exploring the spiritual life by laying the primary emphasis upon contemplation of God and from there moving to the study of our life and its needs. St. Charles Borromeo, later, began organizing group retreats by following St. Ignatius' spiritual exercises. St. Charles Borromeo retreats were designed for both the clergy and laymen. St. Vincent de Paul spent a lifetime propagating retreats, not only for the clergy but also for the laity in 1634. Later, St. Paul of the Cross in 1771 brought women into the cloister to make retreats. In 1856 the Church of England conducted what was perhaps its first group retreat, leading to a wide propagation of laymen's retreat movement in the early twentieth century in Europe. From its providential springs, the retreat movement for laymen has begun to cover all of America. The movement has been continuing at an accelerated pace right up to the present.

As the layman retreat movement expanded, it was progressively questioned if a retreat, to be a true retreat, had to follow classical lines. It was discovered that retreats could be structured to take into account the concern for community, communion with neighbours as well as with God, the finding of God in His world as well as in His word, encounter with the Lord among persons in need, and in the dialogue, "where two or three are met together in His name". Thus, music, singing, testimony, and open confession were introduced into retreats. The worship need not be confined to liturgical practices of the past but could break out in free expression and celebration. The movement toward greater freedom was evident in early Methodist retreats in England, where free prayers were added and often substituted for the completely structured, liturgical services. This gave way to other dimensions of Christianity and retreat movements such as the charismatic movements and the protestant retreats, which sprung up mostly in communities in the United States (Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 2000).

## Theoretical Foundation

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations, activities, and implications of personal spiritual retreats for growth among Christians. Spiritual retreats provide an opportunity for restoration, transformation and personal development (Gill et al., 2019). Two theories are considered instructive for this study: the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and the Activity, Setting, Experience and Benefit (ASEB) Theory. The study uses Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory to explore the different environmental attributes, activities, and experiences of spiritual retreats that lead to transformative and Christian growth outcomes. The theory has been used by scholars to explore restoration and transformation within various settings such as religious site visitations (Bond et al., 2015; Herzog et al., 2010; Ouellette et al., 2005) and vacations (Lehto, 2013). The theory is useful for exploring retreat environments and experiences (Ouellette et al., 2005).

The ART posits that prolonged mental effort that is part of everyday life and work often results in a diminished capacity to focus attention, with consequences such as the inability to make decisions, solve

problems, maintain a healthy perspective, and perform appropriately (Kaplan, 1995). As such, spending time in a restorative environment enables an individual to rest and recover as the mind and body are retracted from the tight schedule and forced attention demanded in the regular day (Berto, 2005). Kaplan (1995) argues that, within such a relaxed environment, there ought to be some physical, social, and temporal characteristics and activities to promote recovery and restoration, while at the same time, “eliminating physical, social and temporal conditions that impose unwanted demands” (Hartig and Staats, 2003, p. 103).

Moreover, whereas research examining the actual experiences of visitors at religious sites is rare, Bond et al. (2015) applied the Activity, Setting, Experience and Benefit (ASEB) framework to understand and explore the benefits experienced by some visitors to three religious heritage sites in the UK. Their findings demonstrated that visitors had the experience of “relaxing and finding peace” as well as spiritual, cognitive, and social benefits. Bond et al. (2015) posit that while visits to religious heritage sites can be spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively rewarding, the central experience and subsequent benefit is an overall restoration and recovery.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Design and Sampling**

This study projects a post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledges the imperfections of all research methodologies and the impossibility of producing an objective account of reality because the interpretation and observation of research data happen almost simultaneously (Mottier, 2005). This paradigm allows the production of stronger inferences and increases the diversity of findings, through quantitative methods coupled with qualitative approaches (Park et al., 2020). The mixed-methods approach was considered important to most effectively address the research problem as it enabled quantitative findings to be more fully understood alongside qualitative insights (Creswell and Clark, 2017), describing how Christian growth and spiritual retreat experiences unfold.

### **Participants and Procedure**

A total of 150 individuals from different Christian denominations within four Christian districts in Accra were invited to participate in this study. Participants were asked to complete an online self-administered survey questionnaire that featured demographic questions as well as specific questions based on the objectives of the study. The participants emerged from a variety of Christian denominations, namely, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Orthodox churches, the Pentecostal churches, and the Charismatic Churches. Out of the 150 individuals invited, 115 successfully responded and participated in the study (response rate = 88%). All responses were combined into a single data file and anonymized.

### **Instruments**

The study used an instrument and a scale to measure the post-retreat experiences of recruited participants. Measuring a complex and theologically challenging concept like spiritual development and transformation can be daunting, the study follows Orthner’s (2021) model of Christian growth and transformation measurement questions, which are closely aligned with the teachings of Jesus and the work of God’s Holy Spirit (Orthner, 2021). The research instrument for data collection and interviews for the study was developed by the researcher using Orthner’s (2021) model and the Spiritual Growth Assessment Process Questionnaire developed by the Lifeway Christian Resources Research Division (2013).

### **Measuring Retreat Attendance**

Data were collected on participants’ retreat experiences. A 5-point Likert scale containing 4 items was used



to measure participants' experience of retreats (=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

### Christian Growth

To measure the effects of retreat attendance on Christian growth, a 34-item scale was included in the questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale was adapted using Orthner's (2021) model measuring Christian growth and the Spiritual Growth Assessment Process Questionnaire developed by the Lifeway Christian Resources Research Division (2013). The scale had the following measures for Christian Growth: Abiding in Christ (AC), Living by the Bible (LBB), Growth in Prayer and Faith (PF), Ability to Fellowship with other believers (FB), and the Ability to Share One's Faith and Minister to Others (SFG). Each of these measures or subscales was made of different questions included in the questionnaire (descriptive summary of items of each subscale are shown in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 below). To aid analysis and easy interpretation of findings, composite variables were created for each subscale, i.e., AC, LBB, PF, FB, and SFG (Cronbach alpha = 0.86, 0.85, 0.83, 0.75, and 0.80, respectively). Descriptive summaries of AC, LBB, PF, FB, and SFG are displayed in Table 7 below. Lastly, a second-level composite variable was further created with each subscale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84).

### Data Analysis

The study adopted Michael Downey's framework for analysing and studying Christian spirituality and spiritual experiences. In his framework, Downey (1997) argued that a critical analysis of spirituality or spiritual experiences must be preceded by a vivid description of the experiences, as well as a constructive interpretation of the experiences. Downey argues that establishing insights into faith and ritual experiences before conducting a critical analysis affords the researcher insights into undergirding scenarios in spiritual experiences. Thirdly, Downey proposes a constructive interpretation of the individual's or group's spiritual experiences, i.e., identifying relationships between believers' past and present views of life and Christian spirituality, to throw light on their present spiritual experience. Downey proposes that religious practices and experiences need to be critically and vigorously interpreted to ascertain their true meanings. Thus, thematic, and statistical analyses were done to make insights from the data in order to realise the objectives of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic Data

Two-way descriptive cross-tabulation with measures of association was used to calculate and group the frequencies of all categorical demographic variables. The descriptive data regarding all 115 participants who completed the survey instrument are presented in Table 1. The results show that more males (74%) participated in the study than females (26%). 69 out of the 115 were from charismatic denominations (i.e., 60%), making charismatic Christians the majority of respondents. The dominant age within the sample was represented from 20 to 40 years, i.e., a total of 74 per cent. Regarding previous retreat experiences, 95% of participants indicated past attendance while only 74% have attended retreats within the last 18 months.

Table 1 Participants Demographic Information by denomination

	Ang.	Method.	Presby.	Evangel.	Charisma.	Apost.	Pentecost.	Total (%)
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	3 (100%)	4 (40%)	6 (50%)	5 (100%)	51 (74%)	3 (100%)	13 (100%)	85 (74%)
Female	0 (0%)	6 (60%)	6 (50%)	0 (0%)	18 (26%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (26%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>115</b>

Age								
20-30	3 (100%)	3 (30%)	7 (58%)	0 (0%)	12 (17%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	28 (24%)
30-40	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (42%)	5 (100%)	42 (61%)	0 (0%)	5 (38%)	57 (50%)
40-50	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (7%)
50-60	0 (0%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (10%)	0 (0%)	8 (62%)	17(15%)
60+	0 (0%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (4%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>115</b>
Attended any retreats previously (personal or church retreats)?								
No	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	2 (15%)	6 (5%)
Yes	3 (100%)	10 (100%)	12 (100%)	5 (100%)	65 (94%)	3 (100%)	11 (85%)	109 (95%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>115</b>
Attended any retreats recently, i.e., in the last 18 months? *								
No	0 (0%)	8 (80%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	7 (11%)	3 (100%)	8 (73%)	28(26%)
Yes	3 (100%)	2 (20%)	10 (83%)	5 (100%)	58 (89%)	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	81 (74%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>109*</b>

Table Column Key: Ang. = Anglican; Method. = Methodist; Presby. = Presbyterian; Evangel. = Evangelical; Charisma. = Charismatic; Apost. = Apostolic; Pentecost = Pentecostal Churches.

\* Indicates some missing data points (Total Observation = 115; Missing observations = None)

The results also show that members of charismatic Christian denominations attended more retreats previously (n=69, i.e., 60% of the total sample) and in the last 18 months (n=65, i.e., 57% of the total sample) than the other denominations. Further, Pearson’s Chi-square tests (n=115) results show that there are no significant differences in gender [(6) = 17.99, p = 0.006]. However, there were statistically significant differences in age of participants [(24) = 120.08, p = 0.000], with a higher proportion of persons aged between 20-40 years completing the questionnaire.

### Descriptive Results

Preliminary descriptive analysis was done to ascertain the mean distributions within the data. An initial descriptive summary was conducted to understand the mean distribution within the data. Table 2 presents the mean scores of each subscale. The mean scores for items included in each subscale are also presented in Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Christian Growth Indicators (AC, LBB, PF, FB, SFG)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
AC	4.410	.502
LBB	4.406	.488
PF	4.384	.499
FB	4.138	.476
SFG	4.304	.499

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

The descriptive analysis shows that participants report a high effect of retreat attendance on their ability to abide in Christ with a mean scale score of 4.41 (see Table 2 and Table 3). Participants were more able to

live their lives according to the principles of the Bible after retreats, mean scale score of 4.40 (see Table 2 and Table 4).

Table 3 Mean Scores of Participants Ability to Abide in Christ After Retreats (AC)

ABIDING IN CHRIST AFTER RETREATS	Mean	Std. Dev.
After attending retreats:		
My walk with Christ is motivated more by love than duty or fear.	4.19	1.084
I can spend and look forward to regular quiet time with Christ.	4.38	0.691
I am more conscious of seeking Christ's guidance first in making choices.	4.45	0.645
I experience a life change as a result of my worship during the retreats.	4.59	0.495
I am more sensitive and able to follow God's leading in an area of my life.	4.45	0.822
I demonstrate a greater desire to build God's kingdom.	4.3	0.855
I more easily trust Christ to help me through any problem I face.	4.57	0.599
I am generally more confident of God's love and provision for me.	4.42	0.785
I experience peace, contentment, and joy rather than worry and anxiety.	4.31	0.766

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

Table 4 Mean Scores of Participants Ability to Live by the Bible After Retreats (LBB)

LIVING BY THE BIBLE AND BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES	Mean	Std. Dev.
After attending retreats:		
I am challenged and able to read and study the Bible for myself.	4.4	0.747
I am more confident in the Bible as God's word provides His instructions for my life.	4.37	0.801
I am able to evaluate cultural ideas and lifestyles from a biblical perspective.	4.18	0.669
I am empowered to replace impure or inappropriate thoughts with God's word.	4.55	0.585
I am challenged to be honest and truthful in my actions and conversations.	4.49	0.675
I am more able to adjust when the Bible exposes an area of my life needing change.	4.36	0.586
I am challenged at retreats to use the Bible as a guide for the way I think and act.	4.5	0.647

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

Also, the descriptive results indicate Christians who attend retreats are more able to grow in their prayer life and walk of faith, trusting and depending on God daily, mean = 4.38 (Table 2, see Table 5 for more details). Participants were also found to be more active in fruitful fellowship with other Christians, allowing other Christians to hold them accountable for their growth, forgive others more easily and become more selfless and humbler in their relationship with other people, mean = 4.13 (Table 2, more details in Table 6). Moreover, results also indicate that more Christians who attended retreats are more able to be given service to God, in the form of service through ministry and using their resources and spiritual gifts to bless other people, mean = 4.30 (Table 2, see Table 7 for more details).

Table 5 Mean Scores of Participants Growth in Faith and Prayer After Retreats (PF)

GROWTH IN PRAYER AND FAITH	Mean	Std. Dev.
After attending retreats:		
My prayers focus on discovering God's will more than expressing my needs.	4.61	0.489
I am able to trust God to answer when I pray and wait patiently for His timing.	4.52	0.554
I am able to spend as much time listening to God as talking to Him.	4.33	0.746
I am more able to completely depend on God for everything in my life.	4.53	0.537
I am motivated to partake regularly in group prayer times.	4.01	0.928
I am able to maintain an attitude of prayer throughout each day.	4.29	0.724

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

Table 6 Participants' Fellowship Life After Retreats (FB)

FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHER BELIEVERS	Mean	Std. Dev.
After attending retreats:		
I admit my errors in relationships and humbly seek forgiveness from the one I've hurt.	4.28	0.636
I am able to allow other Christians to hold me accountable for my spiritual growth.	4.03	0.616
My experience from retreats has helped me to place the interest of others above mine	4.04	0.693
I have been able to forgive others when their actions harm me or when they wrong me.	4.17	0.714

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

Table 7 Participants' ability and readiness to serve God and share their faith (SFG)

SHARE FAITH AND SERVE GOD MORE READILY	Mean	Std. Dev.
Retreats have equipped me and inspired me to share my faith in Christ with non-believers.	4.25	0.669
Retreats have helped me gain a better understanding of my faith such that I am able to remain consistent and firm in my testimony when confronted about my faith.	4.33	0.653
Through retreats, I have been prepared to share my testimony at any time.	4.06	0.684
Retreats have helped me understand my spiritual gifts and how to use those gifts to serve God.	4.35	0.832
Retreats have prepared me to expect God to use me every day in His kingdom work.	4.51	0.633
Retreats have helped me to regularly dedicate my time to a ministry/department in my church.	4.32	0.768

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Note: Mean scores of 4.0 or higher on the five-point scale represent a high effect.

### The Effects of Spiritual Retreats on Christian Growth (CG)

To explore the data further, parametric statistical techniques of multivariate analysis of variances (i.e., MANOVA) were used to compare relationships between retreat participation (RF) and Christian growth

(CG) and to test the null hypothesis. The MANOVA analysis used the sum of mean scores of Christian growth indicators as dependent variables (see Table 8), and retreat participation variables as independent variables (i.e., number of recent retreats attended (RF1), duration of each retreat session (RF2), number of retreats attended in the past, and the frequency of retreats in the last 18 months(RF4).

Table 8 MANOVA Tests: Effects of Retreat Attendance on Christian Growth

Source	Wilk's Lambda	df	F (df1)	F (df2)	F-Stats	Prob>F
Model	0.267	23	115.0	264.9	18.79	.000***
Retreat Factors (RF)						
RF-1	0.202	10	50.0	245.1	22.08	.000***
RF-2	0.829	7	35.0	225.4	19.88	.000***
RF-3	0.268	3	15.0	146.7	18.49	.000***
RF-4	0.293	3	15.0	146.7	17.44	.000***

\*\*\* Statistically significant effect is reached

The results indicate that, overall, Christian Growth mean scores were significantly higher for individuals who attended retreats, and have (have had) the culture of frequently attending spiritual retreats. The results demonstrate a statistically significant difference in participants' Christian growth based on each participant's retreat experience (*Wilk's Lambda* = 0.267, *F*=18.79, *p*<.001). The resulting Wilk's Lambda of 0.04 with an associated statistical significance level (p-value) lesser than 0.001, leads us to reject the null hypothesis of spiritual retreats having no significant contribution to participants' Christian growth. The study, thus, accepts the alternate hypothesis of spiritual retreats having significant effects on retreatants' Christian growth.

The analysis further revealed significant effects of retreat attendance on participants' ability to abide in Christ (*F*(4,53) = 6.89, *p*<.001), participants' growth in prayer and faith (*F*(23,57) = 6.76, *p*<.001), participants ability to live according to the Bible and Biblical principles (*F*(23,57) = 10.86, *p*<.001), participants ability and interest in fellowshiping with other Christians (*F*(23,57) = 6.44, *p*<.001), as well as their willingness to serve God and participate in ministry (*F*(23,57) = 8.39, *p*<.001).

### Retreatants' perception of the spiritual benefits of attending retreats

Furthermore, the study collected qualitative data on participants' perceptions of the influence of attending spiritual retreats on their personal Christian growth and spiritual development. Data collated from participants' responses to open-ended questions were analysed in order to appreciate how participants perceived the impact of retreats on their Christian growth. In the presentation below, participant IDs or codes were used to achieve anonymity and protect participants' privacy. Open-ended comments extracted from the questionnaire data have not been classified or identified.

In the qualitative responses, participants acknowledged their experience at spiritual retreats as an opportunity for "growth in Christ", "to get closer to God", "to get closer and experience the power of the Holy Spirit", "to be revived and renewed in the understanding of self and the world", as well as the opportunity to "worship together with other Christians" and "experience and reflect on the Holy Scriptures in a whole new way". The most common themes that emerged from the qualitative data were organized to reflect the Christian growth indicators developed in this study, i.e., *abiding in Christ, living by the Bible and Biblical principles, growth in faith and prayer, growth in fellowship with other Christians, and readiness and willingness to serve God and engage in ministering to others.*

## Abiding in Christ

For this indicator, participants were reviewed to understand whether attending retreats have made any changes to their motivation to walk with Christ (i.e., to be motivated more by love than duty or fear), how they spend time with God, consciously seek God's guidance in making daily decisions, become more sensitive to God's leading through the Holy Spirit, become confident in God's love and provision, as well as to experience God's peace and joy rather than anxiety and worry. The majority of participants overtly reported a deeply significant effect of spiritual retreats on their experience and walk with Christ.

"...retreat has helped me to fall more deeply in love with God". [Participant CG028]

"I have surely established a more intimate relationship with Jesus as a result of the incredibly personal experiences I have had at retreats". [Participant CG089]

*"Going for retreats has made a tremendous difference in my life. Previously, although I knew that God loved me, somehow it just never soaked in, and I was not serious about my relationship with Jesus. One day, my pastor encouraged me to come for one of our church retreats at Aburi. After learning from the things taught..., personal reflection and reading different portions of the Bible for myself, now I truly know and deeply believe that God loves me so very much. Now, I just want to walk with Him and say, 'yes' to whatever He asks of me or wants me to do".* [Participant CG072]

*"At the peak of COVID-19, when everyone was troubled and not knowing what comes next in the world, my family went on a retreat to wait on God as a family. The encounter was very helpful, as we revisited God's promises, prayed, and worshipped. After the retreat, daydreaming and worrying about the near and distant future became less and less prevalent in my thinking. I realised how Jesus responded to challenging times in His nature, and how much like the human I am he was. I was encouraged to trust in Him".* [Participant CG008]

*"I have observed that my Lord Jesus and the word of God becomes more and more real and meaningful to me whenever I go for spiritual hideouts, where I am alone and reflect on God and my life".* [Participant CG098]

*"It certainly has enabled my relationship with Christ to grow deeper."* [Participant CG012]

Few participants were rather not blatant and specific in verbalising the fact that retreats helped them to stay and grow in Christ. For instance, some participants noted:

*"...the last retreat I attended was very refreshing...I felt spiritually refreshed...from the experience, I felt much closer to God, and I bless God for enriching my spiritual life tremendously".* [Participant CG112]

*"I can say, every retreat I have attended has had some impact on my spiritual life as a Christian...I'm not sure how it would have turned out without them, but I know they have helped me in deepening my trust in Christ as my Lord and Saviour".* [Participant CG068]

*"...I yearn for a closeness with God, I want to spend more time in communion with the Holy Spirit. I now find myself wanting more God and dedicating time".* [Participant CG019]

## Living by the Bible and biblical principles

Another indicator of growth was for participants to report on their ability to follow biblical principles after retreats. Participants noted benefits including being challenged and able to read and study the Bible for

themselves and use the Bible as a guide for the way they think and act. For most participants, retreats have helped them gain fresh insights through meditation on God's word and teachings of the Scriptures provided during church retreats.

*"...it helps me to see ways in which I may have blocked myself from experiencing Christ's presence".* [Participant CG024]

*"Attending retreats has changed my perspective and approach to the Bible as God's true word... I've been studying various parts of the Bible on my own and with our Bible Study Fellowship."* [Participant CG096]

*"Every time I go on a silent retreat, it's as if God utilises the time to tie up all the loose ends of my winding route through life. Instead of my typical pointless reading, I am always motivated to pick up my Bible and other inspirational literature for more in-depth reading and study".* [Participant CG028]

*"Retreats have helped me realise that I can demonstrate the Gospel of Jesus and His words in my daily life. Although it can be challenging, at least now, experience has shown me that it is possible to remain conscious of God and His great love for us as we live in the real world. My greatest desire now is to live as a child of God at all times".* [Participant CG034]

### **Growth in faith and prayer**

Moreover, participants' improvements in prayer and faith were also overtly articulated or implied. Some participants have come to a greater appreciation of their faith and developed a habit of praying regularly on their own, which is something they previously found difficult to do. Others indicated new interests in participating in group prayers or prayer watches, to praying for people other than themselves.

*"...I have come to a greater appreciation of my faith, and this has led to a greater commitment to it".* [Participant CG068]

*"Every retreat I have gone for has strengthened my prayer life as well as lifted me spiritually."* [Participant CG053]

*"Retreats are a big "plus" for me...during the past few years, I have developed the habit of praying most mornings...A recent retreat I attended together with a fellowship has put prayer back in my heart...it has helped me put my life events in perspective, ...tuck in pain and disappointment to my prayer".* [Participant CG108]

### **Growth in fellowship with other Christians**

Participants also appreciated the companionship created when they went on congregational retreats. Christians are able to bond better and share their problems and challenges as Christians when they have the opportunity to fellowship together through prayer, worship, and bible study in God's presence. Retreatants have learned the habit of praying for other Christians, putting others first, trusting each other and becoming accountable for each other's success.

*"Over the years, my prayer encounters and experiences at retreats have made me develop a personal deep calling to pray for other Christians, pastors, preachers, missionaries, especially those who may be depressed, stressed, and discouraged".* [Participant CG090]

*"...I have more at peace with myself and others".* [Participant CG049]

*"I feel I am a better listener and pray for those who wish to share their stories, especially those I meet at church and my workplace"*

”. [Participant CG028]

*“It has assisted me in allowing God to work through my words and deeds while dealing with individuals in tough situations.”.* [Participant CG052]

*“...I am able to accept my weaknesses and the weaknesses of others who hurt me”.* [Participant CG012]

### **Dedication to the service of God**

Participants’ responses also suggested that they are more able to dedicate themselves to the call to serve God and His kingdom. There is a greater inclination to share the Christian faith with non-believers and to explore one’s spiritual gifts for the benefit of one’s church and God’s kingdom at large.

*“Going for retreats has made a tremendous difference in my life. Previously, although I knew that God loved me, somehow it just never soaked in, and I was not serious about my relationship with Jesus...After learning from the things taught at different retreats, personal reflection and reading different portions of the Bible for myself, I... truly know and deeply believe that God loves me so very much. Now, I just want to walk with Him and say, ‘yes’ to whatever He asks of me or wants me to do”.*[Participant CG072]

*“In the past few years, I have felt a strong call to serve others, any time I return from waiting on God”.* [Participant CG012]

*“Usually, after retreats I feel strongly that God has taken me out of my comfort zone and challenges me to serve more, give more, love more, to step out in faith”.* [Participant CG031]

*“I have learned about my spiritual gifts and my ministry two years ago when I attended a retreat together with my church and our pastors. Ever since I have become more active in helping my church in ways I can”.* [Participant CG049]

*“I am now a much more prayerful person. I am very peaceful. What joy and love I now feel for my fellow man. I just want to serve my Lord more and more, and I am so grateful for all that he has done for me. I want to repay him with the sharing of his word”.* [Participant CG002]

## **DISCUSSIONS**

This study aimed to investigate the potential of spiritual retreat experiences in improving Christian growth, specifically, the contributions of spiritual retreat attendance to Christian development, in the areas of establishing a deeper relationship with God, gaining a fuller understanding of self, applying personal faith in troubling life situations, and finding fulfilment in reaching out to fellowship with others. The study sought to find answers to whether participating in spiritual retreats has a measurable contribution to a retreatant’s overall Christian growth experience, and how Christian retreatants perceive the influence of attending spiritual retreats on their personal Christian growth and spiritual development. Data from 115 study participants were analysed using a mixed-method approach and demonstrated evidence of the beneficial effects of spiritual retreats on Christian growth.

Spiritual retreats were shown to have a significant and beneficial impact on participants’ Christian growth, particularly in the areas of abiding in Christ, living by the Bible and biblical principles, growing in faith and prayer, fellowshiping with other Christians, and service to God. Although the study did not measure the variations in improvements in Christian growth experience over a longer period, the results demonstrate a highly significant difference in Christian growth indicators for participants who attended more retreats and more frequently than others. It was found that participating in spiritual activities and experiencing spiritual



engagement during retreats predict positive Christian growth outcomes. Thus, spiritual retreats are not only moments to appear before God's presence and petition for existential needs and all kinds of human problems confronting Christians (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; van Dijk, 2002), the findings of this study suggest that spiritual retreats have a positive implication on Christian growth of those who attend.

This finding tallies with other studies on retreats and wellbeing; for instance Bond et al. (2015), Gill et al. (2018) Gill et al.(2018), and Jansen and Lang (2012). Jansen and Lang (2012) found that spiritual growth was the second highest-rated benefit for attending retreats at religious sites or spiritual tourism. Similar to the findings of this study, Gill et al. (2018) found that Christian retreatants (especially clergymen) found retreats as an opportunity to be led closer to God, be encouraged in ministry, worship regularly with others and experience the Scriptures through reflection and meditation. The authors found personal reflections during retreats to have facilitated growth in participants' relationship with God. Furthermore, the spiritual growth outcomes reported in this study are related to spiritual transformations observed by Fu et al. (2015), who reported that participants received more positive spiritual perspectives toward life as they reflected on their lives during a retreat. This experience was found to have enabled participants to feel more able to handle stressful situations in daily life (Fu et al., 2015).

Responses from study participants suggest that retreats enhance or create opportunities for greater spiritual engagement for retreatants. This observation supports one made by Ouellette et al. (2005) in their study, which found evidence that the spiritual dimension retreats assist spiritual development and may be complementary to the environmental focus of Kaplan's (1995) Attention Restoration Theory. According to Kaplan, definitive aspects of spiritual retreats, i.e., being away from the normal work environment, withdrawing to a serene location to avoid distractions, and resting from the mental effort) enables cognitive clearance, which is necessary for spiritual engagement (Kaplan, 1995). Withdrawing from normal work and domestic routine allows retreatants to a liminal realm where spiritual engagement and *communitas* can unfold (Buechner et al., 2020; E. Turner, 2012; Turner, 1969). Nelson-Johnson (2016) supports this claim in his examination of the transformative experiences of spiritual retreats. He observed that the experience of *communitas* and liminality by participants in a weekend Catholic retreat induced personal transformation, renewal, and healing.

Although the findings of this study suggest positive implications of spiritual retreats on participants' growth in the Christian faith, the findings do not suggest the sustained experience of Christian growth resulting from only a single retreat. Studies show that retreat effects are temporary and subject to decline within 2 – 4 weeks of the experience (de Bloom et al., 2010; Gill et al., 2018; Kirillova and Lehto, 2015; Kühnel and Sonnentag, 2011). The reasons for this fade-out included the reintroduction to everyday routines (Kirillova and Lehto, 2015), especially job demands or work-related matters (Gill et al., 2019; Kühnel and Sonnentag, 2011). However, the study found evidence suggesting that participants who attended retreats more frequently (at least twice a year) and engaged in longer retreat sessions (at least 3-7 days a retreat session) may have more significant improvement in their Christian and spiritual development.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The sample for this study was relatively small and limited to Christians within 3 local districts within Accra, Ghana. This may impact the generalised applicability of the findings. Further research is needed to investigate the extent of applicability of these findings to other locations, especially non-urban populations from different denominations, and to also find out whether individual retreats elicit any different outcomes from congregational retreats. Moreover, the main data for this study was sourced using a survey questionnaire, thus, self-report biases might have been a challenge to data accuracy. Other studies could integrate a control experiment including after-retreat follow-ups to capture any continuing outcomes or

changes in outcome over time, either immediately after retreats or gradually.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature in the field of religion, spiritual engagement, and spiritual tourism. A major theoretical contribution of the findings of this study is how different aspects of spiritual retreats, i.e., spiritual activities, liminal space, spiritual engagement, and other experiences, combine to improve Christian growth. Withdrawing from normal routines to serene atmospheres to wait on God through prayer, bible study, and worship, contributed to growth outcomes. Being away provides opportunities for more focused and intense spiritual engagement, which leads to positive spiritual growth outcomes in the lives of retreatants.

The findings of this research have practical implications for retreat organisers and retreatants. The intentional and structured nature of spiritual retreats can be used by pastors, church leaders, and retreat facilitators to ensure appropriate designs and integrate relevant components that will help Christians abide and walk better with Christ, build a meaningful relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit, live by bible principles, pray more, and serve God the more. Retreats should be designed with minimal distractions, and encourage more personal reflection, meditation, and study of the Scriptures. Also, organizers of congregational retreats may need to educate participants on the ultimate purposes of retreats and ask them to reflect on what they would want to focus on or achieve during the retreat. Disconnecting from technological devices, social media and other distractions can help retreatants connect more with God while away from the routine.

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