

Empowering Leaders for Youth Nurture and Retention Through Social Media in Togo Conference

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Abstract: Young people in the Togo Conference complained that their leaders are not much involved with them in discussions held on their social media platforms. The statistics of the Seventh-day Adventist Church globally reveal that the church is losing its members among which there are a great number of young people. Most of these young people are social media users. Should church leaders use social media platforms to nurture Young Adventist Members in order to retain them in the Church in Togo? To answer that question, it was deemed necessary and important to obtain reliable empirical quantitative and qualitative data among young people and Pastors at Togo Conference. It is in this context that Interviews were conducted and quantitative studies were done at the Togo Conference to confirm the need for leaders' empowerment for youth nurture and retention through social media. The study also provided Biblical and social principles for youth nurture through social media platforms in the Togo Conference.

Keywords: Youth, Nurturing, Social Media, Retention.

Purpose: Whereas young people in the Togo Conference complained that their leaders are not much involved with them in discussions held on their social media platforms, it is essential to confirm that perceived need to empower church leaders in the Conference to nurture and retain young people through social media platforms. The paper seeks to document the cause of young people dropping out from the Seventh-day Adventist Church and proposes solutions to resolve this problem. The study will unpack the biblical principles for youth nurture, and how the use of social media fits in the ways to retain members in the church.

The Significance Of The Study: This study, "Empowering Leaders For Youth Nurture and Retention Through Social Media in Togo Conference" is noteworthy for the reasons listed below:

- A. It is a fact that young people today spend a greater portion of their time on social media, therefore reaching them through social media has become a necessity.
- B. Young people often complain that their pastors and church leaders, in general, are neglecting this important tool for the nurture of the youth; part of the task of this study is to ascertain how pastors and church leaders are neglecting this important tool while laboring to nurture young people.
- C. This study has provided practical approaches for using social media platforms for youth nurture and retention in the church.
- D. The leadership empowerment model that has been presented in this project is intended to help pastors and church leaders succeed in their effort to retain youths in the church by utilizing the potential of social media.
- E. Although Lomé, the capital city of Togo, has been used as a case for the study, the principles that have been provided in this research can be replicated in other parts of the world.

Limitation Of The Study: Social Media encompasses a wide range of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and others. However, in this study, particular attention has been given to WhatsApp, the most currently used social media platform in Africa," (Social Power, 2018) and the Telegram platform.

The study confines itself to young people that are based in Lomé, the capital city so that implementation of the work will be thoroughly followed. At the same time, the data collected and analyzed has presented only one-time results that can become a learning tool for further implementation in other cities and church entities.

Findings: Findings revealed that church leaders in Togo Conference were not much contributing to young people's discussions on social media platforms. It has also shown that young people strongly desire to be nurtured through social media platforms, and that, church leaders should do their best to get the necessary skills to get involved in social media ministry for church members' nurture and retention in the church.

I. INTRODUCTION

Look at the statistics of the Seventh-day Adventist Church shows that the church is losing members at an alarming rate, young people inclusive. Even though evangelism in our churches is winning many souls. Research has shown that "about half of teenagers who grow up in Adventist Families in North America have left the church by their mid-20s" (PETR ČINČALA 2016). Although similar studies have not been carried out by the Adventist church in all parts of the world including Africa, the reality from the global statistics of the Church reveals that the Church is seriously losing members, among which young people represent a great proportion.

The youth in Togo Conference has developed new communities through social media, especially WhatsApp. In this virtual space, they share materials that they feel are helpful for their spiritual growth. Oftentimes, some of the innocent sharing on this platform tend to be false teachings that can mislead unsuspecting youth. Unfortunately, Pastors and leaders who are on these platforms with the youths, seldom react to the discussions as expected. By so doing, they miss golden opportunities to nurture and retain the young people in the Church. This situation needs to be attended to.

This paper is going to look into this assumption that church leaders need to get involved in young people's nurturing through social media.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews related literature on youth drop out from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the way out. It also highlights how using social media for youth nurture can help retain them in the church.

What Is Driving Young People Out Of The Church?

Young people leave the Adventist Church for different reasons. Ed Stetzer in a survey asked young adults why they dropped out of the church. Of those who dropped out, about 97 percent stated it was because of life changes or situations. Among their more specific reasons, 27 percent indicated that they simply wanted a break from church. Another 25 percent said they had moved to college, and 23 percent responded that their work made it impossible or difficult to attend (Ed Stetzer, 2014). About 58 percent of young adults indicated they dropped out because of their church or pastor. Fifty-two percent indicated some sort of religious, ethical or political beliefs as the reason they dropped out. In other words, about 52 percent changed their Christian views. Maybe they didn't believe what the church taught, or they didn't believe what they perceived others in the church to believe (Ed Stetzer, 2014). Dudley in another study also discovered, from the responses given by young adults who left the church that "most are not leaving the church because of a dispute with doctrine, rather, they are confused by the tension between the truth of Adventism and the way they see it being lived out by older members of their congregations (Dudley, 2000)."

The Barna Group released a new survey citing (among others) five compelling reasons church attendance continue to decline, particularly among Millennials (those 30 and under). "(1) The church is irrelevant, the leaders are hypocritical and leaders have experienced too much moral failure. (2) God is missing in the church. (3) In many liberal churches, there is often so much ambiguity that questions that actually can be answered are left unresolved—as if leaders were taking people nowhere. (4) They're not learning about god. (5) They're not finding community (Carey Nieuwhof, 2019)."

Many other young people drop out of church because of some difficulties in combining their church life with their jobs. Instead of giving priority to their relationship with God and

Church activities, they give preference to their jobs, thus, stop coming to church.

Another problem mentioned by Ed Stetzer, as the cause of young people leaving the church after graduating from high school is that church was perhaps something their parents wanted them do. They may have grown up in church, and perhaps they faced pressure from parents and even peers to be involved in church. But it wasn't a first-hand faith (Stetzer, 2014)."

At the First Retention Summit of the Adventist Church in 2013, it was also observed that, the fact that the church in the past has been laying more emphasis on evangelism than discipling could have led to the membership dropout.

Managing Church Dropout And Reclaiming Lost Young People Into The Church

Having known circumstances and situations that lead people to drop out of the church, and in respect to God's mandate given to His Church, we are going to consider possible solutions to counteract the notable causes.

To address the issue related to the lack of relationship in the church, noted as the foremost cause of church abandonment, the recommendations of the First Retention Summit of the Adventist Church concluded saying that "building loving and Christ-like relationships within the local church must be an urgent necessity for the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Oliver, 2013)." This will not be the sole responsibility of the clergy but an affair of the entire church membership. The resolution further states that "SDA affirms that responsibility for ensuring that every church member remains part of the body of Christ, and for reconnecting and reconciling with those who do not, is mutually shared by the Church at large, each congregation, and every church member (Oliver, 2013)." Joseph Webb also agrees that "Only the local church membership can close the back door. While it would be unrealistic to think we can meet all of the needs in our congregation, we can attempt to meet those needs we discover. The more needs being met, the less likely people will look for a quiet exit (Webb, 2017)." This suggests that both members and clergy, adults and young, have a role to play.

How can building relationships among members be achieved in our local churches? Hopkins and all suggest that "Let's reflect His character: be kind, merciful, helpful, forgiving, a resource in times of need, and an advocate for the needy. Be engaged lovingly in the lives of all, especially our youth in and outside the church and our new believers from our evangelistic efforts (Hopkins et al, 2009)." This also means that members have to get closer to one another. The relationship among members and especially with young people should not just be, meeting at church for a few hours. Churches should have some extra-church social activities to do with members such as picnic, playing together, working in the community, and others. Joseph Webb also added that

“Closing the back door, then, involves getting close to people, learning their needs as they are willing to share them, and meeting those needs where appropriate. People who have meaningful relationships with fellow Christians are less likely to leave (Webb, 2017).”

The solution consists also in reconnecting members to Christ. Webb in that aspect recommends that “a need exists for each church to do some serious evaluation in regards to the connection each member has with Jesus Christ. While it is true that you certainly cannot program spirituality into people, you can promote spirituality through the focus and emphasis in everything you do as a church (Webb, 2017).” The more connected a member is to Christ, the less likely he will abandon the church. This will in turn help members to get closer one to another and build a community of love. Likewise, Joseph Webb added, “the church where the members spontaneously exhibit the character of Jesus toward one another, meeting each other’s needs under the guidance and equipping of the Holy Spirit, describes a church where people will want to attend and stay, (Webb, 2017)” and that is what each church has to become.

Another solution to the problem is to involve every church member, especially young people, irrespective of their age into the church’s life. Webb observed that some people do not get involved because they do not know their gift(s). Thus, the leadership of every church must endeavor to help each member discover his or her spiritual gifts and involve such member into the corresponding ministry in the church. The fact that every member should get involve also means that “Rather than asking them to be involved with a specific task, ask them where they would like to be involved (Webb).” This suggests that each church should develop the necessary ministry need for members.

Far back in 2007, the Executive Committee of the General Conference of SDA Church recommended that “Creating such an environment that keeps members in the church requires more than a program. It necessitates the creation of a loving atmosphere with each member taking a personal interest in others (General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists Executive Committee Minutes 2007).”

Narrowing the solutions to the specific case of adolescents leaving the church, Cisneros, Hubert suggest that the church must involve early (from 13 years) so that they already have a place in church before becoming young adults (Cisneros, 2014) Young people should participate in leading out in church and featuring and officiating during the church’s services.

In the May 2014 issue of Ministry, Clint Jenkins and Allan Martin wrote that “a key factor in maintaining engagement among young adults is positive experiences and relationships with older Adventist members and church leadership.” They recommended three keys to facilitate this process: “intergenerational relationships, forgiveness and acceptance,

and platforms for sharing. Young adults seek permission and approval to follow their God-given callings (Elias, 2014).”

Another part of the solution is that besides the church pastor and young people parents in the church, other adults have to be intentionally interested in each young person in the church and be role models/mentors to young people (Cisneros, 2014).

Theological Background For Reclaiming The Lost

A clear reading of the Bible shows that the responsibility of the Church is not just to win souls into the church, but also to make them become disciples of Jesus Christ. God’s mission is “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10 NKJV). Jesus commissioned His followers as instruments of God’s mission, charging us to “Go . . . and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28: 19-20 NRSV, emphasis mine).

How Can The Church Use Social Media As A Tool For The Retention Of Young People?

To address the issue related to the lack of relationship in the church, noted as the foremost cause of church abandonment, the recommendations of the First Retention Summit of the Adventist Church concluded saying that “building loving and Christ-like relationships within the local church must be an urgent necessity for the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Oliver).” Hopkins et al suggest that

“Let’s reflect His character: be kind, merciful, helpful, forgiving, a resource in times of need, and an advocate for the needy. Be engaged lovingly in the lives of all, especially our youth in and outside the church and our new believers from our evangelistic efforts (Hopkins et al 2009).”

In an era when everybody seems very busy, each youth of the church can be reached through social media. A church, for example, can build a virtual community on the WhatsApp platform where church leaders could be getting in contact with young people by posting messages and materials that will help in their spiritual growth. Young people who may be having challenges may instantly reach up to their leaders through those platforms. Church leaders can also use social media to connect young people to other resources that can be useful to youth for their social growth. The relationship among members and especially among young people would not just be, meeting at church for a few hours. Churches should have some extra-church social activities to do with members such as picnic, playing together, working in the community, and others. These can be promoted through social media and pictures of those events shared among members through social media. Joseph Webb also adds that “closing the back door, then, involves getting close to people, learning their needs as they are willing to share them, and meeting those needs where appropriate. People who have meaningful

relationships with fellow Christians are less likely to leave (Oliver 2013).”

The solution consists also of reconnecting members to Christ. Webb in that aspect recommends that

“a need exists for each church to do some serious evaluation in regards to the connection each member has with Jesus Christ. While it is true that you certainly cannot program spirituality into people, you can promote spirituality through the focus and emphasis on everything you do as a church (Oliver 2013).”

A church can plan to send devotional material to its members through social media. Many churches are already ministering to their members through WhatsApp and Facebook.

Another solution to the problem is to involve every church member, especially young people, irrespective of their age in the church’s life. Joseph Webb observed that “some people in your church may not have become involved in any type of ministry, as they have probably never discovered their spiritual gifts (Oliver 2013).” Thus, the leadership of every church must endeavor to help each member discover his or her spiritual gifts and involve such members in the corresponding ministry in the church. Thus, young people could serve as webmasters of the church website or administrators of their WhatsApp groups.

Cisneros, Hubert says that “we lose them when they are 13-16 years of age. If we don’t have a place for them to belong by the time they get the keys to the car – it is too late. What can we do for our young people before it is too late? (Cisneros)” The solution simply is to involve young people in the affairs of the church. Young people should participate in leading out in church and featuring and officiating during the church’s services. In the May 2014 issue of *Ministry*, Clint Jenkins and Allan Martin wrote that “a key factor in maintaining engagement among young adults is positive experiences and relationships with older Adventist members and church leadership (Clint & Allan, 2014).” They recommended three keys to facilitate this process: “intergenerational relationships, forgiveness and acceptance, and platforms for sharing. Young adults seek permission and approval to follow their God-given callings (Clint & Allan, 2014).”

Another part of the solution is that besides the church pastor and young people’s parents in the church, other adults have to be intentionally interested in each young person in the church and try to play a role model to young people and mentor them. Cisneros reported that “in January 2014, we learned at the NAD Ministries Convention in Monterey, California, from David Kinnaman that 59% of young adults stay active in the church because an adult, other than pastor or parent, took an interest in their life (Cisneros, 2017).” On someone’s birthday, for example, the church pastor or the youth director can send an e-card to the person. This will show the person that he or she is appreciated by the church.

For churches that may not know how to get involved in social media ministry, Jonathan Howe and Steve Pfaff suggest seven keys that will help the church engage both members and guests on social media. (1) The church should have a clearly designated point person who will be responsible for the social media communications of the church. The person will see to it that schedules are followed, content is posted, and standards are being met (Howe & Pfaff, 2017). (2) The church should understand that each social media channel has advantages and disadvantages and is best served with specific content for its audience and format ((Howe & Pfaff, 2017)). While posting on Twitter and Facebook can generally be accessed by anybody, the church can focus more on WhatsApp which restricts access to only people who are members of the platform. (3) The church should integrate social media into its current communications plan, thus the church will use its weekly newsletter or bulletin to shape the content in its social media channels. (4) The church should monitor channels for feedback and response. This requires dialogue, listening, and responding to questions (Howe & Pfaff, 2017). (5) The church should have a clearly defined goal for each channel. That is to set measurable and timely goals for engagement and effectiveness rather than simply trying to increase follower counts. (6) Use tools for efficiency and analytics. Once the church sets its goals, there is a need to track them. Using tools like Buffer and Hootsuite allows the church to monitor, engage, schedule, and analyze its social media accounts (Howe & Pfaff, 2017). And finally, (7) promote social media channels through traditional means when possible. Jonathan says that if the church wants its members and guests to engage with her online, they need to know where to find her.

It is important to point out that among various Social Media platforms, Whatsapp could be one of the best ways to reach out to young people in Africa, since research has shown that Whatsapp is the most used platform on the continent. Clark Boyd reported that “There were 192 million social media users in Africa in 2018 (Boyd, 2020)” and “the most popular app among these users was WhatsApp, followed by Facebook Messenger (Boyd, 2020).” He added that “WhatsApp is used by 73% of Internet users in Kenya, 53% of Internet users in Nigeria, and 49% of Internet users in South Africa(Boyd, 2020)”

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed-method research design which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodological elements. “Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e. g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017)”

The study was conducted among young people, youth leaders, and pastors of the Lome District of the Seventh-day Adventist

Church in Togo Conference from November 2019 to May 2020.

For the researcher to access the current trend of leaders in the Togo Conference using Social Media Platforms for the nurture and retention of young people, he decided to interview 4 persons with five (5) simple questions. They were two pastors and two young people in Lome, the capital city. The pastors were one administrator (the Executive Secretary), and the Conference Youth Director. For the two young people, he chose among those that he normally sees participating in International Adventist Youth WhatsApp Platform (JA World).

Since the researcher was not in Lome, Togo, he arranged a WhatsApp call with them and these were the 5 questions he asked each one of them:

1. Are you on Social Media?
2. Which social media do you use?
3. How do you evaluate the involvement of young people on social media, especially in Lome in the Togo conference?
4. What is your assessment of the involvement of church leaders (Pastors and Youth Leaders) in social media discussion within the conference?
5. Do you think there is a need to train church leaders in Togo Conference for youth nurture and retention through social?

The table below shows the transcription of the first interview responses:

Table 1. Transcription of the first interview responses

| Questions asked | Answers received | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| | Administrator | Youth Director | Youth 1 | Youth2 |
| Are you on Social Media? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Which social media do you use? | WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype | WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube | WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram | WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, Viber |
| How do you evaluate the involvement of young people on social media, especially in Lome in the Togo conference? | I know the young people have created a Whatsapp platform but truly I do not know what they are doing there. The Youth Director may have more details of that | Young people have created a Whatsapp platform but it is not official. They run it themselves but I am planning to get more time to be with them on it. | Oh yes a friend created one, I animate it with him but people are not that active on it. Young people have been disturbing on for not running it as it is done on other platforms | Oh, Pastor, we have one for the general youth but we want to create others platforms for married people and even another one for News within the church and outside the church. |
| What is your assessment of the involvement of church leaders (Pastors and Youth Leaders) in social media discussion within the conference? | Frankly speaking, we are not doing much on social media. I know many colleagues who are on WhatsApp and Facebook but I don't know what they do on it. | Many young people complain to me that young people are left alone on their platforms during the discussion | Yes, there are a few social media platforms at our conference but nothing is happening there. I prefer the discussion in international ones which are lively | To be frank with you, I cannot even understand our leaders, when there is a serious question and call them for help they don't respond. |
| Do you think there is a need to train church leaders in Togo Conference for youth nurture and retention through social? | Yes, I have been thinking of how to go about that. | Oh yes, pastor, I will be happy if something can be done about that. | Yes, pastor, I wish you can do something to help our pastors to get involved as you do on other platforms | Yes, Pastor, we are behind, see what is happening on other platforms. You are there, and you see how discussions are many times interesting |

The interpretation of the responses of the interviewees shows the need for leaders' empowerment for youth nurture and retention in Togo Conference. This conclusion was confirmed through a quantitative study done among the same people group but a larger group of people.

The Adventist Church in Togo Conference has a total membership of 9,595 as of September 2019. Out of this, the Pastoral Region of Lome is made up of five (5) Districts, 4,859 members, forty-four (44) churches, and companies, and twelve (12) pastors. Young people in Togo Conference aged below 35 years old represent 58% of the entire membership. Applying this percentage to our study, the population of this study comprising of the Adventist Young People and Adventist Youth Leaders in Lomé, the capital city of Togo, will be around 2,818 people. This population being large, for this study, the researcher used a sampling of one hundred and

seventy-six (176) Adventist Young People and Adventist Youth Leaders in Lomé to represent the entire population, to make the study manageable. These are one youth leader, one pathfinder, one ambassador, and one young adult, chosen at random in each of the churches in Lome. Therefore, the total population for the study was 176.

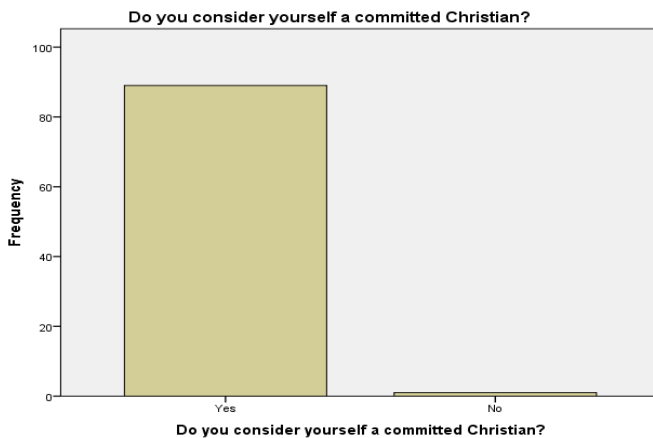
The questionnaire designed for the study was administered to each one of the 176 participants, requesting them to express their perception of the impact of Social Media on Adventist youth. The questionnaire is made up of 24 questions that each of the respondents was asked to answer. Of the 176 questionnaires distributed, 90 people responded and returned their questionnaires which were analyzed for the result of the first study. Further attempts to collect the remaining questionnaires were to no avail. Thus, 51% of the participants

selected responded and their responses were used for the study.

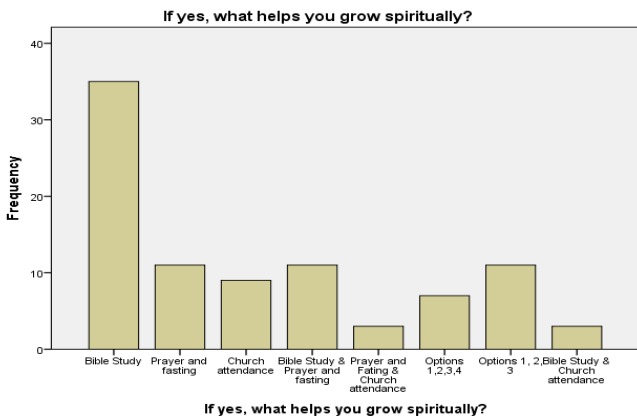
IV. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Data gathered for the study, using questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The results of the findings are presented in descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages while the principles of thematic analysis are used to analyze some of the qualitative data in the survey.

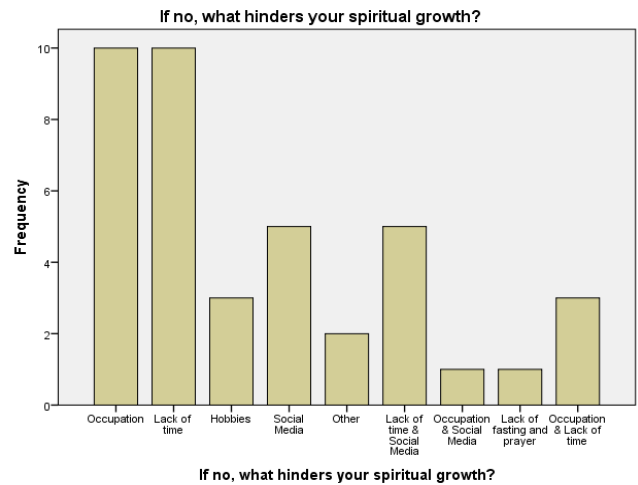
The significant results of this study have shown that the study targeted the intended group of people, that is, those aged between 18 and 24 years old, who represent about 50% of the total respondents. The great majority of the youth surveyed are students (50%). This study has shown that the commitment of the respondents to their faith did not forbid them to be involved in Social Media. 98.9% of them see themselves as committed Christians.



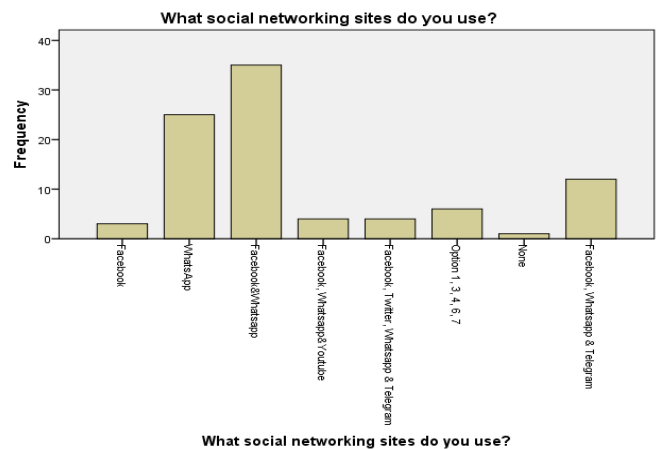
The study has shown that the best means by which young people grow is through Bible Studies (38.9%) and prayer and fasting (12.2%), as shown in the table and graph below. This suggests that if they can be encouraged in a way to integrate Bible studies, prayer, and fasting, among others to their way of living, this will yield good results.



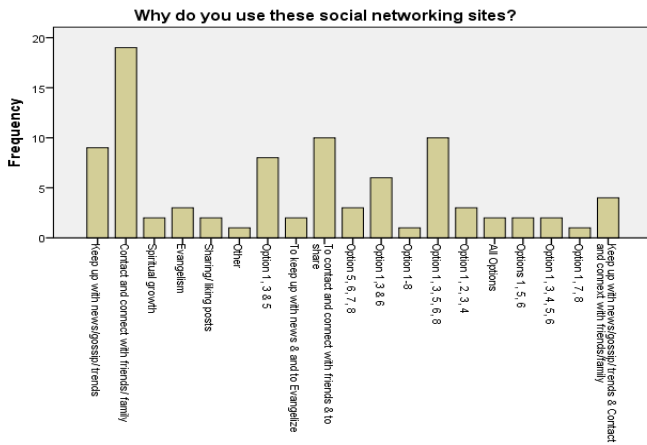
This study has shown that contrary to what many people think, young people, do not see social media as a major hindrance to their spiritual growth. The response of the respondents shows that young people see themselves so occupied with many things and lack time for spiritual activities. Social Media happens to be the third reason hindering their spiritual growth. This suggests that if it were to be possible to remove social media from young people’s lives, they would still be struggling with things affecting their spiritual growth.



This study has interestingly shown that among the population studied, WhatsApp platforms are the most used (27.8%). A greater number of them use a combination of WhatsApp and Facebook (38.9%). This suggests that these two platforms could be the best social media platforms to use to reach out to young people in this part of the world



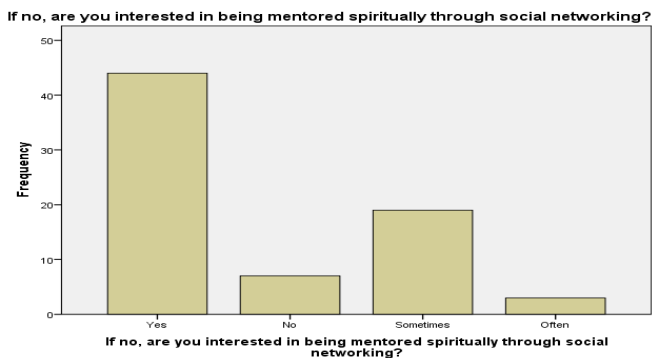
The study has revealed that (21.1%) of young people examined, use social media to contact and connect with friends and family members, as shown in the table and graph below. This suggests that church leaders can make use of social media to reach out to young people for the same purpose and more.



The study has shown that 38.8% of church leaders do participate in social media discussions with young people, while another 30% of the respondents indicated that their leaders do not participate at all in their discussions, as shown in the table and graph below. When it comes to the frequency of their participation, the study shows that leaders' participation in those discussions is not often. However, since young people discuss on those platforms, the ideal would have been for leaders who are looking for avenues to reach out to young people to be more involved with the youths on social media platforms.

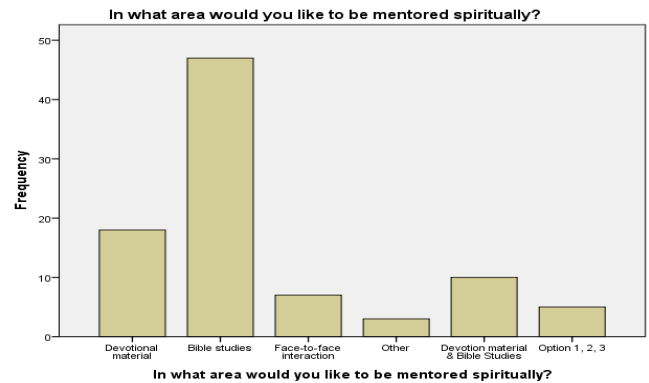


The study revealed that 48.9% of the respondent are interested in mentoring relationships through social media. This offers a golden opportunity for church leaders to get involved with such ministry to young people through social media discussions.



The study confirmed that the preferred means to mentor young people spiritually is through Bible Studies 52.2% and the sharing of devotional materials to them, 20%, as shown in the table and graph below.

This study and its findings have justified the need for church leaders to be empowered to nurture and retain young people through social media. It has shown that leaders could do much better than what they are currently doing with young people in Togo Conference.



The Implication Of The Study: This study has shown that there is a need for leaders' empowerment for youth nurturing and retention through social media. It has confirmed that relationship, connectedness, and caring are key in maintaining young people in the church. This should be the priority for every Seventh-day Adventist Church and denomination at large. The impact of social media in our world is teaching us that the way we do church in this era has to be adapted to the new norm which encompasses the social media world. Hence, the training of the clergy nowadays should take into consideration the use of social media platforms for the nurturing of the membership.

Future Research On The Topic: The Digital Nurturing Training Program advocated by this study has succeeded in the nurturing of young people in the Togo Conference. However, given the time frame of this research, it is not realistic to claim that the empowering model suggested by the researcher has successfully achieved the goal of retention since the rate of retention can effectively be measured over a period of five years and above. This is a gap that could be explored by another study to measure the extent of retention percentage of those nurtured via social media.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that young people need to be nurtured in the church so that they can remain in. this nurture can also be done through social media. This study and its findings have justified the need for church leaders to be empowered to nurture and retain young people through social media in Togo Conference. It has shown that leaders could do much better than what they are currently doing with young people if they are empowered for that.

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