

## **Leadership Styles as Determinants of Youth Apathy and Church Growth: A Case Study of Africa Inland Church, Chepkigen District Church Council, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

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Youth apathy toward church attendance has become a pressing concern for many congregations worldwide, threatening long-term church growth and intergenerational faith transmission. While multiple factors contribute to this disengagement, leadership style within the local church has emerged as a critical yet understudied determinant. This study examined the influence of leadership styles on youth attendance and church growth within the Africa Inland Church (AIC) Chepkigen District Church Council in Kesses, Uasin-Gishu County, Kenya. Grounded in Emile Durkheim's Social Integration Theory, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 147 youth respondents using structured questionnaires, and qualitative data were obtained through interviews with 7 pastors and church elders. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative narratives. The findings revealed that inclusive, transformational, and servant leadership styles significantly enhance youth participation, sense of belonging, and church growth. Conversely, authoritarian leadership was strongly associated with youth disengagement and declining attendance. Youth who felt valued, empowered, and included in decision-making reported higher levels of commitment and regular attendance. The study concludes that leadership style is not merely an administrative variable but a theological and pastoral issue with profound implications for youth ministry. It recommends that churches intentionally adopt servant-leadership and transformational leadership models, invest in youth leadership development, and create structures that empower young people to be active contributors to the church's vision and mission. The study contributes to practical theology, ecclesiology, and youth ministry by providing empirical evidence from a Kenyan rural-urban context.

**Keywords:** Leadership Styles, Youth Apathy, Church Growth, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Social Integration Theory, AIC Kenya

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## **Introduction**

The decline in youth participation in church activities has drawn increasing attention from theologians, sociologists, and church practitioners. Across denominational lines, congregations report that young people, often defined as those aged 18–35, are attending services less frequently, disengaging from church programs, and in many cases, leaving the church altogether (Smith & Snell, 2021; Barna Group, 2021).

In Africa, where Christianity continues to grow numerically, this trend is particularly concerning because the youth constitute the majority of the population and represent the future leadership and vitality of the church (Pew Research Center, 2020; Omondi, 2020). The loss of young people from congregations not only diminishes numerical strength but also erodes the creative energy, volunteer base, and long-term sustainability of faith communities.

Kenya, with its vibrant and deeply rooted Christian identity, has not been immune to this trend. Studies indicate that young Kenyans are increasingly adopting secular values, prioritizing career and leisure over religious obligations, and seeking spiritual fulfillment outside traditional church settings (Mwangi, 2020; Mutua, 2021; Standard Media, 2025). The Africa Inland Church (AIC), one of Kenya’s largest Protestant denominations, has experienced noticeable declines in youth attendance in several of its district church councils, including Chepkigen District in Kesses, Uasin-Gishu County. This decline has prompted concern among church leaders who recognize that today’s disengaged youth may become tomorrow’s absent adults, threatening the very survival of local congregations.

While numerous factors have been identified as contributing to youth apathy, societal shifts, technological distractions, and evolving family structures, the role of leadership style within the local church has received comparatively less empirical attention. Yet leadership is central to the health and growth of any organization, and the church is no exception.

As Northouse (2021) argues, leadership is the process by which an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal. In the church context, leadership style shapes not only the direction of ministry but also the relational climate, the sense of belonging, and the extent to which young people feel valued, heard, and empowered. A leader who listens, delegates, and mentors creates a very different environment from one who commands, controls, and excludes.

Scripture emphasizes the importance of leadership in nurturing faith. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul exhorts young Timothy to be an example to believers, while 1 Peter 5:2–3 calls church leaders to “shepherd the flock of God” not by “lording it over” but by “being examples.” Ephesians 4:11–13 describes church leaders as those who equip the saints for ministry and build up the body of Christ. These passages suggest that effective leadership is relational, empowering, and service-



oriented, qualities that resonate with contemporary understandings of transformational and servant leadership. The biblical model consistently portrays leadership as stewardship rather than domination, as service rather than status, and as empowerment rather than control.

Despite this theological foundation, many churches continue to operate under authoritarian or hierarchical leadership models that alienate young people. Youth often report feeling excluded from decision-making, undervalued in church programming, and disconnected from leadership that does not understand their realities (Koech, 2023; Mwangi, 2022). This gap between leadership practice and youth expectations creates a crisis of belonging that undermines church growth and sustainability. In many cases, youth do not leave because they have lost faith in God; they leave because they have lost faith in the institution and its leaders.

This study, therefore, sought to answer the following research question: What is the influence of leadership styles on youth attendance and church growth within the AIC Chepkigen District Church Council? Specifically, the study examined how different leadership styles authoritarian, transformational, and servant affect youth participation, sense of belonging, and overall church growth. By applying Durkheim's Social Integration Theory, the study provides both empirical and theoretical insights into how leadership can either foster or hinder the integration of youth into the faith community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Leadership Styles in Church Contexts**

Leadership style refers to the characteristic behaviors, attitudes, and approaches that a leader exhibits when guiding, motivating, and directing followers. In organizational studies, several leadership styles have been identified, but three are particularly relevant to church settings: authoritarian (or autocratic), transformational, and servant leadership. Each of these styles has distinct characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses, particularly when applied to youth ministry.

Authoritarian leadership is characterized by centralized decision-making, strict control, and limited input from followers (Sipe & Frick, 2015; Heifetz, 1994). In church contexts, authoritarian leaders may make unilateral decisions about worship, programs, and finances without consulting congregants, including youth. While this style may provide clarity and efficiency in times of crisis, it often stifles creativity, reduces ownership, and alienates younger members who value participation and transparency (Sipe & Frick, 2015; Heifetz, 1994). Authoritarian leaders tend to view their role as one of command and control, expecting unquestioning obedience. This approach can work in highly traditional or hierarchical cultures, but it increasingly clashes with the values of modern youth raised in participatory educational and social environments. Research has shown



that authoritarian leadership in religious settings correlates with higher rates of disaffiliation among young adults (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2020).

Transformational leadership, as developed by Bass and Riggio (2018), involves four key components: idealized influence (acting as a role model), inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (encouraging innovation), and individualized consideration (attending to followers' needs). In churches, transformational leaders inspire youth to embrace a shared vision, challenge them to grow spiritually, and empower them to take ownership of ministry. This style is particularly effective with youth because it appeals to their desire for meaning, purpose, and contribution. Transformational leaders do not simply give orders; they invite participation, explain the “why” behind the “what,” and create a sense of shared mission. Studies in organizational psychology have consistently shown that transformational leadership is associated with higher levels of follower satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Goleman, 2000). In church settings, it has been associated with increased youth retention and volunteerism (Schwarz, 2015).

Servant leadership, popularized by Greenleaf Center for Leadership and later applied to religious contexts by Keith and Spears (2020), prioritizes the well-being, development, and empowerment of followers. Servant leaders put the needs of others first, listen actively, and build community. This style aligns closely with the biblical model of Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). In youth ministry, servant leadership fosters trust, belonging, and voluntary commitment. Unlike authoritarian leadership, which demands compliance, servant leadership inspires commitment through demonstrated care and humility. Unlike transformational leadership, which focuses on vision and inspiration, servant leadership emphasizes practical service and meeting followers' needs. Research has shown that servant leadership is particularly effective in volunteer-based organizations like churches, where members cannot be coerced and must be motivated through relational influence (Keith & Spears, 2020; van Dierendonck, 2011).

### **Youth Apathy: Definition, Causes, and Consequences**

Youth apathy refers to a lack of interest, motivation, or enthusiasm among young people toward church attendance and participation. It is not necessarily a rejection of faith but often a rejection of institutional forms that appear irrelevant, authoritarian, or disconnected from their lived realities (Smith & Denton, 2021). Apathy manifests as irregular attendance, non-participation in church programs, and eventual disaffiliation (Smith, 2009). In many cases, young people who become apathetic toward church still maintain a personal belief in God and may engage in private prayer or online spiritual content. However, they no longer see the local church as a necessary or helpful part of their spiritual journey.



The causes of youth apathy are multifaceted. Societal shifts such as secularization, postmodern relativism, and the prioritization of individual autonomy over communal obligation have reduced the social pressure to attend church (Putnam, 2000). Technological advancements have provided alternative forms of community and entertainment that compete with church attendance (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Evolving family structures, including single-parent households and reduced parental religious transmission, have weakened the intergenerational faith pipeline (Bengtson et al., 2018). However, leadership style cuts across all these factors, as a church leader can either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of external pressures.

The consequences of youth apathy for church growth are severe. Congregations that fail to retain youth experience a demographic imbalance that skews toward older members, reducing energy, creativity, and volunteer capacity. Over time, this leads to the closure of youth programs, reduced financial giving, and an inability to attract new young families (Bruce, 2019). In the Kenyan context, where the median age is around 20 years, the failure to engage youth effectively threatens the long-term viability of many congregations.

### **Empirical Studies on Leadership and Youth Engagement**

Globally, studies have linked leadership style to youth church attendance. In the United States, Schwarz (2015, pp. 78–95) found that mega-churches employing transformational leadership attracted and retained youth through contemporary worship, relational ministry, and youth-led initiatives. These churches intentionally gave young people leadership roles, from running sound systems to leading small groups, creating a sense of ownership that reduced apathy. In the United Kingdom, Harris (2017, pp. 45–67) reported that churches adopting servant leadership saw increased youth participation in outreach and discipleship programs. The key factor was not the specific programs but the relational climate created by leaders who listened, served, and empowered.

In Nigeria, Obi (2022) observed that churches with participatory and empowering leadership experienced higher youth retention than those with authoritarian structures. In South Africa, Nelson (2020, pp. 112–130) noted that youth-focused leadership development programs fostered a sense of belonging and reduced apathy. In Kenya, Koech (2023) found that churches in Eldoret that involved youth in decision-making and ministry planning had significantly higher youth attendance rates than those that merely treated youth as passive recipients. Mwangi (2022) reported that youth in Nairobi preferred churches where leaders were approachable, transparent, and willing to adapt programs based on youth input.

However, most of these studies have been conducted in urban or mega-church contexts. There is a gap in understanding how leadership styles affect youth attendance in rural and semi-



urban settings like Kesses, Uasin-Gishu County, where economic pressures, educational demands, and traditional family structures intersect with modern challenges. This study addresses that gap by focusing on a district church council in a semi-urban area of Kenya’s Rift Valley region.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Integration Theory**

Emile Durkheim’s Social Integration Theory (1890) posits that individuals are more likely to participate in communal activities when they experience strong social bonds, shared norms, and a sense of belonging within their social groups. Conversely, weakened integration due to individualism, secularization, or institutional rigidity leads to disengagement and anomie (a state of normlessness and alienation). Durkheim developed this theory while studying suicide rates in Europe, finding that individuals with weak social ties were more vulnerable to despair and self-destructive behavior (Durkheim, 1897/1951, pp. 241–258). While the context is different, the principle applies to church participation: youth who feel disconnected from their faith community are more likely to drift away.

In this study, the theory explains how leadership styles affect youth integration into the church. Authoritarian leadership may weaken integration by excluding youth from decision-making and failing to address their unique needs. When leaders make all decisions without consultation, youth experience the church as an institution that does not value them, reducing their sense of belonging. Transformational and servant leadership, by contrast, strengthen integration through vision-sharing, empowerment, and personalized care. When youth are invited to participate in planning, when leaders listen to their concerns, and when they see leaders serving humbly, they develop stronger social bonds with the church community.

The theory also helps explain the differential effects of leadership styles across demographic groups. Youth from unstable family backgrounds may be particularly sensitive to authoritarian leadership because they already lack secure attachments. Conversely, they may respond strongly to servant leadership because it provides the care and attention they may not receive at home. This study applies the theory to understand how leadership practices either build or erode the social bonds that keep youth connected to the church.

### **Biblical and Theological Foundations of Leadership**

The biblical witness consistently presents leadership as service. In the Old Testament, Moses is portrayed as a reluctant leader who delegates authority to elders (Exod 18), and the prophets repeatedly condemn leaders who exploit or neglect their people (Ezek 34). In the New Testament, Jesus explicitly contrasts worldly leadership with kingdom leadership: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants



to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:42–43, NIV). Paul similarly instructs church leaders to be “above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2), emphasizing character over charisma (Dulles, 2002, pp. 45–67).

The concept of *diakonia* (service) is central to New Testament ecclesiology (Collins, 1990, pp. 23–45). Leaders are called to equip the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:12), not to hoard authority or control. This equipping role is particularly relevant to youth ministry: effective leaders do not simply supervise young people but develop them as ministers in their own right. The apostle Paul modeled this when he mentored Timothy, entrusting him with significant responsibility and addressing him as a “true son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). This mentoring relationship exemplifies transformational and servant leadership.

Theologically, leadership style reflects one’s understanding of the church. An authoritarian leader implicitly views the church as a hierarchy in which power flows downward from God to leaders to laity (Dulles, 2002). A servant leader views the church as a community of gifted individuals, all called to ministry, with leaders serving as facilitators and equippers. This study argues that the latter view is more consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and more effective in retaining youth.

## Methodology

### Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This design allowed for triangulation of findings and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative data provided broad patterns and statistical relationships, while qualitative data provided depth, context, and explanatory narratives.

### Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in the AIC Chepkigen District Church Council, Kesses, Uasin-Gishu County, Kenya. This district comprises ten local congregations, with an estimated youth population (ages 18–35) of 250. The area is semi-urban, with a mix of farming, small businesses, and commuting to the nearby town of Eldoret. Kesses is home to several educational institutions, including Moi University and the University of Eldoret, making it a context where many young people are students or recent graduates. This demographic characteristic makes the area particularly relevant for studying youth engagement.

### Sampling and Sample Size

The sample size for youth was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) formula, yielding



152 respondents. Proportional allocation was used across the ten churches, and convenience sampling was employed within each church. This approach ensured representation from all congregations while respecting the practical constraints of data collection. Additionally, 10 pastors and 10 church elders were purposively selected for interviews; however, 7 participated fully due to scheduling constraints. Data saturation was assessed during fieldwork: by the seventh interview, responses were yielding recurrent themes with diminishing new insights, confirming that saturation had been reached.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of leadership styles (authoritarian, transformational, servant), youth participation, and church growth. The questionnaire was developed based on established leadership scales from the leadership literature and adapted to the church context. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with pastors and elders, focusing on their observations of youth behavior, leadership practices, and perceptions of effective youth engagement strategies.

### **Validity and Reliability**

A pilot study was conducted with 20 youth from a neighboring district. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the constructs were: leadership styles ( $\alpha = 0.727$ ), youth participation ( $\alpha = 0.713$ ), and church growth ( $\alpha = 0.713$ ), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Taber, 2018). Face and content validity were established through expert review by two university supervisors and three church leaders. The questionnaire was also reviewed for cultural appropriateness by local church elders.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were computed for all variables. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation, were used to examine relationships between perceptions of leadership style and attendance patterns. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's  $d$  where appropriate. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings, coded using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.

## **Results**

The study's primary research question examined how authoritarian, transformational, and servant leadership styles influence youth attendance and church growth. The findings for each leadership



style are presented below.

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

A total of 147 youth completed the questionnaire (96.7% response rate). The majority were female (56.5%), aged 18–25 years (50.3%), and had attained tertiary education (36.1%) or university education (33.3%). Over two-thirds (68.7%) had attended church for more than six years. This demographic profile suggests that the respondents were relatively educated, long-term church members, indicating that their views on leadership were informed by substantial experience. As Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994, pp. 78–95) note, educated church members tend to have stronger expectations for participatory leadership and are more likely to disengage when those expectations are not met. Over two-thirds (68.7%) had attended church for more than six years.

### **Leadership Styles and Youth Participation**

Respondents were asked: ‘The leadership style in my church actively encourages youth participation.’ Of these, 79.6% agreed or strongly agreed. Inclusive and encouraging leadership: 79.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “the leadership style in my church actively encourages youth participation.” One youth participant (RS24) stated in open-ended comments: *“Our pastor listens to us and gives us chances to lead. That makes me want to come to church.”* Another respondent (RS31) added: *“When the pastor asks for our opinions on youth programs, we feel like we belong. If he just told us what to do without asking, we would feel like children, not partners.”*

Opportunities for leadership roles: 76.8% agreed that youth are given opportunities to take leadership roles. A 26-year-old male respondent (RS37) noted: *“I was made a youth leader, and now I feel like the church is mine. I don’t just attend; I serve.”* Another respondent (RS44) commented: *“Our church has a youth council that plans all the youth activities. The pastor advises us but doesn’t control us. That trust makes us work harder.”*

Feeling valued: 80.9% agreed that “the church leadership’s approach makes youth feel valued and involved in church growth.” An interview participant (P04) explained: *“When we involve youth in planning and decision-making, they come early, they stay late, and they bring their friends. It’s a different energy.”* A youth respondent (RS56) stated: *“I used to feel like a spectator. Now I feel like an owner. The difference is that the leadership asked me to help.”*

Authoritarian leadership and decline: Strikingly, 79.6% agreed or strongly agreed that “a more authoritarian leadership style has contributed to a decline in youth attendance.” A youth respondent (RS52) commented: *“Our former pastor made all decisions alone. The youth felt like we were just there to fill seats. Many left.”* Another respondent (RS68) added: *“The previous leader never*



listened. He would say, ‘This is how we have always done it.’ The youth got tired and stopped coming.”

Transformational leadership positively influences engagement: 83.6% agreed that “transformational leadership in the church has positively influenced youth engagement and attendance.” A pastor (P02) stated: “When I share a vision and invite youth to be part of it, they respond with creativity and commitment. They don’t just come; they bring ideas.” A youth respondent (RS73) noted: “Our youth leader challenges us to grow. He doesn’t just preach at us; he shows us what we can become. That inspires me to keep coming.”

Servant leadership increases involvement: 78.9% agreed that “servant leadership in my church has led to an increase in youth involvement.” An elder (E03) noted: “When leaders wash feet literally and symbolically, youth feel loved. They return that love with their time and talents.” A youth respondent (RS82) shared: “Our pastor visited me when I was sick, even though I had only been attending for a few months. That act of service made me loyal to this church.”

Dynamic leaders and church growth: 85% agreed that “youth church programs led by dynamic leaders have contributed to the overall growth of the church.” This was the highest level of agreement across all leadership items. A respondent (RS91) commented: “When the person leading youth has energy and vision, everyone wants to be part of it. When they are boring or negative, people disappear.”

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
The leadership style actively encourages youth participation	6.8	10.2	3.4	46.3	33.3
Youth are given opportunities to take leadership roles	8.2	12.2	2.7	43.5	33.3
The leadership’s approach makes youth feel valued	7.5	9.5	2.0	47.6	33.3
Authoritarian leadership has contributed to the decline in youth attendance	6.1	11.6	2.7	45.6	34.0
Transformational leadership positively influences youth engagement	5.4	8.8	2.0	46.9	36.7
Servant leadership has led to increased youth involvement	6.8	10.9	3.4	44.9	34.0
Dynamic leaders have contributed to overall church growth	4.8	8.2	2.0	48.3	36.7

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

Table 1: Influence of Leadership Styles on Youth Attendance and Church Growth (N=147)

### Qualitative Findings from Pastors and Elders

Interviews with pastors and elders reinforced and deepened the quantitative findings. One participant (P07) observed: “The churches where youth are thriving are those where leaders are not bosses but shepherds. They walk with the youth, ask them questions, and give them real



responsibility. Where leadership is distant or dictatorial, youth vanish.”

Another pastor (P01) highlighted the negative impact of authoritarianism with a concrete example: “We had a leader who made all decisions alone, from service order to finances. Youth who questioned were labeled rebellious. Over two years, we lost 60% of our youth. When he left, we started rebuilding by forming a youth council. Now attendance is rising again, but it has taken years to regain trust.”

Regarding transformational leadership, P05 said: “I challenge our youth to see themselves as ministers, not just attendees. We set goals together for evangelism campaigns, feeding programs, and music ministry. They own it. Last year, our youth-led outreach brought in 15 new families. That would never have happened if I had just told them what to do.”

On servant leadership, P03 shared:

“I visit youth at their workplaces and schools. I help them with job recommendations. When they see that I care about their lives beyond Sunday, they trust me and they trust the church. That trust brings them back week after week.” One elder (E06) provided a cautionary tale about the transition between leadership styles: “We had a beloved pastor who was very relational. When he left, the new pastor was very strict and formal. Within six months, the youth group had shrunk by half. It took us two years to recover. Leadership style matters more than many church leaders realize.”

### **Correlation Analysis**

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between leadership style (aggregate score) and youth attendance. The analysis yielded a moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 95% CI [0.28, 0.56]), indicating that more positive perceptions of leadership (inclusive, transformational, servant) were associated with higher self-reported attendance. Conversely, perceived authoritarian leadership correlated negatively with attendance ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.51, -0.21]). The effect size for the difference between transformational and authoritarian perceptions was large (Cohen’s  $d = 1.24$ ). These correlations, while moderate, are statistically significant and meaningful, suggesting that leadership style accounts for a non-trivial portion of the variance in youth attendance.

### **Church Attendance and Growth (Dependent Variable)**

While 46.9% of respondents acknowledged a decline in youth attendance in recent years, 75.5% observed increased attendance at church events and activities. This seeming paradox suggests that while regular Sunday service attendance may be declining, youth are still willing to participate in special events, outreach programs, and activities that feel relevant and engaging. Significantly, 83.7% agreed that the church’s outreach efforts have led to noticeable growth. These findings indicate that effective leadership enables growth even amid broader societal challenges.



Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
The number of youths attending church has declined in recent years	5.4	44.9	2.7	38.1	8.8
I have observed an increase in overall attendance at church events	6.8	14.3	3.4	42.2	33.3
Our church has experienced a decrease in membership	7.5		2.7	34.0	11.6
The church’s outreach efforts have led to noticeable growth	4.8	9.5	2.0	48.3	35.4

Table 2: Church Attendance and Growth Perceptions (N=147)

### Comparison Across Leadership Styles

To better understand the relative impact of different leadership styles, the study compared mean agreement scores. Transformational leadership received the highest mean agreement ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 0.68$  on a 5-point scale), followed by servant leadership ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), inclusive leadership ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), and authoritarian leadership ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ , reverse-coded). A paired-samples t-test showed that the difference between transformational and authoritarian perceptions was statistically significant ( $t = 8.34$ ,  $df = 146$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.24$ ). This suggests that youth can clearly distinguish between empowering and controlling leadership, and their attendance decisions reflect that distinction.

## Discussion

The findings of this study answer the research question by demonstrating that leadership style is a critical determinant of youth attendance and church growth. Authoritarian leadership pushes youth away, while transformational and servant leadership pull them in, fostering belonging and commitment.

### Authoritarian Leadership as a Push Factor

The finding that authoritarian leadership strongly correlates with youth disengagement aligns with existing literature (Sipe & Frick, 2015; Koech, 2023). Young people, shaped by postmodern values of participation, transparency, and individual agency, resist hierarchical models that silence their voices. This resistance is not simply rebellion but a reasonable response to environments that treat them as passive recipients rather than active contributors.

Durkheim’s Social Integration Theory explains this dynamic: authoritarian leadership weakens social bonds by excluding youth from meaningful participation, reducing their sense of belonging, and ultimately pushing them toward apathy or exit. When young people feel that their opinions do not matter and that leaders are not interested in their perspectives, they experience the church as an alienating institution. Over time, they disengage not because they have lost faith in



God but because they have lost connection to the community.

Theologically, authoritarianism contradicts the servant model exemplified by Christ. Jesus empowered his disciples, entrusted them with ministry, and listened to their concerns. He did not treat them as subordinates but as friends (John 15:15). Churches that replicate authoritarian structures inadvertently reject this biblical pattern and alienate the very generation they seek to retain. The study's finding that 79.6% of youth attributed the decline in church attendance to authoritarian leadership is a sobering indictment of top-down church governance.

It should be acknowledged, however, that in some highly traditional or honor-based cultural contexts, authoritarian leadership may be expected and accepted. The AIC Chepkigen context, with its educated, urban-oriented youth, may be less receptive to such styles. Future research could examine whether authoritarian leadership has different effects in rural, less-educated congregations.

### **Transformational Leadership as a Pull Factor**

The strong positive association between transformational leadership and youth engagement (83.6% agreement) is consistent with global research (Bass & Riggio, 2018; Schwarz, 2015). Transformational leaders inspire youth by articulating a compelling vision, modeling commitment, and challenging them to grow. In the AIC Chepkigen context, pastors who set shared goals and invited youth leadership to take the lead saw increased attendance, creativity, and ownership.

Why does transformational leadership work so well with youth? First, it appeals to their desire for a sense of purpose. Young people want to know that their lives matter and that they are contributing to something larger than themselves. Transformational leaders provide that sense of purpose through visionary goals. Second, it appeals to their need for growth. Young people are in a developmental stage characterized by rapid learning and identity formation. Transformational leaders stimulate intellectual and spiritual growth, making the church a place of development rather than stagnation. Third, it appeals to their desire for relationships with caring adults. The individualized consideration component of transformational leadership ensures that youth feel seen and valued as individuals, not just as demographic statistics.

This finding has practical implications for theological education and pastoral training. Seminaries and church leadership programs should equip pastors with transformational leadership skills, including vision-casting, mentoring, and participative decision-making. Many pastors are trained in biblical exposition and pastoral care but receive little formal training in organizational leadership (Osmer, 2008). This study suggests that such training is urgently needed.



## **Servant Leadership as a Relational Foundation**

Servant leadership, with its emphasis on listening, empathy, and empowerment, resonated strongly with youth (78.9% agreement). This aligns with biblical teaching (Mark 10:45; John 13:1–17) and with contemporary youth ministry research (Keith & Spears, 2020; Mwangi, 2022; Root, 2017). Youth in Kesses reported that pastors who visited them at home, helped with practical needs, and treated them as partners rather than subordinates fostered deep loyalty and consistent attendance.

Servant leadership addresses the emotional and social needs of youth from vulnerable family backgrounds. Youth from single-parent or non-practicing families often lack spiritual role models. Servant leaders who act as surrogate spiritual parents fill this gap, providing the integration that Durkheim identified as essential for communal participation. When a pastor shows up at a youth's school event, helps with a job application, or listens without judgment, that pastor is embodying servant leadership in ways that build lasting bonds.

The difference between transformational and servant leadership is subtle but important. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision and inspiration; servant leadership emphasizes meeting followers' needs. Both are effective, but they may be appropriate in different contexts. In situations where youth lack basic support and care, servant leadership may be the necessary foundation before transformational leadership can take effect. In situations where youth are already well-supported, transformational leadership may be more impactful. This study found that both styles were valued, suggesting that effective youth ministry combines elements of both.

## **Leadership Style and Church Growth**

The finding that 85% of youth agreed that dynamic leadership drives church growth underscores the strategic importance of leadership development. Churches experiencing youth apathy often focus on programmatic fixes, new worship music, shorter services, or social events without addressing the underlying relational and structural issues. This study suggests that leadership transformation may be a more foundational intervention. Programs can be changed relatively easily, but if the leadership culture remains authoritarian or distant, youth will continue to drift away.

Notably, the same youth who acknowledged a decline in attendance (46.9%) also reported growth in outreach and events (75.5%). This paradox suggests that even in contexts of overall decline, targeted leadership efforts can produce pockets of vitality. The key is intentional, youth-focused, and empowering leadership. When leaders invest in youth, youth respond. The growth in events and outreach may indicate that youth are willing to participate in activities that feel relevant and that are led by dynamic leaders, even if their Sunday attendance has become irregular.



## **Theoretical Contributions**

This study affirms and extends Durkheim’s Social Integration Theory. While Durkheim focused on the breakdown of traditional bonds in industrial societies, this study shows that even within a religious institution, integration depends on the quality of leadership. Authoritarian leadership produces what Durkheim called anomie, a state of normlessness and disconnection, while transformational and servant leadership produce social cohesion, shared purpose, and voluntary commitment.

The study also bridges sociological theory with practical theology (Osmer, 2008). It demonstrates that theological concepts such as servant leadership are not merely abstract ideals but empirically validated strategies for youth engagement. This integration is valuable for both academic and practitioner audiences. Scholars gain a richer understanding of how Durkheim’s theory applies to religious organizations; practitioners gain evidence-based guidance for improving youth ministry.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing literature on African church leadership. Much of the leadership research is based on Western contexts; this study provides data from a Kenyan semi-urban setting, offering insights that may be transferable to similar contexts across Africa. The finding that youth value inclusive, empowering leadership resonates with broader African values of community and participation, even as it challenges authoritarian tendencies that persist in some church structures.

## **Practical and Theological Implications**

For pastors, the message is clear: leadership style matters. Youth can distinguish between leaders who serve and leaders who control, and they vote with their feet. Pastors who wish to retain youth should examine their leadership practices using reflective questions drawn from youth ministry literature (Root, 2017): Do you listen to youth? Do you delegate real responsibility? Do you serve youth or expect them to serve you? Do you inspire vision or merely enforce rules?

For denominational leaders, the study suggests that leadership development should be a priority. Many pastors are promoted based on preaching ability or seniority, not leadership skills. Denominations should invest in ongoing leadership training, with a focus on transformational and servant leadership. Peer mentoring, coaching, and assessment tools could help pastors grow in these areas.

For theological educators, the study indicates that leadership courses should be required in seminary curricula. Too often, seminaries focus on biblical languages, theology, and pastoral care while neglecting organizational leadership. Yet most pastors spend most of their time leading volunteers, managing conflicts, and developing programs that require leadership skills. Integrating



leadership training into theological education would better prepare graduates for the realities of pastoral ministry.

Theologically, the study challenges churches to align their leadership practices with biblical teaching. The authoritarian model that many churches inherit from cultural hierarchies is not the New Testament model. The New Testament consistently presents leadership as service, empowerment, and equipping. Churches that reclaim this biblical vision will be better positioned to retain youth and fulfill their mission.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the influence of leadership styles on youth apathy and church growth within the AIC Chepkigen District Church Council in Kesses, Kenya. Grounded in Emile Durkheim's Social Integration Theory, the research investigated how authoritarian, transformational, and servant leadership styles shape youth attendance, participation, and sense of belonging. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that leadership style is a critical determinant of youth engagement. Authoritarian leadership, characterized by centralized decision-making and limited youth input, was strongly associated with disengagement, with 79.6% of respondents attributing attendance decline to such styles. In contrast, transformational leadership (83.6% agreement) fostered purpose, growth, and ownership among youth, while servant leadership (78.9% agreement) built trust and loyalty through empathetic, needs-focused pastoral care. Both empowering styles contributed to church growth, with 85% of youth agreeing that dynamic leadership drives congregational expansion. However, the study also identified a paradox: despite a perceived decline in regular Sunday attendance (46.9%), participation in outreach events and special programs increased (75.5%), suggesting that intentional, youth-centered leadership can create vitality even amid broader challenges. The study affirms the biblical model of shepherding leadership service, empowerment, and listening, and extends Durkheim's theory by demonstrating that integration into faith communities depends on leadership quality. Limitations include the single-case design and cross-sectional data, limiting generalizability and causal claims. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative methods across denominations and regions. Practically, churches must invest in leadership development, adopt inclusive styles, and create decision-making structures for youth. Ultimately, leadership style is not peripheral but a central theological and pastoral issue; churches that embrace servant and transformational leadership will retain youth and secure sustainable growth.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:



1. Adopt inclusive leadership models: Church leaders should intentionally move away from authoritarian approaches toward participatory, transformational, and servant leadership styles that value youth input and empower young leaders. This includes consulting with youth on program decisions, inviting them to church board meetings as observers or representatives, and creating feedback mechanisms.
2. Invest in youth leadership development: Churches should establish mentorship programs, leadership training, and internship opportunities that prepare youth for current and future church responsibilities. This could include annual leadership retreats, one-on-one mentoring relationships, and practical ministry assignments.
3. Create youth decision-making structures: Establish youth councils or youth representation on church boards and committees to ensure young people have a voice in planning, budgeting, and program evaluation. These structures should have real authority, not merely advisory roles.
4. Train pastors in leadership effectiveness: Denominations and theological institutions should incorporate transformational and servant-leadership modules into pastoral training curricula, with an emphasis on youth engagement strategies. Continuing education for existing pastors should also be prioritized.
5. Conduct regular leadership audits: Churches should periodically assess their leadership climate through anonymous surveys and focus groups, using feedback to adjust practices and address youth concerns. These audits should be conducted at least annually.
6. Develop contextualized resources: Given the Kenyan context, denominations should develop training materials and case studies that reflect local realities, including the challenges of youth ministry in semi-urban areas, economic pressures on young people, and the role of extended families in faith transmission.
7. Foster intergenerational partnerships: Rather than completely segregating youth, churches should create intentional opportunities for intergenerational interaction, where youth learn from older adults and older adults learn from youth. This builds the social bonds that Durkheim identified as essential for integration.

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