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Church-Hopping and the Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being of Youth in FCT, Abuja: Theological and Pastoral Implications.

Insights for Pastoral and Mental Health Agents in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Church-hopping has become an increasingly visible feature of contemporary Christian practice, particularly among young people living within religiously plural and highly mobile urban environments. This article examines church-hopping among Christian youth in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria, with particular attention to its psychological, spiritual, existential, and pastoral implications. The article is extracted from a larger empirical study involving 400 respondents and interprets its findings within relevant theological, psychological, and pastoral literature. Findings indicate that church-hopping is prevalent among Christian youth in Abuja ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.99$), particularly in the form of dual or cross-congregational attendance rather than complete denominational abandonment. Psychologically, respondents reported deterioration in important dimensions of daily functioning ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.80$), including concentration, sleep, decision-making, coping, and enjoyment of everyday activities. Significantly, however, church-hopping did not correspond with a collapse of personal religious faith. Religious well-being remained relatively strong ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.05$), whereas existential well-being was comparatively weaker ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.10$), suggesting a distinctive psycho-spiritual paradox: young people may remain personally connected to God while becoming psychologically, communally, and existentially unsettled. The article argues that church-hopping should therefore not be interpreted merely as ecclesiastical disloyalty but as a complex expression of contemporary youth religiosity requiring psychologically informed, relational, participatory, and pastorally responsive interventions.

Keywords: church-hopping; psycho-spiritual well-being; youth; religious well-being; existential well-being; psychological functioning; pastoral care

Introduction

Religion occupies a significant place in Nigerian social life. Beyond providing a system of belief, religious communities contribute to identity formation, moral orientation, social belonging, meaning-making, and psychological coping. Within urban centres such as Abuja, however, increasing denominational plurality, population mobility, digital religious exposure, socioeconomic pressures, and competition among religious organisations have transformed the manner in which many young people relate to institutional Christianity.

One increasingly visible expression of this transformation is **church-hopping**: the recurrent movement of Christians between congregations, ministries, programmes, or denominations without sustained commitment to a single worshipping community. Such mobility may be motivated by the search for spiritual satisfaction, miracles, healing, prophetic interventions, compelling preaching, contemporary music, social networks, emotional support, youth-oriented programmes, or material breakthrough.

This phenomenon exists within what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) describe more broadly as a religious marketplace, in which religious participation increasingly reflects individual preference and subjective experience. In such an environment, the believer can gradually move from being a committed participant in a religious community to becoming a consumer of religious experiences.

For young Christians, this transition is particularly significant. Youth and emerging adulthood constitute developmental periods during which identity, belonging, commitment, relationships, values, and life purpose are actively consolidated (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Consequently, instability within one's religious community may have implications extending beyond church attendance to psychological and existential functioning.

This article therefore examines church-hopping not merely as denominational mobility but as a **psycho-spiritual phenomenon**. Drawing particularly from the empirical findings of Nwoko's (2026) study of 400 Christian respondents in FCT Abuja, it asks what church-hopping reveals about the contemporary religious experience of Nigerian youth and what implications it presents for pastoral ministry.

Understanding Church-Hopping in the Nigerian Context

The contemporary Nigerian religious environment presents young Christians with an unprecedented range of religious options. Churches and ministries increasingly differ not merely in doctrine but in worship style, music, media presentation, prophetic emphasis, youth programming, leadership culture, healing ministries, socioeconomic networks, and approaches to personal problems.

Church-hopping consequently operates within a broader culture of choice.

Young people may retain a primary denominational identity while simultaneously participating in programmes organised by other churches. This makes church-hopping more complex than formal denominational conversion. A Catholic youth may remain Catholic while attending a Pentecostal prayer programme; an Anglican may retain Anglican identity while regularly participating in another ministry's youth events; a Pentecostal Christian may circulate between several prophetic or charismatic ministries without formally abandoning a home congregation.

The present study strongly reflects this pattern. Church-hopping among Abuja youth was found to be prevalent, with an overall cluster mean of $M = 3.02$ ($SD = 0.99$). Most significantly, regular attendance at special weekly or mid-week programmes outside one's primary denomination produced the highest prevalence score ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.89$). Visible fluctuations in youth attendance during highly publicised programmes across FCT ministries were similarly prominent ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.86$).

These findings suggest that **church-hopping in Abuja is better characterised as fluid religious participation than wholesale ecclesial abandonment**.

The young person has not necessarily left the Church; rather, the boundaries defining where and how that young person belongs have become increasingly porous.

This distinction is crucial for pastoral interpretation. Church-hopping should not automatically be interpreted as rebellion, doctrinal rejection, or loss of faith. In some cases, it may represent spiritual searching; in others, dissatisfaction with leadership, weak mentoring, socioeconomic need, developmental transition, or the search for a religious environment perceived as more responsive to contemporary realities.

Yet fluidity carries consequences. Where religious participation becomes permanently consumer-driven, commitment may become conditional: *I remain for as long as this community satisfies my immediate spiritual, emotional, social, or material expectations*. At that point, faith risks becoming consumption rather than formation.

Church-Hopping as Consumer-Oriented Religiosity

The contemporary religious marketplace can subtly redefine the relationship between believer and church. Instead of asking, "**Where am I called to belong, serve, grow and become accountable?**", the dominant question can become, "**Where are my present needs best satisfied?**"

This mentality has been described in the literature through concepts such as religious consumerism, "buffet Christianity," and dislocated discipleship. Kroesbergen (2019) associates aspects of contemporary African religiosity with transactional expectations in which religious participation becomes connected with immediate material and existential concerns. Similarly, studies reviewed in the larger research suggest that dissatisfaction with mentoring, leadership, worship aesthetics, and socioeconomic expectations can encourage youth mobility.

Nevertheless, the present findings caution against reducing church-hopping entirely to superficiality. Abuja youth live within genuine pressures: unemployment, economic uncertainty, identity struggles, relationship difficulties, urban isolation, anxiety about the future, and the search for meaningful community.

The church-hopper may therefore be more than a religious consumer.

Sometimes the restless worshipper is a restless person looking for somewhere that understands the restlessness. This distinction shifts pastoral attention from condemnation to discernment. The pastoral question is no longer simply, "*Why are our young people leaving?*" but also, "*What are they searching for that they believe they cannot find while remaining?*"

Church-Hopping and Psychological Well-Being

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns psychological functioning.

Using the General Health Questionnaire, the study recorded an overall psychological well-being cluster mean of $M = 2.59$ ($SD = 0.80$), interpreted as **worse than usual**. The disturbance was particularly evident in everyday functioning rather than severe psychopathology.

Respondents reported poorer concentration ($M = 2.76$), sleep disturbance associated with worry ($M = 2.89$), diminished feelings of usefulness ($M = 3.00$), difficulties in decision-making ($M = 2.99$), increased psychological strain ($M = 2.80$), greater difficulty overcoming problems ($M = 2.92$), and reduced enjoyment of ordinary activities ($M = 3.00$).

This pattern is important.

The findings do not suggest that church-hopping youth are necessarily psychiatrically ill. Rather, they point toward **functional psychological strain** associated with religious instability.

At the same time, indicators associated with deeper deterioration of self-concept remained comparatively stable. Unhappiness or depression ($M = 2.46$), loss of confidence ($M = 1.92$), feelings of worthlessness ($M = 1.97$), and general happiness ($M = 2.40$) remained below the study's threshold for deterioration.

Thus, the psychological finding is more accurately stated as follows:

Church-hopping among the respondents was associated less with a collapse of the self than with a disturbance of everyday psychological functioning.

The youth still knows who he or she is, but may be struggling with how to function.

This distinction has substantial psycho-spiritual importance. Stable communities ordinarily provide social support, continuity, relational accountability, trusted leadership, predictable rituals, and networks of belonging. Repeated movement between communities can limit the depth of these attachments.

Previous studies associate religious instability and consumer-oriented religiosity with loneliness, emotional insecurity, disrupted religious coping, identity difficulties, and cognitive dissonance (Amadi, 2022; Ellison & Lee, 2021; Ganu & Mambo, 2024; Nwankwo & Onyam, 2023; Pillay, 2025).

The implication is not that mobility alone causes psychological distress. Rather, persistent religious mobility may coexist with or reinforce an already unstable psychosocial environment.

The Psycho-Spiritual Paradox: Strong Faith, Unsettled Life

Perhaps the most important contribution of the present study is the paradox revealed when psychological and spiritual findings are considered together.

Contrary to an assumption that church-hopping necessarily destroys personal spirituality, the respondents demonstrated relatively strong **Religious Well-Being (RWB)**, recording a cluster mean of $M = 3.02$ ($SD = 1.05$).

Respondents strongly affirmed that active pursuit of faith brought fulfilment ($M = 3.70$), that their relationship with God contributed positively to their well-being ($M = 3.50$), and that prayer remained important and satisfying ($M = 3.50$).

Therefore, these young people were not simply "losing God."

They continued to pray.

They continued to believe.

They continued to experience God as personally meaningful.

Yet their **Existential Well-Being (EWB)** was comparatively weaker ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.10$). Particularly revealing were borderline scores concerning clarity of life direction ($M = 2.50$) and self-motivation/productivity ($M = 2.50$), alongside considerable uncertainty surrounding the future.

The resulting psycho-spiritual picture is therefore not one of straightforward spiritual collapse but **spiritual resilience existing alongside psychological and existential vulnerability**.

This distinction deserves emphasis: **A young person may be spiritually searching without being spiritually empty; religiously active without being existentially settled; deeply convinced about God while remaining uncertain about life.**

This finding challenges pastoral approaches that interpret every instance of church mobility as faithlessness.

It also challenges purely psychological interpretations that overlook religion as a genuine source of resilience. The young people's relationship with God appears to function as an enduring internal resource even when institutional religious attachment becomes unstable.

The pastoral problem, therefore, may not simply be **how to bring young people back to God**, but how to help young people integrate their relationship with God into stable identity, community, purpose, relationships, and everyday functioning. That is fundamentally a psycho-spiritual task.

Theological Implications: From Religious Consumption to Ecclesial Belonging

Christian spirituality is personal, but it is not merely private.

The Christian understanding of Church presupposes communion, belonging, responsibility, formation, accountability, and participation in a community of faith. The New Testament image of believers as members of one body (1 Cor. 12:12–27) challenges a purely consumerist understanding of religious affiliation.

Church-hopping becomes theologically problematic when the Church is approached exclusively according to preference: *the preacher I enjoy, the music I prefer, the prophecy I want, the atmosphere that excites me, or the answer that solves my immediate problem.*

Such an orientation can make commitment increasingly dependent upon satisfaction.

Yet authentic discipleship includes remaining long enough to be known, corrected, accompanied, challenged, entrusted with responsibility, and formed within community.

The theological concern is therefore not movement *per se*. Legitimate reasons exist for changing congregations. The deeper concern is a spirituality that becomes incapable of rootedness.

A faith that continually searches for a new altar may experience many religious moments without necessarily developing a religious home.

The empirical findings, however, require the Church to examine itself simultaneously. If young people retain strong belief in God while repeatedly moving between congregations, then the problem cannot simply be described as declining faith.

It may equally raise an ecclesiological question: If they are still searching for God, why are they struggling to remain with us?

Pastoral Implications for the Church in Nigeria

The findings demand a shift from a retention-centred pastoral model to a **formation-and-belonging model**.

The study evaluated six possible strategies for improving youth retention and psycho-spiritual development. The overall strategy cluster mean was $M = 2.88$ ($SD = 1.01$), indicating a generally neutral or cautious response. This itself is significant: young people were not overwhelmingly persuaded that conventional institutional interventions would solve the problem.

The strongest response concerned intentionally appointing young adults to meaningful leadership and decision-making positions ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.88$). Faith-based counselling services and practical development programmes, including career mentoring, skills acquisition, and financial literacy, each recorded $M = 3.00$. Interactive discussions recorded $M = 2.90$, while small-group peer fellowships recorded $M = 2.70$.

Most strikingly, the proposition that proactive intervention by church leadership in internal conflicts would encourage youth retention received the lowest score ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.12$).

The pastoral significance is considerable. Young people appear to desire not merely programmes for them, but participation with them.

From Spectatorship to Co-Responsibility

Youth ministry should move beyond treating young people primarily as audiences for programmes. Young adults require meaningful participation in decision-making, planning, ministry, leadership, and service.

Belonging deepens when a person moves from asking, "What does this church offer me?" to being able to say, "This is also my community, and I have something to offer it."

Psycho-Spiritual Pastoral Care

The psychological findings suggest the need for professional psycho-spiritual support within church structures. Pastoral agents should collaborate, where possible, with appropriately trained psychologists, counsellors, therapists, and mental-health professionals.

Such services should not replace pastoral care but complement it, particularly for young people experiencing anxiety, identity difficulties, family conflict, emotional distress, addiction, relationship problems, vocational uncertainty, or other concerns that cannot adequately be addressed through preaching alone.

Relational Discipleship and Mentorship

Young people require relationships, not merely events.

Nnamani and Okafor (2024) emphasise the importance of structured mentorship, transparent leadership, and intergenerational inclusion in strengthening congregational attachment.

Pastoral ministry should therefore invest in relationships in which young people are known personally, accompanied consistently, challenged constructively, and entrusted with responsibility.

Addressing the Existential Questions Behind Church-Hopping

The lower existential well-being scores suggest that ministry to youth cannot end with religious instruction.

The Church must also create spaces in which young adults can engage questions such as:

Who am I becoming? What is my vocation? Where is my life going? How do I cope with unemployment? How do I integrate faith, career, sexuality, relationships, failure, ambition, mental health, and uncertainty about the future?

If the Church speaks eloquently about heaven but cannot accompany young people through the existential realities of earth, they may continue searching for communities they perceive as more responsive.

Implications for Pastoral Agents

The findings are particularly significant for priests, pastors, religious educators, youth chaplains, counsellors, and other pastoral agents.

Church-hopping should not automatically be approached with accusation. The first pastoral response should be **curiosity and listening**.

The pastoral agent must distinguish between a youth who is rejecting faith, a youth undergoing developmental transition, a youth searching for deeper spiritual experience, a youth responding to unresolved psychological distress, and a youth who has genuinely experienced exclusion or inadequate pastoral care.

Consequently, the pastoral question should move:

from: "Why can't these young people stay?"

to: "What makes belonging difficult for them?"

and eventually:

"What kind of community must we become so that faith, belonging, psychological safety, accountability, and meaningful participation can coexist?"

This does not require diluting Christian doctrine to retain young people. Rather, it requires making authentic Christian community more visible and experientially accessible.

Conclusion

Church-hopping among Christian youth in FCT Abuja represents a complex feature of contemporary urban religiosity rather than a simple movement from one denomination to another. The findings of the present study indicate a prevalent pattern of cross-congregational participation, particularly attendance at programmes and events outside one's primary church.

More importantly, the study reveals a significant psycho-spiritual paradox. While respondents demonstrated deterioration in several dimensions of everyday psychological functioning, including concentration, sleep, decision-making, coping, and enjoyment of daily activities, their fundamental self-worth remained comparatively stable. Similarly, their personal religious well-being remained relatively strong even as existential vulnerability became more evident.

Church-hopping therefore does not necessarily mean that young people have lost God. **They may have retained God while struggling to locate themselves—psychologically, existentially, socially, and ecclesially.**

This may be the most important pastoral insight arising from the study.

The Church's response cannot therefore consist merely in producing more attractive programmes to compete within the religious marketplace. Neither can it consist simply in condemning mobile youth as uncommitted.

The more enduring response lies in rebuilding **belonging, participation, psychological safety, mentorship, accountability, meaningful leadership, and integrated psycho-spiritual formation**.

The future of youth ministry may ultimately depend less upon making churches difficult to leave and more upon making Christian communities **worth belonging to**.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made for pastoral and mental health agents addressing the phenomenon of church-hopping among youth:

- **Move Beyond Programmatic Retention to Co-Responsibility:** Actively involve young adults in meaningful decision-making, planning, and leadership roles (such as appointing them to decision-making positions, which scored highest among youth-preferred strategies at $M = 3.20$) rather than treating them merely as audiences for church programmes.
- **Integrate Professional Psycho-Spiritual Support:** Establish structured collaboration within church structures between pastoral agents and trained psychologists, counselors, and mental-health professionals to address everyday psychological strain, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and decision-making difficulties.

- Invest in Relational Discipleship and Mentorship: Cultivate transparent, intergenerational, and consistent relationships where young people are known personally, accompanied through life challenges, and mentored rather than relying solely on large-scale events.
- Create Spaces for Existential and Vocational Dialogue: Design intentional pastoral spaces that help young adults grapple with real-world uncertainties—such as career choices, vocational direction, unemployment, identity formation, relationships, and the transition into adulthood.
- Cultivate Curiosity and Compassionate Listening: Approach mobile youth with pastoral curiosity rather than immediate accusation, carefully distinguishing between spiritual searching, developmental transition, leadership dissatisfaction, and underlying psychological distress to make authentic belonging more accessible.

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