

Assessment of Home-Based Factors Contributing to Church Absenteeism in Methodist Churches of Kenya in Nyambene Synod, Meru County, Kenya

Gerald Kithure¹, John Ngige² and Julius Kithinji²*

¹*MCK Nyambene North P.O Box 261 -60600 Maua Kenya*

²*Kenya Methodist University P.O. Box 267-60200 Meru, Kenya*

**Correspondence email: revkithure@gmail.com*

Abstract

Regular church attendance is often an indicator of Christians' commitment and faith in God. It follows then that absenteeism undermines both the Christian faith and the ability of the church to meet ministry goals. The objectives of this study were to assess the home-based factors that contribute to church absenteeism in Methodist Churches of Kenya in Nyambene Synod, Meru County, Kenya. The study was guided by secularization theory under postmodernism philosophy which maintains that as science and technology continue to shape the world social changes in power and class structure tend to persist in similar forms as well (Heywood 2012). A descriptive survey research design was employed for this study, with a sample of 379 respondents selected through simple random sampling. The target population comprised of 28,015 men, women and youth church members taken from 177 congregations in Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod. Data was collected using documentation and two questionnaires; one for the youth, and the other for adult members. A pilot study with a sample of 38 respondents was conducted in Miathene Synod. Analysis was done using SPSS (Version 25). The researcher performed descriptive statistical analyses to determine and rank specific factors that affected church attendance. The study concluded that poor family background, lack of monies to give out during fundraisers, unfriendly relationships between youth and parents, and lack of parental guidance greatly contributed to church absenteeism. The reasons for absenteeism can be addressed by church leaders through frequent pastoral visits to the absentee members, conducting youth and adult's seminars or fellowship to discuss the importance of attending church services, and encouraging church leadership to look for other means of income to avoid victimization of the poor families during church fundraisers. The church leadership can also reach out to the absentee members through the cell group leaders and group fellowships such as women, youth and men fellowships. Future studies need to be extended to other Churches to assess whether different findings may be reached as regarding home based factors contributing to Church absenteeism.

Key words: *Church absenteeism, Synod, home-based factors*

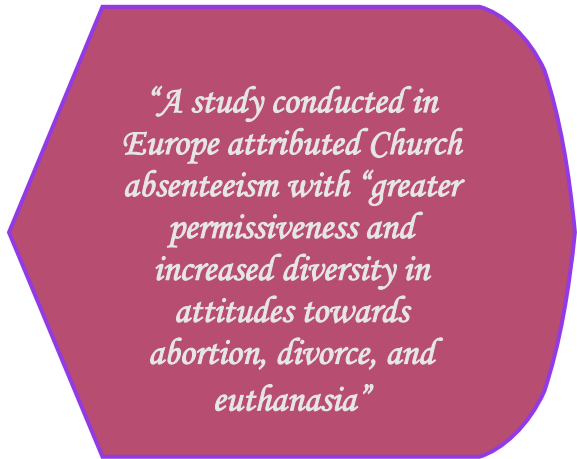
1.0 Introduction

A Church is an assembly of believers who meet together to encourage one another by sharing the word of God (Hebrews 3:13), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), instruct, or teach one another (Romans 15:14), and share with one another. It represents a place where believers gather, a denomination such as the Methodist Church, or an assembly of Christians (Armentrout & Slocum, 2007). Thus, Church attendance can be defined as the Christians' 'moral duty' of congregating in the Church regularly in the common purpose of proclaiming the Christian faith, salvation through baptism (Armentrout & Slocum, 2007).

Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi (2015) state that attendance means that someone is present at a particular event or an institution. Similarly the general rule of the Methodist Church requires that every member should be attending all the ordinances of the Church, which includes public worship of God (Abraham & Kirby, 2011). Absenteeism does not only hurt the Church, but it also hurts individual's spiritual growth and maturity in Christian's life. It also leads to gaps in the continuity of systematic Bible teaching, weakens the overall connection with other church members and general devaluation of the Lord's Day.

Church absenteeism has been creeping slowly in the Church and now it has reached a tipping point where the Church needs to address it urgently before it drains off her members. Many scholars have investigated the reasons behind Church absenteeism. For example according to a research done by the

European Social Survey (2012), a third of the European Christians attended Church services at least once a month. In other countries such as France, only 15 per cent of its citizens attended the Church; in the UK, 10 per cent attended the Church; 5.6 per cent of Australians citizens attended the Church, while 5.6 per cent of Dutch citizens attended the Church (National Church Life Survey (NCLS), 2012).



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The Methodist church has also experienced members' absenteeism. For example, a report received from the department of Church mission in Britain (2014) showed that there was serious decline of Methodist Church members in Britain. It showed a 3.7 per cent year decline, and a reduction of 29.35 per cent church attendance overall.

In United States of America, the united Methodist continued to decline with nearly 72,000 members, with 18 Conferences reporting membership losses of 2 percent or more (Report 2011). Another survey done in 2010 showed that 33,000 churches had declined by nearly 10 percent in membership. According to Orton & Hart (2017), Methodist membership declined in

weekly attendance from 17.0 per cent to 15.1 per cent between year 2009 and 2014. This was attributed to age and family movements. In Africa, the Methodist Church is also experiencing the problem of absenteeism. In South Africa, membership in Protestant Churches among the black people dropped by about 19 per cent between 2005 and 2012.

This figure was way above the global average of 9 per cent (Nel & Schoeman, 2015). In East Africa region, particularly, Uganda and Tanzania, weekly Church attendance is ranked at above 80 percent according to the Pew Research Center (2018). However, according to Methodist Commission Survey (2010) done in South Africa between year 1998 and 2001, the mainstream churches membership, including Methodist, declined from 11.7 percent to 15.1 percent in attendance.

The Methodist Church in Kenya is also experiencing the same problem of church absenteeism. For instance, in Nyambene Synod, 13,208 adult and 6481 youth were registered as members in their respective Churches across the Synod in 2019. However, in the first quarter, 650 adults and 820 youth did not meet the attendance threshold of at least three services in a month. In the second quarter, this number increased by 1.5 per cent and in the final quarter it increased by 2.1 per cent (Synod Statistical returns, 2019). From these statistics, it is clear that the church is experience decline in church attendance, which needs to be addressed urgently.

Statement of the problem

The Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod is experiencing a significant church absenteeism among the adults and the youth. From the recent data reported by the Service Attendance Register, the number of congregants attending weekly Church services has been declining steadily. For instance, in this Synod 13,208 adult and 6481 youth were registered as members in their respective Churches across the Synod in 2019. However, in the first quarter, 650 adults and 820 youth did not meet the attendance threshold of at least three services in a month. In the second quarter, this number increased by 1.5 per cent, and in the final quarter, it increased by 2.1 per cent (MCK Nyambene Synod Statistical returns, 2019).

A study conducted in Europe attributed Church absenteeism with “greater permissiveness and increased diversity in attitudes towards abortion, divorce, and euthanasia” (Halman & Van Ingen, 2015). This moral decadence is also likely to affect the youth and children who may lead to even worse Church attendance records in the future. Just as in the rest of the world, the reasons for the declining Church attendance numbers and absenteeism are largely unknown among the Church clergy. At this time, the 0.5-1 per cent (Synod statistical return 2019) annual contraction in attendance at Nyambene Synod might seem insignificant in terms of numbers; however, the accompanying consequences threaten the continuity of beliefs and values of the Church profoundly.

The challenge also implies that there will be gaps in the continuity of systematic Bible teachings, increased workload for committed Church leaders and members, weakening of the overall connection with other members, and general devaluation of the Lord's Day. Hence, this study anticipates that if the reasons for absenteeism are known, Church leaders will potentially make better decisions to improve Church attendance and avert the dangers associated with the current declining trends in church attendance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the home-based factors that contribute to church absenteeism among adults and youth members from Sunday to Sunday at Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod, Meru County, Kenya.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the home-based factors that contribute to church absenteeism among the adults and youth members of MCK Nyambene Synod, Meru County, Kenya.

Research Questions of the Study

How the home-based factors contribute to church absenteeism at Methodist Churches in Kenya Nyambene Synod, Meru County, Kenya?

The empirical literature on factors contributing to church absenteeism in the Church

There are several home-based factors that contribute to church absenteeism. According to Wali (2016), these factors include parents' level of education, family income, and family size. Currently, many governments and individuals consider education as an essential tool to deal with challenges affecting the world. First, as observed by Segall et al. (2015), education either changes or reinforces the beliefs of parents. It also improves critical thinking which enables individuals to examine religious texts and to interpret them accordingly. Secondly, there are many translations of the bible, including local languages. However, as explained by Molosiwa (2020), some people are illiterate. Thus, they lack the essential skills needed to read and understand various versions of the bible. For example, in Botswana many people still depend on translators in Church services since they do not understand English (Molosiwa, 2020). Therefore, some of these people fail to attend the church if translators are not available.

Family income also affects religiosity and church attendance. Evaluated evidence suggests that families with higher income are more likely to attend church compared to low-earning ones. A study conducted by Schwadel et al. (2009) concluded that low-income individuals attended Church less often than other people. Another research conducted by Buser (2015) indicated that families that earn higher go to Church more often. According to these arguments, when the overall income of the society improves,

the number of Church attendees also goes up. Family dynamics such as family size and family lifecycle also affect Church attendance and absenteeism, Petts (2019) states that religion and family life are inherently intertwined institutions. These claims are supported by Marks and Dollahite (2016) who posit that religion contributes to higher family functioning and improved family relationships. These studies indicate a causal relationship between family dynamics and religiosity.

Theoretical review of the study

The secularization theory is perhaps the most plausible theory in religion and theological studies to explain religious attendance. Based on this theory, religious gathering is determined by the competition between demand for religious goods and supply for secular goods (Stolz & Tanner, 2017). Thus, the general hypothesis in this theory is that increased human development increases the supply of secular goods. In this case, human development is defined by such factors as education, income levels, and state of health.

Thus, increased human development translates to a higher secular utility, mostly at the expense of religious utility. Further, in the pursuit for either of these goods, an individual has to make a tradeoff. Both religious and secular goods require investments in effort, time, and money (Dhima & Golder, 2020). Thus, when an individual is inclined to the pursuit of secular goods, then compromises have to be made in the pursuit of religious goods, and

consequently results to reduced religious attendance.

2.0 Materials and Methods

This study employed descriptive research design. Descriptive design is suitable in gathering data on the perception of the population in addressing research questions. This research was carried out in Methodist church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod in Meru County. The Synod has 24 circuits (administrative units). The target population comprised 28,015 members in MCK Nyambene Synod as per annual Statistical return and reports (2019). The sample size for this study comprised 379 respondents from eight Circuits. This figure was derived from the sampling table formulated by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and also qualified by Kothari (2009) who states that for descriptive studies, the most appropriate sample size ranges from 10% to 30%. Therefore, 30% of the Circuits in Nyambene Synod were included in the study as illustrated in table 1 below. Simple random and stratified sampling techniques were utilized to pick respondents to be included in the research.

Data collection was done through structured questionnaires. Two questionnaires were developed to obtain information on factors contributing to Church absenteeism among adult and youth members. Section A had two items on demographic information of the respondents, while section B had home based factors contributing to church absenteeism. The pre-test involved 38 respondents from Miathene Synod, which is 10 percent of the sample size. Miathene Synod was chosen for pilot study since it

neighbors Nyambene Synod and is also located in Meru County. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version

25) was utilized for data analysis. Further, the study employed descriptive statistics and Chi-Square Tests in data analysis.

Figure 1

Formula for determining sample size

Formula for determining sample size

$$s = X^2 NP(1 - P) + d^2 (N - 1) + X^2 P(1 - P)$$

s = required sample size.

X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).

N = the population size.

P = the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the maximum sample size).

d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (.05).

Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970

Table 1

Determination of Sample size

Total Circuits	No. of	Sample size for the circuits (30%)	Target population	Sample size : As per Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table
24		8	28,015	379

3.0 Results and Discussions

Response rate

A total of 379 questionnaires were distributed to the sampled members of MCK Nyambene Synod, comprising of 189 youths and 190 adults of men and women fellowship. As shown in Table 2, a total of

334 questionnaires were successfully completed; 163 youths and 171 members of men and women fellowship. This represents 88.1 percent of the questionnaires. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2009), above 50 percent return rate of the questionnaires is acceptable.

Table 2

Response Rate

Respondents' Category	No. Distributed	No. Completed	Percentage Completed
Youth	189	163	86.2
Men and Women	190	171	90
Total	379	334	88.1

Table 3

Distribution of youth respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	75	46.0
Female	88	54.0
Total	163	100.0

The profile of the respondents details their gender category. Results displayed in Table 3 indicate that 54 percent of the youths included in the study were females, while 46 percent were males. These results suggest

that both genders were adequately represented in the study in nearly equal proportions. This was good for the study as it could allow for comparison of variables scores between the genders

Table 4

Distribution of respondents in men and women fellowship by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	84	49.1
Female	87	50.9
Total	171	100.0

Results displayed in table 4 revealed that 49.1 percent of the respondents were men, while females comprised 50.9 percent of the respondents. Hence, both genders were adequately represented in the study in nearly equal proportions. This result was good for the study since each gender was adequately

represented and thus, scores for various study variables could be compared between genders. This meant that the result for the study would clearly show a positive outcome and results which confirmed the home-based factors affecting church absenteeism in the church.

Table 5

Assignment of tasking chores on Sundays

Assignment of tasking chores	Frequency	Percent
Tasking chores assigned	27	16.6
Not assigned	114	69.9
Not applicable	22	13.5
Total	163	100.0

Respondents were asked whether their parents assigned them tasking chores on Sundays. As shown in Table 5, more than two thirds of the respondents, 69.9 percent indicated that they were not given tasking assignments on Sunday, while 16.6 percent gave a differing response. A small proportion of the respondents, 13.5 percent,

was living independent of their parents and thus gave ‘not applicable’ response. These results suggest that some parents were not mindful of their children church attendance. Nearly a fifth of the respondents attested that they were assigned tasking chores on Sundays.

Table 6

Church absenteeism and home based factors

Home based factor item	D		N		A	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
When there is a fundraiser in Church, some people are likely to miss due to lack of funds to contribute	9	5.3	22	12.9	140	81.9

To examine home based factors and their influence on Church absenteeism in respect to fundraiser in church as shown in table 6, it was found out that some people were likely to miss due to lack of funds to contribute in fundraisers. Majority of the respondents, 81.9 percent agreed, 12.9 percent were unsure and thus gave a neutral

response, while 5.3 percent disagreed. These results imply that church levies were significantly associated with church absenteeism. This finding is in line with that of Juma (2015), who argued that in some instances, unemployed individuals failed to attend church to avoid stigma and criticism from other members of the church who are more affluent

Table 7

Chi-Square Tests of Church attendance for the youth and tasking chores on Sundays

	Value	df	P – Value
Pearson Chi-Square	64.5	8	.000
Likelihood Ratio	66.5	8	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	22.3	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	163		

Church attendance rating was used to examine the dependent variables for the study, namely; Church absenteeism. The rating was done both for the youth respondents and for members of men and women fellowship. The youth respondents were asked to rate their Church attendance. More than two-thirds failed to attend church regularly. A cross tabulation was done to examine the relationship between Church absenteeism and assignment of tasking chores on Sundays. Further, a chi square test was performed to examine the relationship between the Church absenteeism and tasking

chores on Sundays. The relationship between the Church absenteeism and tasking chores on Sundays was significant, $\chi^2 (8, N = 163) = 64.5, p < .001$, as shown in Table 7. Hence, the prevalence of Church absenteeism among youths who were assigned tasking chores on Sundays was higher than that of their counterparts not assigned tasking chores on Sundays. This finding supports the observation of Petts (2019) who stated that religion and family life are inherently intertwined institutions, such that family chores affected church attendance.

Table 7

Frequency of Church absenteeism due to work/school engagement based on Gender

Frequency of missing Church (Youth)		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Never	F	20	12	32
	%	26.7%	13.6%	19.6%
Few times	F	25	35	60
	%	33.3%	39.8%	36.8%
Sometimes	F	15	35	50
	%	20.0%	39.8%	30.7%
Frequently	F	15	0	15
	%	20.0%	.0%	9.2%
Almost always	F	0	6	6
	%	.0%	6.8%	3.7%
Total	F	75	88	163
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Additionally, a cross tabulation was done to examine the relationship between Church absenteeism due to work/school engagement and gender. A chi square test was performed to examine the relationship between church absenteeism due to school/work engagements and gender. The relationship between the church absenteeism due to school/work engagements and gender was significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 163) = 31.8, p < .001$, as shown in Table 7. Hence, Church absenteeism due to school/work engagements varied significantly between genders. Subsequently, the prevalence of church absenteeism due to school/work engagements among the female youths was much higher than that of their male counterparts. This affirms the argument by Hungerman (2014) that involvement in

school affect religious immensely due to the nature of time and activities involved within the week. Education also affects how people perceive the importance of church participation and devotional activities. Schwadel (2011) claims that increase in education leads many people to compartmentalize religion to weekend service attendance. These assertions are supported by Cragun et al. (2019) who argue that many christians believe that attending church on Saturday or Sunday is essential to maintain and improve their spirituality. Weekend masses are associated with activities such as prayer, reading the bible, and worship. Therefore, education can affect Christians’ perception of the importance of church attendance and participation.

Table 8

Church absenteeism ratings for members of men and women fellowship

	Frequency	Percent
I always attend Church	93	54.4
I attend Church 2 to 3 times a month	46	26.9
I attend Church once a month	16	9.4
I attend Church few times in a year	16	9.4
Total	171	100.0

In respect to church attendance ratings for members of the men and women fellowships, 54.4 percent of respondents indicated that they always attended church, while 26.9 percent stated that they attended Church 2 to 3 times a month as shown in Table 8. A small proportion of the

respondents (9.4 percent) specified that they attended church once a month; and a similar proportion specified church attendance of a few times in a year. Nearly half of the respondents indicated Low Church attendance.

Table 9

Chi-Square Tests of Church attendance and previous commitment to Sunday school

	Value	df	P – Value
Pearson Chi-Square	44.4	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	51.3	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	33.8	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	171		

A cross tabulation was done to examine the relationship between church absenteeism in the previously committed to Sunday school attendees. A chi square test was performed to examine the relationship between church absenteeism for the previous commitment to Sunday school. The relationship between irregular church attendance and previous commitment to Sunday school was significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 171) = 44.4, p < .001$ as shown in Table 9. Hence, prevalence church absenteeism among respondents whose parents did not play a significant role in their Sunday school affairs was higher than that of their counterparts whose parents were keen on their Sunday school affairs.

This finding is in line with the assertion of Pattachini and Zenou (2016) who argued that religious beliefs are transmitted from parents to children. These observations explain why most people inherit their religion from other family members. According to Petts (2019), the parenting style used by parents can be helpful or detrimental in transmitting the faith to the children. Dollahite et al. (2019) also states that affectionate independence parenting

style is ultimate impart christian commitment and denominational loyalty in children. Therefore, as these children develop into adults, they uphold less religious perspectives that contribute to lower church attendance rates and poor religious background.

4.0 Conclusion

The study established a very strong correlation between the church attendance by the youth and their parents. Thus, parents played a significant role in the choice of church for their children. Poor background was a major contributor to Church absenteeism. Youth from poor families were more likely to miss Church than their counterparts from rich families. Lack of monies to channel during designated fundraiser days was a key contributor to church absenteeism among the adults and the youth. Moreover, lack of parental guidance was significantly associated with church absenteeism. Equally, unfriendly relationship between the youth and their parents greatly contributed to church absenteeism among the youth. In addition,

youth missed church due to tasking chores assigned to them by their parents on Sundays.

5.0 Recommendations

From the conclusions arrived at in respect to the home-based factors affecting church absenteeism, the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations; that the church leadership should conduct frequent parental seminars on importance of attending the church since lack of proper parenting is associated with church absenteeism. Secondly, the church leaders need to use cell group leaders to intensify

pastoral care to all members, including absentees so as to curb absenteeism in the church.

Thirdly, the Church leadership needs to organize team building activities for the respective church groups to ensure harmonious relationship and avoid stigma and criticism that is ignited from difference family backgrounds. Further, church leadership should strategize on ways to initiate income generating activities to supplement Sunday offerings and thus minimize the need for frequent fundraisers which are associated with church absenteeism.

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