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Ethiopian Orthodox Church Leadership Support of Youth from Ethiopian Immigrant Families in the United States

Beimnet Bekele

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Approval Signatures:

_____
Tana L. Hasart, EdD   Date
Committee Chair

_____
Laurie Stevahn, PhD   Date
Committee Member

_____
Margit McGuire, PhD   Date
Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in the United States can successfully attract and retain young adults ages 18–30. Additionally, this research examines the factors that cause young adults to leave or stay in the EOTC and makes recommendations for changes that can improve retention rates.

A significant challenge for the EOTC in the United States is that of youth retention. Young adults often leave the church following graduation from high school. According to a Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015), the decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within Christian religious communities is a worldwide issue, not limited to any religious denomination, race, or location.

Studies show that attending church has psychological, educational, and behavioral benefits for young adults. Active church youth are more likely to avoid drug use, delinquency, and early sexual activity (Regnerus, 2000; Agyekum & Newbold, 2016). Due to the absence of young adults, churches close as the membership becomes smaller, risking their essential role to congregants and communities. Several studies indicate that young adults do not feel a sense of belonging, which leads to their leaving or disengagement from the church.

Knowing about the church experiences of young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families in the U.S. can provide leaders in the church with important information on developing meaningful experiences for these youth to support and encourage active participation in the church. Qualitative interviews of eight EOTC church leaders, four

active youth members, and four inactive youth members provided information about perceived factors influencing young adult retention in the EOTC. The three strongest factors perceived to cause youth to leave the Church are (a) the EOTC not justifying its relevance for young parishioners; (b) the low engagement of young parishioners in Church communities, events, and services linked to the EOTC's conservatism, language barriers, and not customizing Church events to meet youth needs and expectations; and (c) exposure of young adherents to external factors that discourage them from staying at the EOTC, such as American values and career aspirations. Results also point to three significant areas for consideration to improve youth retention in the EOTC, including (a) cultivating a sense of belonging; (b) customizing engaging activities and leadership assignments that support youth involvement, empowerment, and learning; and (c) encouraging parental support.

Keywords: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, clergy leadership qualities, church youth retention, church change processes, youth engagement, church retention

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Dedication

I have always put the interest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) first. I have been diligently working to bring followers of EOTC together. I have always followed the dogma, canon laws, rituals, and traditions of the EOTC. Growing up in a community of strong Christian faith and in a Church with a rich culture, heritage, and rituals, it was etched in my heart to serve the Church and God throughout my whole life with my time, money, knowledge, and efforts. From the time I was the age of 7, I started memorizing the Psalms, prayer books, and many Biblical verses in Ge'ez and Amharic in the Church.

After arriving in the U.S., I became disheartened when I saw young adults detached from the Church. I served four Churches in four different states, and it allowed me to see how disengaged and less involved the young adult population is within the Church. The youth and young adult generations represent future leaders, clergy members, hymns, and Church members. Their lack of engagement leaves one to wonder about the future impact on the Church. So, studying this phenomenon was so important to me.

Hopefully, this dissertation will be their "voice." This lack of engagement is a growing issue and will never get better until young adults' voices and perspectives are heard and understood, and action is taken by the leaders and congregations of the Church. This study is dedicated to Church leaders, hoping that it will inform and inspire them to step back, take a closer but transparent look at themselves, and wholeheartedly make changes that will motivate and encourage engagement with the next EOTC generation.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Problem Statement

Since 2012, through personal observation of four Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) congregations, it is evident that young adults often become detached from their Church following their high school graduation as they realize more significant levels of independence (Bekele, Personal observation, 2020). Furthermore, according to a Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015), the decline in the young adult population's presence and engagement within Christian religious communities has become a global problem, not limited to any spiritual denomination, race, or location.

Studies show that church service attendance has positive psychological, educational, and behavioral implications for young adults (Zeiders et al., 2016). Moreover, religious youth activities clearly label drug abuse, delinquency, and sexual activities among adolescents as negative behavioral traits (Regnerus, 2000; Agyekum & Newbold, 2016). Many youths active in church activities have steered away many from these harmful practices. Young adults are the next to carry out and preserve the church's faith for generations to come; they hold the key to the church's continuation. Nevertheless, young adults leaving the EOTC pose a severe risk to its perpetuation in the United States.

This dissertation investigates how the United States EOTC can employ strategies to attract and retain young adults ages 18–30 more successfully. Knowing about the Church experience of young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families in the United States may provide leaders in the Church with important information about providing

meaningful experiences that young adults can relate to, thus retaining their active and

continued participation in the church.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the role that EOTC leadership has in

retaining young Ethiopian immigrants as congregants. The study will also explore church

leaders' practices that contribute to retaining young adult congregants and issues that pose

challenges to church attendance and affiliation. Finally, this study will focus on the

reasons for retention or lack of retention of young adults within the church following

their graduation from high school or emergence into adulthood.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What factors contribute to young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families
   attending and remaining active in their local Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo
   Church?
2. What factors contribute to young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families
   leaving their local Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church?
3. What leadership qualities are necessary for Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo
   Church leaders to provide meaningful and supportive experiences for young
   adults from Ethiopian immigrant families living in the United States?

Rationale for the Study

The United States has, in the past decade, seen a high influx of Ethiopian family

immigrants (Tefera & Castro, 2016). Confronted with a new environment's challenges,

most young immigrants ages 18 to 30 tend to experience recurrent psychological and

emotional stress from cultural shock (Kindarara et al., 2017). This study will explore the role church leadership may play in easing transitional distress among groups of young immigrants due to their church attendance. Unfortunately, previous research has predominantly ignored the role of spiritual leaders. Therefore, this study's first purpose is to understand the role that EOTC leaders have in assisting young Ethiopians from immigrant families in adjusting to their new environment in the United States through Church affiliation.

Withstanding the role church leadership has in facilitating immigrant resettlement and offering social services, continuing debates about the source of displacement difficulty causes many to ignore the role church leaders have in helping youth from immigrant families adjust to a new environment (Temesgen & Tsega, 2019). Tura et al. (2017) found that many international organizations focus on providing monetary and resource support to immigrants but ignore the role faith-based leadership plays in the lives of immigrants.

In addition to the impact that religion has on immigrants' lives, there is a significant relationship between immigrant relocation and religion. Tesfaye (2017) noted that migration is not a random act. He posits that immigration is a theologizing journey directly linked to one's spirituality and social life. This research, presently focusing on religion's immigration and resettlement role, may help fill this gap.

When considering previous research on the relationship between church and young adults, it is essential to note the role of church leaders in supporting youth, especially those in immigrant families from foreign countries. Therefore, another rationale for conducting this study includes many independent churches that serve

refugees and the increasing number of immigrants who enter the United States because of church assistance. For example, the Lutheran church has assisted 379,000 refugees since 1930 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020). Under its 108 charities, the Catholic Church assisted about 300,000 immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in 2018 (Catholic Charities USA, 2019). This study may provide insights that can help church leaders more effectively aid young immigrants and youth born in the United States into immigrant families who struggle socially, emotionally, and financially.

Understanding how leadership and religious affiliations influence the integration of young adults from immigrant families into their new environment is essential to immigrant sociology and the study of immigrant patterns of behavior. Socioeconomic integration of immigrants, particularly youth, recently became a significant policy concern in immigrant-receiving regions in the United States, primarily based on higher unemployment rates among young relocating people and social challenges that hinder their integration into society (Ramakrishnan, 2005). Research results pose a question as to whether church leadership can reduce suffering among youth in immigrant families. This proposed study builds on previously published literature regarding immigrant youth by extending understanding of how church leaders can help young people more effectively settle in a new environment.

Significance of the Study

This study can provide information that will inform church leaders about their role in supporting young people ages 18 to 30 in immigrant families. The role of church leaders in providing financial, social, and spiritual support to immigrant families can be

clarified, allowing for better youth facilitation from such families into a new society and culture.

The loss of the young adult population has been a critical issue facing leaders of the EOTC. Hopefully, this study will bring to light the EOTC young adult population's concerns about the causes for lack of youth retention while providing some suggestions on what EOTC leaders can do to increase engagement. Ultimately, the goal will be to provide answers and recommendations to the EOTC leadership and the church at large since this is not only an EOTC concern but a universal church concern. This study may also help other churches dealing with young adult retention and inclusion issues. Church leaders must understand the factors that motivate young adults to attend church if they want to increase and retain membership and active engagement of this population.

Summary

By understanding the support that young adults need, church leaders may be better able to (a) understand the nature of the challenges that young people from immigrant families encounter and (b) help them devise strategies to alleviate resettlement challenges. Study findings may also be helpful for governmental institutions by informing them of the difficulties that young immigrants face in their new countries and reinforcing the need to partner with churches to provide essential support. Finally, the study may offer findings that help church leaders and government authorities identify policies and practices toward increasing vital support and reducing psychological and emotional challenges of young people from immigrant families.

Definition of Terms

Adherent. A faithful member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, observing the religious practices and participating in the Orthodox lifestyle.

Amharic. The national language of Ethiopia, derived from Ge'ez. A Semitic language that uses a consonant/vowel symbolic alphabetic system. It is the only alphabet to be indigenous to Africa.

Asylum seeker. Asylum seekers are not officially designated refugees, but they have appealed to achieve refugee status. They leave their country of origin to escape war or persecution due to their nationality, race, religion, or political affiliation.

Bahire Hasab. Literally "Sea of Thought" or figuratively as "the Dates of the Ages." A calendar typically located in the appendix of various Ethiopian Orthodox prayer books, expounding the date and day of significant holidays and fasting days from year to year, usually decades into the future.

Church / church. Church (capitalized) refers to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. In contrast, church (lower-case) refers to other Christian denominations.

Christians. Christians profess to trust in Jesus Christ and try to live lives of obedience to his instructions on loving all peoples.

Diaspora. A term used to designate Ethiopians who have fled from their country due to political turmoil, seeking refuge and livelihood in countries worldwide. This community of Ethiopians has been fundamental in establishing the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo faith around the world.

EOTC. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) is a member of the Oriental Orthodox Communion (including Egyptians, Syrians, Armenians, East Indians, and Eritreans).

EOTC congregant member. A congregant member pays dues and attends church regularly (at least 2–3 times a month).

Ge'ez. The ancient common language of Ethiopia, prominent during the Axumite Empire from 80 BC until 1000 AC. Today, Ge'ez is still heavily used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church during Holy Prayer services. The language is traditionally taught as the language of the Angels and relied upon for Church sermons and teaching.

Holy Synod. The Holy Synod is the standing council of archbishops led by a patriarch considered the first amongst equals. The Holy Synod is the highest authoritative body of the EOTC.

Holy Synod in exile. In exile, the Holy Synod is the standing council of archbishops led by the 4th patriarch of the EOTC who fled Ethiopia in 1991 for North America seeking asylum by claiming political persecution. This body in North America had a competing claim of ecclesiastical authority over Ethiopia with the standing council of archbishops in Ethiopia, led by the 5th and 6th patriarchs. In 2018, these two synods reconciled, and for the first time in history, two co-ruling patriarchs led the EOTC.

Immigrant. An immigrant is an individual who willingly leaves their country of origin, legally enters another country, and is granted permission to resettle, thus qualifying them to work without restriction permanently.

Kidassie. A Ge'ez word meaning "Hallowing" or "Sanctifying." An accurate English correlation would be "Divine Eucharistic Liturgy." A ritualistic Worship,

Kidassie is the practice of offering up the Holy Sacrifice as taught by Jesus Christ, where bread and wine are transformed into the Holy Body and Precious Blood of Jesus Christ and offered to the Orthodox faithful for the remission of sin and eternal life.

Mahilet. The morning or overnight celebratory hymnology performed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy preceding significant holidays, created and developed by St. Yared in the 4th century in Ethiopia. Ceremonial and stoic drumming and dancing accompany vocal singing. Relegated only to the clergy, the subjects of the hymnology are often the praising of God, his Saints, and Martyrs. The services usually take hours to complete, spanning from spontaneous poetic pros to lively upbeat jubilee singing.

Mahiber. Ge'ez and Amharic word meaning "Congregation." Within the Divine Eucharistic Liturgy or "Kidassie" context, the term denotes those who gather inside the church to participate in the prayer service. Outside of the prayer service, Mahiber refers to a group of people who regularly meet to share food and drink at each other's houses in a religious setting and in the name of saints.

Mezmur. A Ge'ez and Amharic word referring to the hymns sung by the choir of the church. Devotees perform songs through voice, drum, and stoic dancing after the Divine Eucharistic Liturgy has finished. The clergy and church congregation typically sing and participate in these celebratory songs. The subject of the songs is religious, often giving thanks to God and referring to theological mysteries surround the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo faith.

Orthodox. Eastern and Oriental are two prefixes used for two different communions claiming to be Orthodox. The Eastern Orthodox are connected historically with Byzantium or the Eastern Roman Empire and later expanded to include the Slavs.

The Oriental Orthodox are associated historically with Alexandria and Antioch and after the Armenian and Aksumite empires (the ancient Ethiopian empire).

  Refugee. A refugee flees their country due to war, persecution, or because their home government cannot or will not protect them. When a refugee flees, they register with an official agency, such as a government or the United Nations, to gain state and international aid and assistance.

  Youth (in general). Youth is a general term used differently by different scholars and institutions. Youth, according to this study, are people ages 18–30.

  Youth from Ethiopian immigrant families. These are young people born to Ethiopian immigrants, either before or after the family came to the United States. According to this study, youth are ages 18 through 30 and are either active or inactive members of their local EOTC parish.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction and Conceptual Frameworks

This study's primary goal is to extend and contribute to scholarly knowledge of leadership practices of EOTC leaders concerning their support of young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families and how these practices may lead to Church membership retention. The respective Church leadership styles directly impact the problem of suffering among transitioning immigrants in host countries and the declining number of young adult Church members.

Bass's (1985) *Transformational Leadership Theory* and Greenleaf's (1977) *Servant Leadership Theory* inform this study because of their emphasis on (a) leadership as a learned skill and (b) the need for leaders to serve those who follow. These two theories apply to church leaders seeking to improve their practice.

According to Bass (1985), leaders are at the center of the group of followers, and their effort is likely to influence followers positively. Previously, Transformational Leadership Theory focused on the impact that leadership practices have on the growth of followers. In this regard, transformational leaders influence their followers and sway them toward realizing identified goals. By exhibiting transformational leadership practices and behaviors, leaders in an organization are likely to influence, inspire, and motivate outstanding achievement among their followers.

For this study, Bass's (1985) theory helps clarify how church leaders use various constructs of transformational leadership frameworks, such as idealized influences, individualized consideration, individualized motivation, and intellectual stimulation, to help young adult immigrants. Idealized influence is the charismatic element of

transformational leadership in which leaders become role models who are admired, respected, and emulated by followers (Avolio & Bass, 2002). Therefore, followers demonstrate a high degree of trust in such leaders (Bass, 1990; Jung & Avolio, 2000). The development of a shared vision is an integral component of the idealized transformational leader's role (Jung & Avolio, 2000).

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate others by "providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work" (Avolio & Bass, 2002, p. 2). The transformational leader builds relationships with followers through interactive communication, which forms a cultural bond and leads to shifting values by both parties toward common ground (Bass, 1998). Through intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts "to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways" (Avolio & Bass, 2002, p. 2). Leaders should stimulate their followers by encouraging and supportively criticizing those being mentored privately and in meaningful ways.

The transformational leader disburses personal attention to followers based on the individual follower's needs for achievement and growth (Avolio & Bass, 2002). To do this, the leader acts as a mentor or coach, developing followers in a supportive climate to "higher levels of potential" (Bass, 1998, p. 6). The considerate leader recognizes and demonstrates acceptance of the followers' differences in terms of needs and desires. The transformational leadership model suggests that a leader who can use idealized influence and personal consideration is likely to provide the required social, economic, and psychological support needed by immigrants, thereby contributing to their growth, happiness, and joy.

Greenleaf (1977) described servant leadership as an inherent feeling that a person must serve others first. Servant leadership focuses on others rather than self and on understanding their role as servants (Greenleaf, 1977). Self-interest should not motivate servant leadership; instead, it should ascend to a higher motivation level (Greenleaf, 1977; Pollard, 1996). The servant leader's primary objective is to serve and meet others' needs, optimizing the prime motivation for leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). Servant leaders develop people, helping them to strive and flourish (McMinn, 2001). Servant leaders provide vision, gain credibility and trust from followers, and influence others in ways that strive to be positive for everyone (Farling et al., 1999).

Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership theory's central theme is that leaders should serve with kindness and bravery by attending to followers' needs and ensuring they are satisfied. Therefore, this theory will help understand the extent to which church leaders are dedicated servants in assisting and supporting young adult immigrants' settlement in the United States.

Figure 1

Four Basic Elements of Transformational Leadership
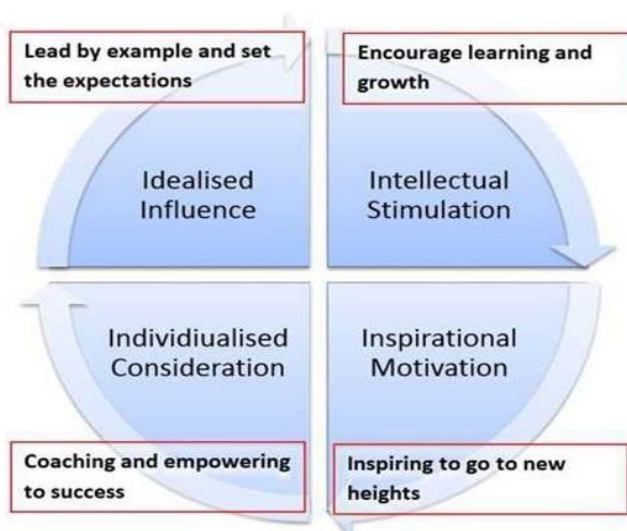
The transformational leadership and servant leadership theoretical models provide grounding concepts that will inform this study by addressing Church leadership and its support and ability to retain young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families as Church members. According to both the Bass (1985) and Greenleaf (1977) theories of leadership, these concepts are foundational: (a) influence, (b) vision, (c) trust, (d) respect or credibility, (e) risk-sharing or delegation, (f) integrity, and (g) modeling. In addition, transformational leadership and servant leadership emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people by listening, mentoring, teaching, and empowering followers. The theories are probably most similar in their emphasis on individualized considerations and appreciation of followers (Stone et al., 2004).

History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the United States

There are two categories of orthodox churches in the world, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) is one of the six largest among this group. Tewahedo is a Ge'ez word conveying the meaning of being made one or unified, referring to the Oriental Orthodox doctrine of the united Divine and Human natures of Christ. So, the Oriental Orthodox churches include the Coptic Orthodox, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo, the Syriac Orthodox (sometimes referred to as Jacobite), the Armenian Apostolic, the Eritrean Orthodox, and the Malankara (Indian) Orthodox churches. These churches are in a spiritual union, sharing the common belief about the Biblical mystery of Incarnation (Engedayehu, 2016).

The EOTC foreign ministry started in the holy city of Jerusalem. As the Bible notes, the spiritual tie between Ethiopia and Jerusalem began before the coming of Christ and during the period of King Solomon (English Standard Version Bible, 2017, 1 Chron

10:1). For approximately 1,500 years, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had a significant

presence in Jerusalem (Abbott, 2019; Ancel, 2018). Binns (2016) notes that the

connection between Jerusalem and Ethiopia can be traced back to 1000 BC when Queen

Sheba visited King Solomon. These rich religious connections linking Jerusalem to

Ethiopia include monks and nuns from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church who maintained

close ties with Black Christians in Jerusalem since 1000 BC (Asale, 2016; Afework

Bitew et al., 2016). The presence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church nuns in Jerusalem

resulted from Ethiopian Emperors' decisions in past centuries (An, 2016).

The presence of the EOTC beyond the Ethiopian borders has extended and grown

in many different countries. In the past (approximately 6 decades ago), the EOTC existed

beyond Ethiopia's border and opened branches in other countries. People who sought an

indigenous African Church brought the EOTC to the Western Hemisphere in the 1930s.

When Emperor Haile Selassie visited Jamaica in 1968, the country welcomed him

because of Ethiopia's symbolic significance to the Black diaspora. Rastafarians

considered Selassie as the modern-day Messiah, but Haile Selassie denied that he was a

deity. After the trip, the emperor instructed church officials, including Abba Laeke

Mariam, to bring Rastafarians into the church's fold, and Selassie began to minister

specifically to the Rastafarian community (MacLeod, 2014).

As a result of their new presence in the Caribbean, the EOTC missionary effort

considered expanding its unique teachings and beliefs to Tobago and Trinidad

(Alexander & Philip, 2018). With a continued presence in the Caribbean islands and the

need to reach more people with its teachings, the EOTC mission expanded its North

American presence. Its manifestation in the United States resulted from Haile Selassie's

orders, which wanted Ethiopian priests and deacons to acquire advanced studies

(Kalbian, 2018; Keon-Sang, 2016; Kent & Orlowska, 2018).

However, after completing their mission in the United States, some Ethiopian

priests and deacons chose to remain there. An example of members who stayed behind

was Father Laike Mandefro (Leslie, 2019; Malara, 2019). Father Mandefro established a

congregation in the Bronx area of New York to encourage all Ethiopians living in the

Western Hemisphere to atone their souls (Mengist, 2018; Nekatibeb, 2018; Oyebade,

2016). Within a few years, Father Mandefro, known as Abune Yesaq, became a Bishop

within the Orthodox religion. In 1979 he was officially appointed to be the Archbishop

for the North American diocese of the EOTC. Until his death in 2005, Father Mandefro

dedicated his entire life to helping and expanding EOTC's presence in the Caribbean and

North America writ large (Buda, 2019; Chernela et al., 2019). His leadership also

supported the building of churches in Guyana, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

Whereas the expansion of EOTC in the Caribbean and the presence of Ethiopian-

owned churches in the city of Jerusalem many centuries ago are unique in history, the rise

and predominance of EOTC teachings in North America have been the most surprising

church development aspect (Olson et al., 2018; Palo, 2020; Priess, 2017). While the

precise number of EOTC congregations beyond Ethiopian boundaries is unknown,

statistics show that the number of Churches in America, New Zealand, Africa, and

Australia has significantly increased over the past 10 years. Among church historians,

religious expansion fueled the EOTC immigrant surge in North America (Revis, 2016;

Reynolds et al., 2017). Including clergy who serve as missionaries, Ethiopian immigrants

in the United States assemble and establish a spiritual fellowship guided by the principles

and teachings of founding EOTC communities of faith (Temesgen & Tsega, 2019; Tefera & Castro, 2016).

Current statistics suggest that over one million immigrants from Ethiopia migrated to Northern America (Wordofa, 2017). In turn, this significant influx of immigrants into the United States, particularly from Ethiopia, has accelerated the spread of EOTC congregations in the United States. An extensive history of this movement by Chacko and Gebre (2017) provides important insights. Among those immigrants who moved to North America were many senior clerics (Desalegn et al., 2018; Dulin, 2017; Kaplan, 2018). In the 1990s, the senior EOTC Archbishop established the Holy Synod in exile. This action heralded His Holiness Patriarch Merkorios (Goodin et al., 2019; Guglielmi, 2020). In turn, the founding Archbishops and senior members of the EOTC pledged allegiance to His Holiness Patriarch Merkorios, facilitating his exit from exile in Kenya (Engedayehu, 2016; Falola & Oyebade, 2016).

In 1991, a new regime came into power in Ethiopia by overthrowing the previous Marxist military junta that ruled from 1974–1991. This new regime uncanonically removed the incumbent patriarch and replaced him with a new patriarch (Engedayehu, 2016). Patriarch Merkorios, who was ejected, fled first to Kenya, then to the United States. In 1992, led by Patriarch Merkorios and Archbishop Melketsedek, a new EOTC Holy Synod in exile formed, claiming that Ethiopia's Holy Synod was illegal and illegitimate (Falola & Oyebade, 2016). In the view of the founders of the North American Synod, the EOTC could only have a legitimate synod with the legitimate Patriarch (Falola & Oyebade, 2016; Tesfaye, 2017). In Ethiopia, critics of Patriarch Merkorios and Archbishop Melketsedek argued the need for the Patriarch to not be in exile but instead

seated in Ethiopia for the Synod of the United States to be legal and legitimate (Fritsch & Kidane, 2020; Gobena, 2019).

Disregarding the conflict around the Synod's legality in New York, the EOTC continued establishing even more parishes in North America. This action removed the patriarch and paved the way to create the exiled Synod (Goldman, 2016). In addition, the consecrated archbishops in the various synods had an instrumental role in raising priests and deacons to ensure that they retained religious knowledge from the United States while remaining grounded in Addis Ababa's tenants (Goodin et al., 2019). This action has, in turn, increased the number of deacons and priests in the United States (Ghobadzadeh et al., 2015), paving the way for the establishment of new parishes and recruitment of new Church members.

The EOTC has a long and rich history that includes expansion to many parts of the world. Currently, there are more than 20 thousand members in the United States, and this number continues to grow as immigrants seek to formally stay connected with their adopted religious practices (Tefera & Castro, 2016).

Reasons for Declining Youth Membership in Churches

Some churches are recording a significant increase in the number of congregants (Burdick, 2018). In particular, the EOTC has seen a surge in the number of followers (approximated to be about 4 million congregants across the globe). Despite this increase in the number of church members, EOTC parishes record a sharp decline in the number of Christians attending Church services, particularly youth between 18 and 30. Similar statistics recorded by Sakellariou (2018) noted that only 12% of the Christians globally are Orthodox, reduced from 20% a century ago. Statistics also show a decline in the total

number of Orthodox Christians globally. For instance, reports estimate that the current

percentage of Orthodox Christians is 4% compared to 7% in 1910 (Burdick, 2018). In

turn, the EOTC reduced number of 6% of Christian congregants worldwide has become

an issue of concern among Church leaders who aim to increase membership. Some

examples that can be potential reasons for decline include strict adherence to religious

beliefs, lack of youth involvement in the church's affairs, parental influence, personal life

goals and career ambitions, and a post-Christian mindset. Each of these themes is

elaborated in the sections that follow.

Strict Adherence to Religious Beliefs

One factor contributing to the decline in the number of young adults in the EOTC

is its strict adherence to religious beliefs, thoughts, and teachings (Wordofa, 2017). For

instance, Wordofa links the decline in the number of youths in the Orthodox Church in

Ethiopia to extreme religious practices that may be considered hypocritical. In addition,

90% of the participants in the EOTC have strict guidelines relating to social interactions,

food, and lifestyle that youth find burdensome to adhere to in this modern age.

Moreover, a different study reported that Orthodox Christians in the United

States, who are estimated to be 0.5% of the overall United States immigrants, showed

stricter adherence to their religious backgrounds than other Christian groups in the

country (Wordofa, 2017). In turn, most youth said they opted out of their religion because

they could not meet the high standards of behavior and beliefs set by the Ethiopian

Orthodox Church. This factor suggests that the increased need to comply with religious

practices that youth consider hypothetical influences them to separate from the church.

In the EOTC, there are strict rules that cannot change with simple procedures. For example, there are seven fasting periods in the church canon each year, with different days for each fasting period. Lent, the fasting to memorialize Jesus Christ's 40 days of fasting, has 55 days (an additional 15 days plus the 40 days because of religious traditions). Every follower over the age of 7 is obliged to participate in these seven periods of fasting. Fasting is the abstinence from food and drinks during certain hours and days. During fasting, food must be free from meat, milk, egg, fish, and other dairy products. Also, sexual intercourse is not allowed during fasting because sexual intercourse is considered an act of the flesh. People should restrain from any flesh acts during this period.

Lack of Young People's Involvement in Church Affairs

The second factor noted as producing a decline in young adults in the church is the lack of young people's involvement in church affairs (Vaughn et al., 2018). Theological researchers have established that youths may feel like they are sycophants of the church, with no authentic voice in decisions or meaningful duties. According to Zeiders et al. (2016), this sense of worthlessness, attached to their non-involvement, compels them to withdraw from church participation. According to the research, it is essential for church leaders to initiate a process that seeks to involve young people in engaging in church affairs by providing them with duties that encourage responsibility and accountability. By implementing such strategies, youth are likely to assume a more active role, increasing their hope for the church's future and motivation to continue to be part of the church.

In the EOTC, youth usually attend Church. Still, they either come late or do not come to the eucharistic liturgical service, perhaps because of a lack of parental expectations or perhaps because of language barriers. In the EOTC, Ge'ez and Amharic are languages used during services. Ge'ez is the Ethiopian equivalent of how the Catholic Church traditionally used Latin in worship services. Thus, the youth feel both bored and excluded.

Youth also do not typically have decision-making power in the parish council. Since they do not have a voice in the parish council, their interests are not necessarily centered when determining the budget. Without funds, it is difficult for youth to exhibit a sense of ownership in their parish precisely and in the EOTC in general. Instead, youth tend to view the EOTC as a parish for their parents, so when young people are of college age and begin to make decisions independently, they tend to leave the parish and the EOTC.

Parental Influence

A third factor impacting the retention of young people in the EOTC is that of parental influence. Previous researchers (Vaughn et al., (2018), including Wordofa (2017), have noted that a lack of faith at home can significantly obstruct young peoples' willingness to attend church. Tura et al. (2017) found that in most cases, youth depend on their parents to influence their Christian faith, including decisions and desire to engage in fellowship in particular churches. In this case, parental influence at home is likely to motivate youth to be religious by attending churches.

Personal Life Goals and Career Ambitions

A fourth factor related to youth retention is a personal commitment to accomplishing life goals and career ambitions. These elements contribute to the decline in young adults in many churches globally (Temesgen & Tsega, 2019). Researchers agree that many young adults tend to focus on their life and career goals to realize stable lives. One implication is that youth may have little time for church engagement.

Post-Christian Mindset Among Youth

Lastly, a sense of post-Christian mindset among youth can result in a decline in church affiliation. Increasingly, religion may be considered irrelevant in modern Western culture (Sanchez et al., 2016). Such perceptions influence young people to reduce their active participation and attendance because most young adults no longer consider church participation a priority.

Researchers also explored the topic of youth and church attendance (Sanchez et al., 2016). The areas of focus for some of these studies include the impacts of culture, technology, leadership, conflicts of interest, perceptions, and other common factors in modern times (Burdick, 2018). As Hardie et al. (2016) outline, youth congregants, especially in developing countries, associate their reduced church participation with the youth ministry's decolonization in the 21st century. Like interreligious issues in historic times, the circumstances related to politics, globalization, and economics surrounding today's modern youth culture result in adverse impacts, further complicating young people's lives (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016).

Conversely, other researchers argue that the decline of youth participation in church affairs is the same as that of the general population and that focusing on youth

only gives a false representation of the facts when compared to the entire population, irrespective of the age group (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016; Francis et al., 2016). Other researchers support the above assertion, adding that church attendance is significantly decreasing for all groups, regardless of the religion or region (Hardie et al., 2016). Furthermore, scholars associate the high rate at which youth leave churches with the lack of more innovative ways of worship, especially in churches that conform to conservative methodologies and theologies (Burdick, 2018; Francis et al., 2016). Francis et al.'s study focused on the perceptions of both congregants and clergy in Canada. Findings indicated that more than two-thirds of young people prefer modern approaches to worship versus traditional worship and theologies.

Sanchez et al. (2016) reveal that church attendance among Catholic believers has decreased in recent years. Most significantly, the decline in attendance is among young people in Western countries. Various findings by scholars indicate that overall church attendance has declined over time. The most impacted age for reduced church attendance is the population between 16 and 24 (Burdick, 2018). This age group's pronounced decline went from 70% church attendance to below 25% in 2016 (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016).

Sanchez et al. (2016) compared overall church attendance by Catholics and Protestants and established that many congregants stayed in Protestant churches. Even though Catholics had a higher number of congregants than Protestants over the last two decades, church attendance is higher for Protestants despite a decrease from 42% to 36% (Burdick, 2018). One reason for higher attendance in Protestant churches is the adoption of innovative worship and music styles (Francis et al., 2016).

Whereas the research of Hope et al. (2019) focused on youth and modernity, demonstrating that modernization has negatively affected young people, Francis et al. (2018) opine that modernization can constructively impact church attendance among youth. According to Hope et al., it is essential to consider other factors concerning church growth before focusing on the decline in attendance since many of the elements mentioned above are interrelated. Some of the factors that directly influence church attendance include positions on scriptural authority, evangelism, cultural relevance, openness; goals and vision; planning; organizing; and pastoral leadership (Hardie et al., 2016). Rather than focusing on church attendance in isolation, it is vital to consider the impact these factors have on attendance.

Other researchers note that the decline in church attendance among youth results from reduced church attendance role modeling in society. Many individuals currently do not practice Christianity (Burdick, 2018; Hope et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2018). As Francis et al. point out, even though most worshippers in America are Christians, less than 31% of the American population actively practices Christianity (self-professing and attending church at least once a month).

Statistics as of 2016 showed that 73% of America's population were Christians, while 20% did not espouse any faith (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016). Based on these statistics, it is probable that young people can be influenced by those who do not have any faith and do not belong to any religion and by the 41% who do not attend church yet profess to be Christians (Francis et al., 2016). The fact that role modeling contributes to the decrease in church attendance and youths' participation draws from the above findings.

Hope et al. (2019) emphasize that youth are not often actively included in modern church affairs, leading to increased assumptions, myths, and misconceptions about God and the church. Researchers note the following factors as having impacted youth ministry in the recent past: (a) failure to replace members who just attend church as a cultural aspect; (b) failure to replace the older generation of builders, thinking young people are not ready to take up missionary responsibilities; (c) rapid transfers among churches; and (d) emerging trends in the modern environment, such as individuals placing a higher priority on other life issues as opposed to worship (Bruce et al., 2017).

Young Adult Views Concerning Modern Church Leadership

As Hope et al. (2019) suggest, the leadership concept is another controversial factor in modern churches affecting young adults' willingness to participate in church activities. Hardie et al. (2016) note that young adults more often develop their philosophies regarding their roles, both at the church and at a societal level. Kulis and Tsethlikai (2016) find that this trend is encouraged by church leadership's failure to appreciate that youth represent the church's present and future. Future church productivity rests on properly nurtured young people. Effective leadership in churches is associated with identifying present challenges and coming up with strategies that solve these problems, not only for the benefit of the current church but also to ensure a sustainable future in attendance and membership (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016).

Although most churches grapple with these conflicts, leaders need to handle church matters in a way that reflects inclusivity so that young people are equally satisfied with church decisions and outcomes (Francis et al., 2016). Davis Iii and Kiang (2016) found that conflicts of interest due to the inequalities between the demands of those born

between 1965–1980 (often called Gen X) and the older population's expectations are

crucial. Failure to gain decision-making consensus encourages young adults to move

towards modernity and consumerism, both of which can lead to separation from

spirituality, harming their ties and their spiritual attachments to the church in general and

Jesus Christ specifically (Hope et al., 2019; Lee, 2007).

Sakellariou (2018) analyzed the leadership challenges encountered when

ministering to young people in a Scottish Presbyterian Church. The study revealed that

adults' perceptions towards youth and the youth's perceptions of adults are yet another

modern-time impediment that detracts from young people attending church. While older

people may regard youth as spoiled and pleased only with worldly desires, young adults

often perceive older adults as old-fashioned and judgmental. Such perceptions create a

rift between the two groups, making the youth feel out of place when in church, resulting

in young people distancing themselves from church activities. The problem at hand has

several dimensions: language use, dress code, the type of music played in church, style of

preaching, and leadership in general (Davis Iii & Kiang, 2016; Lee, 2007). For example,

Sanchez et al. (2016) concluded that youth believe rock music is best for modern church

worship, yet older congregants often regard this as the "devil's music." These examples,

and more, demonstrate the need to find commonality between older and younger church

attendees.

Sakellariou (2018) argued that the differences in perceptions between older and

younger adults contribute to church leaders' overly judgmental behavior, pushing young

people away from churches. Concerns about the church's future regarding worship and

leadership are supported by the widening gap between young people and adults (Hardie

et al., 2016). The division between youth and elders in modern churches seems to occur due to confusion between appropriate and inappropriate music, church development, ecclesiology, liturgy, and theology. Findings by Sakellariou (2018) note that the decline in church participation and attendance existed for decades. Some of the leading causes of this trend are the demographic, social, economic, technological, and cultural challenges that contribute to unpredictable and discordant patterns.

Bruce et al. (2017) shared a contrary opinion to the many studies showing a general decline in youth attendance in churches caused by church leadership. Bruce et al. hold that the main reason there is a decrease in the number of young people attending church is that more than half of the young people who go to church do not deliberately. However, the researchers did not note the fundamental reasons for regular attendees' children not attending church. One potential explanation for the lack of young people's lack of church attendance could include the failure of parents to introduce their children to church matters at an early age and growing up without understanding the significance of church attendance (Sanchez et al., 2016). When young people become adults, they nonetheless have the freedom to choose what they want. Therefore, later parental interventions, such as asking children to attend church, tend to become difficult or ineffective because each adult child is left to make individual decisions and choices (Kulis & Tsethlikai, 2016).

Experiences of Ethiopian Immigrants in the United States

Distinct from the past, when people's movement from one geographic place to another was a fundamental characteristic, international migration has increasingly become problematic with its sophisticated network of demographic, economic, and

political obstacles (Schwartz et al., 2018). Today, international migration is a topic whose

agenda is nationally and internationally confronted. Previously, the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) made the right of movement recognized

globally. However, immigration has grown into a significant concern worldwide (United

Nations, 2002, p. 1), perhaps especially in several Western countries, particularly the

United States. Many countries have tightened immigrant and refugee policies. To a more

considerable extent, some in the United States view migration as less critical to its future

development.

As the United Nations (2002, p. 11) elaborated in its study, the massive settling

of immigrants in the United States underscores a pre-existing and unequal distribution of

immigrants in various countries worldwide. Research illustrates that 8.5% of the

population in developed nations is comprised of immigrants, while 1.5% of people in

developing countries represent immigrants. The available literature, including United

States Census data, does not contain any information regarding African immigrant

patterns in the early 1970s. In the 1980s, the U.S. Census Report indicates traces of

general African immigrant populations within the United States without identifying

specific African countries of origin (Getahun, 2005, p. 1). The lack of precise data does

not help researchers know the exact number of African American immigrants. Limited

information on ultra-Orthodox Christians in the United States is a severe issue, restricting

an understanding of the challenges encountered in their new country and the type of

specific support needed (Tesfaye, 2017).

A shift in United States immigration policies in the early 1960s resulted in a

massive African immigrant movement into the United States. Before this period,

migration policies within America did not favor African, Asian, and Latin American immigrants. Despite the massive immigration of Africans into the United States (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1985), their number is still low compared to other immigrant groups. Historically, many Africans were victims of forced migration from their homes to the United States to serve as slaves. Tesfaye's (2017) focus is on Ethiopian immigrants and Ethiopian migration into the United States in the early 19th century reflects the nature and progressive developments in Ethiopian American diplomatic relationships.

United States statistics indicate a minimum of 300,000 Ethiopians who immigrated during the socialist government period in Ethiopia (Tefera & Castro, 2016). Current estimates show that 5,000 Ethiopians immigrate to the United States yearly. Many immigrants arrive as temporary visitors but later change the status of their visa to permanent residence status. Over time, Ethiopian communities have developed in Washington DC, Atlanta, Boston, New York, and Dallas (Tefera & Castro, 2016).

During the socialist regime in Ethiopia, many Ethiopians left their country due to the rise of a military junta and communist governmental council (Derg Party) that caused a civil war leading to many thousands of individuals being imprisoned and executed without trial. This conflict significantly contributed to the psychological torture of many Ethiopians. The embattled socialist regime massacred millions of Ethiopians, causing an increased exodus to the United States (Tiruneh, 1990).

For the most part, Ethiopian refugees who fled the socialist regime first settled in neighboring countries before officially migrating to the United States in the late 1960s. Ethiopians who settled in the United States appear to fall into three groups, each corresponding to particular years of entry. The first group consisted of highly educated

individuals, women, tourists, and government workers for whom the revolution

suppressed their return home. The second group consisted of Ethiopians who were

ejected from refugee camps in Sudan by international organizations during the early

1980s and mid-1990s. The final Ethiopian group to migrate to the United States were

beneficiaries of the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery. Once approved for the visa, the green

card process enabled them to work, pursue studies, and establish permanent residency.

The DV lottery application program, created through the United States

Immigration Act (1990), aimed to diversify immigrant populations in the United States

from selected countries. Because the DV lottery application program was the easiest way

to obtain a United States green card, a significant number of Ethiopians navigated their

way to the United States (Bhave, 2001; Kebede, 2012). Many Ethiopians came to the

United States to study, while others arrived as athletes for tourism, or to obtain medical

treatment, or to reunite with their families. Chicago hosts an Ethiopian community

established in the early 1980s with nearly 4,500 people. In recent years, the United States

has an estimated population of 200,000 Ethiopians residing in the key cities of

Washington, DC, Minneapolis, and Atlanta (Alemu, 2009; Hasso Shashe, 2015).

In effect, a tragic road accident in Chicago that led to an Ethiopian immigrant's

death ignited Ethiopian immigrants' desire and need to have a formal association (Tefera

& Castro, 2016). As a result, Ethiopian residents founded an institution named the

Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago (ECAC), which has gradually grown to be

a substantial and influential organization (Tesfaye, 2017). Through volunteers' help,

ECAC is now an organization capable of helping large numbers of Ethiopian immigrants

living in Chicago and across the United States. ECAC not only helped the Ethiopian

community but also immigrants from other Eastern African countries. During the last

three decades, the ECAC sharpened its focus and efforts related to housing, employment

training, and job placement for Ethiopian origin.

Other services spearheaded by the ECAC include establishing the Ethiopian

Evangelical Church, situated in Chicago, serving as the primary location where Ethiopian

immigrants congregate. The ECAC also participated in Chicago sporting activities and

founded restaurants that serve as informal networking sites (Bhave, 2001; Alemu, 2009).

From the literature, it is evident that the settlement experience varies from one

group to another. Immigrants from Addis Ababa first migrated to Chicago because of the

rapidly growing Ethiopian community and family ties. Contrary to some other United

States immigrant groups, Ethiopian immigrants prioritize supporting their members

during ceremonies, such as weddings, and consoling one another during times of grief.

These practices further empower immigrant community members.

Education also became a new and different experience for Ethiopian immigrants.

It is vital to understand Ethiopia's education system's limitations and differences

compared to that in the United States. The United States educational context and

experience involve a dramatic change in language, school policies, environment,

relationship with teachers, and application of some technical words (Tesfaye, 2017). This

form of education is substantially different from the more limited and traditional

education experience in Ethiopia.

A substantial number of resources are devoted to the study of immigrant

experiences. For example, Knight et al. (2016) conducted a study focused on education

adjustments, language, and socioeconomic and psychological well-being of immigrants

to the United States and revealed that immigrants face stress related to acculturation, change, loss, and trauma. Some states or regions also may not be welcoming to immigrants. These sentiments, underscored by recent legislative initiatives in California, pose a denial of access to social services for some immigrants (Vaughn et al., 2018).

Research related to immigrants has broadly excluded African immigrants. Hence, there is limited information about the needs of this population. In one study, Tesfaye (2017) documented immigrant conditions and experiences by conducting focus groups composed of African immigrants in America. The focus groups included religious leaders, students, tribal group leaders, and professional and non-professional members of the United States' African immigrant community. The groups included people from different backgrounds, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, homemakers, and paraprofessionals. Two focus groups, each consisting of 15 participants from 19 other African countries, were formed. Participants noted the benefits immigration offered, which influenced African immigrants to remain despite the stress they experience. Benefits identified by those relocating to America included (a) a more stable government, (b) somewhat regular economic and political freedoms, (c) freedom of speech, (d) freedom of worship, (e) educational opportunities, and (f) better economic opportunities for themselves and their children.

Most African immigrants relocate to the United States as refugees or asylum seekers because of the political instability in their countries of origin. Other reasons for migration include better educational opportunities, improved economic status, or "chasing the American dream," as each immigrant defines. Asante et al. (2016) argued

that language, food, and lifestyle are challenges encountered by refugees as they adjust to the new American culture different from their home country's culture.

According to Kindarara et al. (2017), transitions are prospects for consolidation and advancement. Migration by most Africans to America occurs to advance their education and obtain freedom from their home countries' oppressive governments. Upon arrival in the United States, immigrants encounter numerous challenges to advancing their education, assimilating into the new culture, and securing well-paying jobs. Many continue to remain in poverty and encounter hardships.

Acculturation Stressors

An examination of refugee adaptation by Bostean and Gillespie (2018) indicates that immigrants encounter various challenges, including being discriminated against by African Americans. In East Africa, the Arabs only took Black people into slavery; some mainland tribes did not sell anyone into slavery. Miao et al. (2018) argued that immigrants struggled in America as they tried to preserve their culture, quickly acculturate, and distinguish between two different cultures and languages. Their research indicated that this struggle could result in acculturation and assimilation stress. As Lorenzo-Blanco et al. (2016) found, African immigrants, just like African Americans, still face racism. A case in point is the shooting of an unarmed African immigrant named Diallo Amadou by New York Special Crime Unit members. Critics argued that this action was racially instigated (Tesfaye, 2017).

Zeiders et al. (2016) argue that there are numerous examples of racism and anti-immigrant feelings in America. These are evident in discriminatory/hateful graffiti, the use of derogatory terms, actions attributed to the KKK, legislation seeking to withhold

support services, and limiting immigrant voting rights. Current immigrants face resentment from their host country as they struggle to adapt.

The role of immigrant groups in providing support for United States foreign policies that address democratization and self-determination in their countries of origin has not been fully explored (Tefera et al., 2016). Other immigrant groups, such as the Jewish community, have had a more significant impact on United States foreign policy. Israel has received more money and support than African countries. African immigrants built America as slaves, yet many African Americans live in poverty with few available solutions.

Just like other immigrants, African immigrants also experience psychological acculturation stress. As Keles et al. (2016) argued, there is a need to rethink acculturation issues associated with diasporic cultures and postcolonial identities. As earlier stated, African countries became colonized by different European groups such as the English, French, and Portuguese. Practitioners may be better able to identify and address acculturation needs when appreciating the effects of colonization. Various measurement scales aid the study of acculturation of African Americans. One set of measures relevant to the research study by Rubens et al. (2018) addresses adolescents' psychological adaptation to immigrant backgrounds.

As Rubens et al. (2018) note, acculturation is a stressful psychological process. The process entails adapting to a foreign culture while sometimes experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed, even for the most emotionally healthy and resourceful immigrants. Tension, stress, and sometimes despair accompany the process of assimilation. Keles et al. (2016) revealed that the stress resulting from acculturation

relates directly to Mexican Americans' general mental health. Similar research is not available for African immigrants. However, African immigrants likely face stress-related problems similar to those faced by Mexican Americans (Bekteshi, & Kang, 2018; Cobb et al., 2017; Mann-Jackson et al., 2018).

Acculturation challenges and their associated stress can aggravate problems experienced by immigrants, as discussed above. According to Keles et al. (2016), acculturation issues fall into four main areas: (a) the quality of immigrants' social life in the new culture; (b) immigrants' attitudes towards their former culture and country of origin; (c) immigrants' relationships within the family in a new culture, particularly with parents; and (d) the quality of the environment in the new culture.

According to Chaze et al. (2015), an ecological perspective was critical in evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of African immigrants' coping styles. Ecological perspective theories identify the factors of stress, low self-esteem, and hardiness encountered while trying to fit into the dominant culture. Ecological perspective theories are necessary for appreciating how African immigrants relate to the host country and the stressors and coping mechanisms experienced during assimilation. This framework helps consider factors that influence the decision-making processes used by recent immigrants to the United States.

Adolescent Development

In writing about psychosocial developmental stages, Erikson (1980) describes adolescence as a period in which individuals ages 12–19 examine their identity. Adolescent development focuses on reconciling the internal conflict between *identity* versus *confusion*. Healthy reconciliation results in *fidelity* when one knows and commits

to what it means to be oneself. In other words, during this time of life, youth are

grappling with identity issues, essentially trying to find themselves. They also begin to

seek and establish closer relationships with others, primarily outside of their immediate

family circle (Erikson,1980; Tuckman et al., 1977).

Furthermore, a sense of fidelity is at stake as the definition of self causes one to

examine others' genuineness and relationships and loyalty with pre-attained value

systems, among which may be religious organizations (Capp et al., 2016). If youth are

unsuccessful in this stage, they are likely to experience role confusion, leading to

difficulty forming lasting relationships (Erikson, 1980). In the next phase of

development, early adulthood across ages 20–25, *intimacy* versus *isolation* is the primary

developmental conflict. Those who traverse this territory successfully emerge as

individuals who *love* and can develop healthy intimate relationships. They seek

companionship, input, and love with like-minded persons when making important

decisions (Erikson, 1980). During this period, youth are selective in relationships and

alliances. As youth begin to define their identity, they may scrutinize multiple areas of

their lives that they have previously participated in out of habit (Capp et al., 2016).

Given the purpose of this dissertation study, it is reasonable to assume and

essential to note that identity struggles that youth experience as described in Erikson's

(1980) developmental stage theory can be enhanced or impeded by the social situations

and settings that youth inhabit. Therefore, one's home or living environment,

neighborhood, school, and church affiliations likely play influential roles in adolescent

identity development. People either facilitate and support or hinder and obstruct youth

trying to work through the struggles that the adolescent stage of development entails.

Role of Religion and Spirituality in Immigrant Lives

Religion plays a significant role in understanding the immigrant population. The impact of religion on African immigrants is especially noteworthy, given it played a part in Africa's colonization. In *How the European God Took a Disaster to Africa*, Chaze et al. (2015) argue that evangelism strongly affected the African way of life, culture, and religious perspectives. Generally, African immigrants still embrace religion/spirituality in America as their primary support mechanism during acculturation. The survey conducted by Chaze (2015) revealed that religion/spiritual involvement was essential in helping immigrants cope with acculturation stress in America.

In a broad sense, religion is also essential for youth psychological, emotional, physical, and social development (Agyekum & Newbold, 2016). Compared to less-religious counterparts, religious youth are more hopeful about the future and find life more meaningful; they are also proud of their religious affiliations (Smith & Faris, 2002). The research notes that youth also found that religion's coupling with significant social interactions based on trust and support was associated with more positive moral outcomes (King & Furrow, 2008). In their findings, King and Furrow concluded that youth require a supportive network to develop trusting and interactive relationships to build sound moral principles. Jeynes (2009), who studied 160 youth in public and private schools in Grades 7–12, found that young people raised in a religious environment showed better academic performance.

Furrow and Wagener (2000) suggested that religious adolescents report consistently higher developmental assets associated with increased restraint and decreased risk behavior. Furrow and Wagener join a long list of scholars who have found

an association between religious perception and religious participation and reduced

engagement in risk behaviors ranging from drug and alcohol abuse to juvenile

delinquency (Benda, 1995). What we do not know is how many youths are spiritually

motivated and practicing in any religion. While some hail religion as a solution to

societal social problems, it may be helpful to know what proportion of today's youth are

religious and if religion is relevant for all youth.

Smith and Faris (2002) found that among 12th graders in the United States,

"regular religious service attendance, high subjective importance of faith, and years spent

in religious youth groups are associated with high self-esteem and positive self-attitudes"

(p. 9). This finding suggests that increased religiosity among teens and young adults can

be a social asset. Thus, reliable data about teens' religiosity indicators and an

understanding of its distribution among teens' subgroups have important implications for

future studies.

When youth become active in church activities, they feel a sense of belonging.

Hayashi (2016) stated the need to belong directly connects to establishing interpersonal

relationships demonstrated by companionship, communication, confidentiality, mental

stability, and the development of roles in society. Engaging in religious activities, such as

Bible studies and small-group discussions, offers the opportunity for personal

conversations in a space of trust (Henderson, 2014). Establishing these interpersonal

relationships encourages and promotes a sense of belonging in congregational life. Young

adults, or people of any age, are more likely to feel a sense of belonging when they

receive support or feel valued by fellow members of their organization or congregation

(Mammana-Lupo et al., 2014).

Importance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC)

In addition to its spiritual mission, the EOTC serves to develop community and has long promoted a sense of belonging to help members cope with existential crises. It provided social, financial, and emotional support and maintained cultural traditions and beliefs, religious values, and attitudes. For immigrants, the church has a strong effect on protecting people's psychological well-being.

Studies indicate that the EOTC role has a significant effect on Ethiopians' socio-cultural identity and everyday lives. In several states, for the Ethiopian immigrants to acquire a sense of belonging, the primary educator, supporter, and counselor is the EOTC (Yesahaq, 1997). The church educates Ethiopian immigrants about their faith, moral values, history, culture, language, and unique identity and has done so for the last 2,000 years (Yesehaq, 1998).

Summary

There are several vital themes prevalent in the literature that inform and guide this dissertation study. Below are strands of importance.

- Young people leave the EOTC, thereby losing church support that could be offered and jeopardizing the church's future leadership. For many Ethiopian immigrants, the church plays a significant role during resettlement and acculturation into the United States.

- There is a literature gap about the role that the EOTC leaders play in retaining youth church congregants.

- Bass (1985) and Greenleaf (1997) developed leadership theories that underscore the importance of the leader as a servant focused on transformational encounters.

- Several factors influence the retention or disassociation of youth church attendees. A positive factor internal to the immigrant community includes the need to have support while assimilating within a new culture. In contrast, a major external challenge includes facing discrimination based on culture and beliefs.

- The EOTC can, in part, mitigate barriers for Ethiopian immigrants.

The literature gap related to EOTC youth congregant retention underscores the importance of identifying factors that lead to the retention of EOTC youth members while also identifying areas where church leaders can improve their service to these young people.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

Introduction

Yin (2014) indicates that choosing an appropriate research method and design is vital when carrying out a study. This proposed research will use qualitative descriptive and exploratory case study methods. The following sections give insight into the research method and design, explaining the rationale for choosing qualitative descriptive and explanatory case studies.

Research Methods

Usually, researchers use one of three overarching research methods: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Thorne, 2016). As Patton (2002) states, qualitative research methods are used by researchers when their main aim is to gather information on the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding a given phenomenon. In other words, qualitative research methods are relevant if one wants to find, explore, and understand individuals' lived experiences about a specific concept. The research questions answered by qualitative research are "what," "why," and "how" (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). This dissertation study explores what causes young people to continue attending their EOTC parish, the strengths and challenges that impact youth EOTC attendance, and how church leaders might employ specific strategies to support youth from Ethiopian immigrant families in the EOTC.

Design

The most appropriate research design for the present study is a phenomenological exploratory study design. Phenomenology designs apply when there is a need to understand the similarities of various people's lived experiences about a given

phenomenon, event, or occasion (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Language and culture are important factors for consideration when analyzing data from immigrant groups. The selected design assures an accurate and verifiable approach to interviewing subjects, transcribing the interviews, coding for emerging themes, and analyzing patterns among and between the three sample groups, namely (a) EOTC youth leaders, (b) youth who are active in their EOTC congregation, and (c) youth who have become inactive in the EOTC.

Exploratory designs allow for identifying patterns, especially in areas where previous research is limited (Thorne, 2016; Merriam, 2002). Exploratory studies gain more in-depth insight into real-life events observed or experienced by study participants while identifying themes and patterns over time (Stake, 2010). An exploratory case study design provides for collecting in-depth information from research participants (Thorne, 2016). This design, therefore, will enable exploration of the lived experiences of EOTC youth and church youth leaders' strategies to support young Ethiopian church attendees.

Population and Sampling

In this study, the first of three sample groups include eight clerics who lead and participate in youth ministry at one of eight specific EOTCs in a large metropolitan area of the Northwestern United States. A group of four youth, ages 18 through 30, currently active in four of the eight churches, comprises the second sample. The third group of four youth, ages 18 through 30, were once but are not presently engaged in the remaining four of the eight EOTCs. Input from these three sample groups provides an opportunity to denote themes associated with effective and ineffective ministerial leadership and youth experiences in the EOTC.

Before contacting the eight church leaders, site permission from EOTC area leadership and research authorization from the Seattle University IRB occurred. Once approval from each entity was received, verification of the sample populations took place. Yin (2014) noted that qualitative researchers use purposive sampling techniques to recruit participants within their vicinity and share everyday experiences. Purposive sampling techniques are helpful in this research because the researcher intentionally identifies clergy people who serve young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families in the designated age group and grew up under the principles of the EOTC in the United States. According to Merriam (2002), a small sample size for each proposed participant group is adequate, aiding the researcher in carefully analyzing large volumes of qualitative data collected.

EOTC area leadership provided names and contact information for each clergy person selected for the church leadership pool. To be included in the study, clergy people had to meet the following criteria:

1. Must be a leader at one of the eight identified area churches.

2. Must be actively involved in serving EOTC youth members.

Youth included in the study had to reflect the following characteristics:

1. Must be 18 through 30 years old.

2. Must be an Ethiopian who was born in or immigrated to the United States.

3. Must be registered with the local EOTC and either active at the selection time (Group 1) or inactive (Group 2).

When composing the final groups of active and inactive youth, the additional attributes of age, gender, and specific local parish affiliation further ensured balanced and holistic perspectives.

The steps taken to identify those selected for interviews included the following:

1. Verify EOTC area leadership site permission (Appendix A).

2. Complete IRB review and obtain approval to proceed with the study.

3. Obtain names and contact information for clergy participants from EOTC administrative leadership (Appendix A).

4. Obtain informed consent from EOTC leader participants (Appendix A). Ask church leaders to provide names for a pool of potential youth participants—those active and those inactive—by completing a table that contains relevant information, including names, age, gender, contact information, church affiliation, and whether active or inactive (Appendix B).

5. The researcher then created three separate Excel spreadsheets, one containing clergy names, contact information, and parish affiliations; one including EOTC youth who are active in the Church, and one for EOTC youth who are no longer active in the Church. Data entry for active and inactive youth includes name, age, gender, contact information, and parish affiliation, ensuring the composition of the final interview pool provides a rich and varied perspective.

   a. The researcher arranged clergy names and contact information in alphabetical order, then assigned a unique identifier to each name to conceal identities from third parties and ensure specific data supplied by individuals is known only to the researcher.

b. The researcher entered data for active and inactive youth groups to include alphabetically ordered names and associated age, gender, contact information, and parish's name. The researcher then assigned a unique identifier to each entry. This process ensures that the names and personal input from youth participants are concealed from third parties and known only to the researcher. Next, using a random table, the researcher selected four youth from the active church attendee list (one youth from each of four different church sites) and four from the inactive church attendee list (one youth from each of the four remaining church sites).

c. All participants took part in the study voluntarily and without financial incentive.

Upon completing the selection and confidential identification assignment process, the researcher sent an email invitation to those in the leader (Appendix A) and prospective youth (Appendix B) pools. The invitation included an informed consent form (Appendices A and B), stated the study's purpose, identified protections to guard confidentiality, noted participant expectations, and included researcher email and phone contact information. Research subjects who had questions or needed additional information were directed to contact the researcher by email or phone to stay within existing COVID-19 guidelines. An adequate sample was obtained, making a second email follow-up recruitment letter unnecessary.

To protect the privacy of the documents and information collected during the study, the researcher will delete all research data from the researcher's personal computer

and save it on a password-protected external drive. The aim is to ensure that no third

parties access the data.

Data Collection

As noted by Patton (1999), the researcher is the primary instrument in data

collection. In this study, the primary data source is semi-structured interviews to identify

themes within respective groups and across all groups holistically for all study

participants. According to Yin (2014), researchers use semi-structured interviews to

collect detailed information on a specific phenomenon by asking participants in-depth

questions about their experiences.

The interview questions (Appendix C) model the Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Theory approach espoused by Cooperrider (2018), aiding in developing a preferred future

vision for the EOTC. This method exhibits support for participants in engaging in a

solution-oriented conversation, generating positive ideas. Given participants are

immigrants and second-language speakers, AI allows for expressions of opinion in

familiar terms through open-ended questions framed in a non-biased manner. The number

of questions is limited, providing richer and deeper responses than may be found by using

other, more complex, qualitative data-gathering methods.

Yin (2014) shares Patton's (1999) view, stating that semi-structured interviews

help the researcher to collect valuable insights from participants relating to their opinions,

experiences, and attitudes towards a given phenomenon. In this study, the semi-structured

interviews supported collecting rich information regarding the perceptions that EOTC

clergy and young adults have about church leadership support. Moreover, researchers

such as Yazan (2015) contend that semi-structured interviews encourage greater

disclosure of data collected from participants. This interview approach allows the

researcher to encourage participants to express themselves freely, thereby providing more

comprehensive and credible responses.

Independent interviews were conducted online via Zoom. In addition to interview

responses, notes regarding body language added depth to the data under consideration.

The researcher used responses and notes in the analysis, aiming for accuracy. Accurate

transcription occurred using two audio recorders (a primary and backup) and handwritten

notes. The researcher conducted all interviews in English because all participants speak

English. However, if any participants unexpectedly responded in their first language,

their comments were translated to English by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research generates large amounts of word-based data and field notes,

making it time-consuming to code and cross-check (Stake, 2010). The present study

incorporates five data analysis steps outlined by Yin (2015): compiling, disassembling,

reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. While various types of qualitative analysis

software are available, and because culture and language are essential in obtaining

accurate data and coding responses from immigrant populations, this study will apply

manual coding techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher began the data analysis process using a combination of

denaturalized and naturalized transcription (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The researcher noted

body language and gestures while omitting other more discreet clues like mumbling and

pauses. To enhance data accuracy, validity, and saturation, the researcher used member

checking and Yin's (2014) five analysis steps. As Yin indicates, member checking was

carried out by the researcher (a) reading and making a list of key ideas for each separate transcript as soon as possible after each interview, (b) providing each list to its corresponding participant, (c) asking the participant if the list accurately captured the key ideas expressed in the interview, and (d) amending or correcting any key ideas as directed by the participant. Amendments or corrections suggested during member checking took place before the coding process began.

Merriam and Grenier (2019) define methodological triangulation as using multiple verification sources to test the study's validity and allow for data saturation. The researcher used methodological triangulation by conducting in-depth interviews with participants, observing participants during interviews, completing careful and accurate transcription, and verifying the critical ideas in each transcript with each interviewee, respectively.

The researcher completed the coding process, then analyzed and interpreted the content of each transcript for emerging themes and patterns. The next step included comparing information across transcripts for overarching themes and patterns. The use of inductive coding ensures that themes rise from the data itself. Because there is little published research to illuminate potential patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), inductive coding is an essential attribute of this study. Careful recording of code guidelines and definitions is another aspect of the coding process used to ensure reliable, consistent, and accurate results. The researcher carefully compiled records that reflect code guidelines, descriptions, and over-arching themes among and across participant groups and any amendments made during the transcript review process.

A second independent coder examined two randomly selected transcripts from clergy, one from an EOTC active youth member, and one from an EOTC youth church leaver using the same codes as the researcher. These four transcripts (two from clergy, one from an active youth, one from an inactive youth) were randomly selected for analysis by an independent coder. The researcher (first coder) and the second coder then compared their independent coding results. Together, they resolved differences through consensus, resulting in themes and patterns in the analysis and synthesis process. Finally, the investigator compared and contrasted the final themes and concepts that emerged from the analysis with the theoretical frameworks presented in Chapter 2 of this study.

Ethical Research

Research ethics focuses on ensuring that the researcher treats study participants respectfully and ethically (Patton, 1999; Stake, 2010; Thorne, 2016). To uphold the ethical treatment of participants, the researcher adhered to the Belmont Report's ethical principles and guidelines to protect human subjects (Patton, 2014). Participants were provided with an informed consent form via email and voluntarily consented to participate before beginning data collection. Information provided to participants stated that participants were free to withdraw from the research study at any point in time without being adverse consequences.

The use of pseudonyms or identification codes ensures the confidentiality of both participant responses and identities. Researchers often use pseudonyms or identification codes to protect the identity of study participants (Stake, 2010). In this study, EOTC Church leaders were identified as CL1 through CL8, youth active in the EOTC as Y1 through Y4, and youth inactive in the EOTC as Y5 through Y8. Storing all documents in

the study securely on a password-protected computer that the researcher can only access provided another layer of protection.

After 5 years of completing the study, the researcher will destroy all audiotape recordings, flash drives, and handwritten notes. Participants were made aware that no payments, gifts, or reimbursement would be made available to those in the study. A summary of the study results and associated recommendations were made available to all participants upon request.

Summary

Several factors drive the selection of an appropriate research method and design. Careful consideration is needed to ensure study purposes, methods, and designs align with research goals. Also, the protection of human subjects is an essential and critical factor. Strengths of the methods and design selected for this study include the following.

- The study used a qualitative phenomenological explanatory case study method.
- In preparing for this study, three target groups were identified. The first target group includes eight EOTC clergy who lead and participate in youth ministry in a defined area within the Northwestern United States. The second target group comprises youth who currently attend and serve the EOTC, while the third target group includes youth no longer active in the EOCT.
- Site permission and participant informed consent were secured, along with IRB approval before data collection.
- This study incorporated the five steps of data analysis outlined by Yin (2014): compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

- Interviews were transcribed and coded for content themes using sound coding methods, including observational notes taken during each interview. Member checking confirmed key ideas in each transcript before detailed coding began. Triangulation of results occurred by a second coder verifying identified themes and patterns.

The general themes and ideas from this dissertation research may help improve youth retention in the EOTC. Retention of youth membership is a critical factor in ensuring the viability and health of each EOTC parish and its essential role in supporting immigrants entering the United States. In addition, such information might be useful to other faith communities wishing to support youth and strengthen church participation.

Chapter 4. Findings

Introduction

This study investigated the EOTC leadership support of youth from Ethiopian immigrant families in the United States. The primary purpose is to identify factors contributing to young parishioners' activity and inactivity in their local EOTC congregation and determine qualities necessary for EOTC leaders to provide meaningful and supportive experiences for these young adults. An interview method patterned after the Appreciative Inquiry Model (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011) collected qualitative data from Church leaders and young people who are either active or inactive in their EOTC.

The researcher interviewed eight Church leaders and eight youth representatives (four were active Church parishioners and four were inactive). Interviewees answered a series of questions about the importance of the Church for young people, the characteristics that support youth retention at the EOTC, and other relevant aspects of the problem under investigation (Appendix C). The researcher used transcripts from recordings of each interview to conduct a thematic analysis when coding and processing the data (Guest et al., 2012). After the initial coding of transcripts, the researcher then engaged a faculty member from a private university in the Pacific Northwest to conduct the same thematic coding procedure. Codes identified by the professor and the researcher were similar, a likely indication of high validity in the data analysis process. Where coding resulted in differences, the researcher and professor discussed the items under question and resolved dissimilarities based on available literature and research best practices. This chapter presents thematic results from each group, an overview of differences between the two groups of young people (active versus inactive in their EOTC congregation), a composite perspective highlighting differences and similarities

for clergy versus youth, and a summary of findings. The researcher then discusses

significant themes and conclusions regarding the research objectives of the study. All

data analysis results align with best practices as outlined in various studies related to

qualitative analysis and findings from the literature review.

Results From Interviews With Church Leaders

Eight Church leaders each representing an EOTC parish in a major city in the

Pacific Northwest participated in the interview process. All of them were male ministers

for youth in their congregations. Each clergyperson expressed interest in the problem

under investigation and provided a substantial amount of information about various

aspects of youth involvement and possible means for realizing more significant levels of

youth retention in the EOTC. An analysis of transcripts from the interviews resulted in

themes within each of the seven interview topics (interview questions) for EOTC leaders

(see Appendix C). Table 1 presents the themes classified by topic and sequenced by

frequency; the first theme within each topic is the one mentioned most often, descending

in order through the one mentioned least often.

Table 1

EOCT Leader Themes Within Interview Topics

Topics	Themes
1. Leader rewards	- Guiding and supporting young people. - Monitoring and fueling spiritual growth. - Having an impact on their lives. - Helping young people learn and discover new information and skills. - Helping youth better understand and remember their religious roots. - Inspiring young parishioners to grow and overcome life obstacles.

2. Leader contributions	• Being a teacher, mentor, and role model to youth. • Teaching young people about God and His words. • Educating young parishioners. • Helping the EOTC succeed and remain viable. • Witnessing God's blessings. • Serving as a cultural bridge for immigrants.
3. Successful events or activities that support retention of young parishioners	• Lessons. • Conferences. • Group trips. • Team collaboration projects. • Competitions. • Charity events.
4. Connective Church practices	• Leadership assignments for young parishioners. • Encouragement of young adherents' participation in Church and social events. • Organization of engaging experiences for youth to include special conferences and team events. • Helping young people become more fluent in the use of the English language. • Welcoming and supporting young people who attend Church. • Giving rewards for participation in Church events and activities.
5. Effective retention strategies	• Customization of events to meet the unique needs and expectations of young parishioners. • A chance to build relationships with peers. • Practical, hands-on events and experiences. • Empowering youth to have Church leadership roles. • Gaining acceptance and support from other members of the Church community. • Creating meaningful learning opportunities.
6. Recommendations for change	• Using the English language during services. • Working in partnership with parents. • Ensuring that the EOTC engages ministers who understand young parishioners. • Customizing Church events and activities to meet the needs and expectations of young people. • Reforming Sunday school methods and services. • Paying more attention to young adherents' requests and feedback. • Digitalizing youth Church events.

	• Creating "wow" moments (instances that are the source of enjoyment and excitement).
7. Other comments or ideas	• Developing the trust of young people. • Working with parents to improve youth retention. • Giving more autonomy to young adherents to increase their spiritual growth.

Leader Rewards From Working With Youth

Church leaders overall attested to considering their work with youth as an important task, discussing a set of rewards and contributions related to the young parishioners' engagement with the EOTC. All eight Church leaders expressed enthusiasm about the personal rewards received when working with young people. Those interviewed noted satisfaction when guiding and supporting the success of young people through:

- Monitoring and fueling their spiritual growth.

- Having a substantial impact on their lives.

- Guiding young people in learning and discovering new things.

- Helping youth remember their spiritual and cultural roots.

- Inspiring adherents to grow and overcome life obstacles.

Leader Contributions to Working With Youth

When reflecting on contributions to youth success, leaders noted themes similar to those through which they felt rewarded. The primary focus of the leaders' comments emphasized the role of teacher and mentor, one who can instruct young people about God, educate them, help them witness God's blessings, and contribute to the development of the EOTC by serving as a bridge between experiences in Ethiopia and those in the United States.

Most Church leaders (six of the eight interviewed) regard the EOTC as a potentially valuable partner for young people because the Church guides success, fuels spiritual growth, helps discover new knowledge and skills, and aids in remembering religious history. One of the interviewees emphasized that "Giving a lesson or delivering a good sermon to adults is of great service, while in many cases, you can barely change an older adult's mind. When it comes to teaching the words of God though, it is almost guaranteed that your service can shape and change their [youths'] lives for the better." Therefore, as this Church leader concludes, "The most rewarding [thing] is knowing that you are making a difference in their [youths'] lives." Five other interviewees expressed similar opinions. Interviewee CL2 revealed that "The most rewarding thing when working with youth is to be able to contribute to their growth and support young people in resolving the obstacles or challenges they face." Interviewee CL3 pointed out that, "The most rewarding aspect of being a Church leader who spends time with youth is tangibly seeing the impact you have upon them." Several other respondents (three of eight) believed that working with young people provides a means for contributing to their development. These responses illustrate that many Church leaders consider their tasks when working with youth as part of a broad mission contributing to young people's overall growth and development.

Whereas some Church leaders are committed to the broad mission described above, others are inclined to have a narrower view of the role of the EOTC in the lives of young people. Many ministerial interviewees focused solely on spiritual growth when discussing the problem under investigation, absent a companion focus on other aspects of youth development. Interviewee CL1 highlighted that the most rewarding part of working

with young people is watching them connect to God and grow spiritually. Interviewee

CL6 echoed the same argument by stating that, "God is the one [to] put the words in

youth teachers' and leaders' mouths to guide and teach them in a way of spiritual path."

Similarly, Interviewee CL7 pointed out that, "Looking at their [youths'] spiritual growth

is also rewarding, and sometimes even exemplary, even for leaders."

Six interviewed Church leaders believed that young people must understand and

remember their roots and historical traditions; accordingly, the EOTC dedicates itself to

helping individuals achieve this goal. Interviewee CL8 shared that he gets "a sense of

satisfaction and blessing to help young people understand the unique place the Ethiopian

Tewahedo Orthodox Church holds and important characteristics that differentiate EOTC

from sister Oriental churches and other churches/denominations." He explained that the

EOTC is characterized by its "close identification with ancient traditions and customs,"

which, in his opinion, often make it difficult for the Church to function in the modern

world. He noted that in this situation, the youth in the diaspora "can become a bridge

between the Church, immigrant communities, and the Western world."

The EOTC supports young people in understanding their roots and heritage when

developing a clear comprehension of their self-identity. Interviewee CL3 considered his

role as a "bridge between Ethiopia and the United States." Interviewee CL4, at the same

time, admitted to being "overjoyed to be able to teach Ethiopian Orthodox youth and be a

part of their commitment to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church." Throughout the

interview process, a dominant opinion of five Church leaders about the commitment of

young people to the EOTC and their knowledge and awareness of their historical roots

was noted as critical goals for leaders when working with young parishioners.

The last documented sub-theme discussed by Church leaders about the importance of the EOTC is youth education, as mentioned by four of eight clergy. Interviewee CL4 associated his mission as a Sunday school teacher to inspire young people "to learn more about their faith and culture," and Interviewee CL5 admitted that "The most rewarding [thing] is witnessing their [youths'] eagerness to learn." Interviewee CL7, at the same time, revealed that what he values the most is an opportunity to be simultaneously a teacher and a mentor for young people while also enjoying the trust they place in him. As noted by Interviewee CL4, the issue of education should not be understood exclusively as a process during which adherents are being lectured on some essential matters. Per interviewee comments, young people should also be able to share their knowledge with others to build and leverage acquired information, thereby contributing to individual growth and the Church's growth as a whole.

Clergy interviewees (four of eight) understand that youth retention is their mission when working with young parishioners. As Interviewee CL1 explained, "The youth are the future of tomorrow, and they need to be built accordingly." Some leaders expressed a more pragmatic approach toward this matter, realizing that the EOTC is unlikely to succeed in the United States unless it attracts young Ethiopians living in this country. Interviewee CL8 noted that the EOTC should distinguish itself from other churches by ensuring the succession and continuous adherence to traditions, which is impossible without the support of youth. If the EOTC fails in this sphere, it "would not be any different from the churches we currently see in the West[ern] [world], which continue to [physically] close their doors and become available on the market for sale because of lack of succession."

During the interview process, all interviewed Church leaders noted the importance of the EOTC to youth. Simultaneously, a smaller number (three of eight) mentioned the importance of young parishioners to the EOTC. Despite youth retention problems experienced by the EOTC in the United States, Church leaders continue focusing on the potential benefits of Church attendance for young people. There is a more limited awareness among those interviewed that the EOTC may not survive in the U.S. unless it finds a way to align with the needs and expectations of young people.

Successful Events or Activities that Support Youth Retention

Despite differences in the opinions of various Church leaders, most (five of eight) believed that effectively engaging youth in a particular Church event or activity ensures that the experience is helpful, interesting, and valuable for young people. Interviewee CL2 mentioned a specific lesson on "Bahire Hasab [the calendar of Ethiopia]," a term referring to the Tewahedo Ethiopian Church when asked about the example of a successful youth event or occasion calendared system. During the discussion of the event's results, Interviewee CL2 concluded that the experience was successful because it was "engaging, practical, there were many mathematical computations embedded in the lesson, and learning the wisdom of Church fathers revealed by the Holy Spirit is joyful." The core message related to the particular "success strategy" revealed by this interviewee underscores the importance of making a specific service or event in which young parishioners fully engage. In the opinion of four of eight Church leaders, services must meet the needs of and recognize contributions from youth. Three participants of the study also expressed the importance of helping young people engage in relationships with their

peers during Church events and ensuring Church leaders serve as role models for young

parishioners.

Considering the lack of a consistent EOTC-wide vision noted by interviewees,

Church leaders offered many different strategies for engaging youth. Most interviewees

stated that the Church should take an essential step towards understanding the unique

needs of youth and customize educational activities, events, and even the language used,

to meet young people's needs and expectations. Interviewee CL3 noted the importance of

finding a balance between the Church's traditions and young people's expectations,

stating, "The youth feel most connected to Church practices that are rooted in our

tradition but explained to them in words that they can understand."

By admitting that the existing ways of working with youth might be inconsistent

with young people's expectations, clergy stated their awareness of the critical

shortcomings of existing youth engagement approaches employed by EOTC youth

ministers. Francis et al. (2016) and Burdick (2018) note that conservativeness negatively

affects youth attendance at church services. Similarly, Hope et al. (2019) share an opinion

that churches failing to take advantage of modernization are unlikely to retain young

parishioners. Some (two of eight) Church leaders noted these crucial issues.

Simultaneously, others (five of eight) believed that preserving conservative EOTC

principles and practices is now and should remain an important goal. Interviewee CL1,

particularly, expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that it becomes hard to "minimize

screen time and . . . let them [youth] focus on something else" instead of trying to use the

attachment of young people to digital devices as an advantage to "modernize" certain

aspects of Church services so that they can be of greater interest and use for young

people.

Minister CL6 noted that, "Our conventional approach didn't work in the past

since we lost a lot of youths, so we need to change that approach." He realizes that new

approaches help young people "connect with the Church community, so they don't feel

isolated or rejected whenever they do something." To achieve this goal, the Church

should "ask them what they want . . . [and] understand their needs." Unfortunately, the

majority (five of eight) of Church leaders interviewed did not note that a gap exists

between the dated Church practices of the EOTC and the needs and expectations of

young people regarding the perceived role of religion in their lives.

Church Practices That Make Youth Feel Connected to the EOTC

When discussing methods used to engage youth with the Church, interviewees

offered many general and practical recommendations. In the opinion of Church leaders,

the provision of leadership assignments for young parishioners is among the most

effective connective Church practices. Moreover, some Church leaders agreed (three of

eight) that the EOTC should increase youth involvement in Church affairs. Young

adherents should have a higher impact on and engagement in decision making to ensure

that Church services, events, and activities are relevant for them. One way to engage

young parishioners in decision making is to give them leadership assignments as

recommended by Interviewee CL2.

Effective Strategies for Retaining Youth in the EOTC

A sense of belonging, personal connection with leaders and peers, and an ability

to see the impact of their participation on others are popular youth retention drivers cited

by Church leaders. Half (four of eight) pointed out that young people are significantly

affected by their parents; accordingly, Church leaders need to work closely with parents

to retain children and adolescents in the EOTC. Interviewee CL5 stated that parental

support is essential for the adequate engagement of children and adolescents in Church

services and events. Interviewees CL4 and CL7 provided practical examples of a Vashon

Monastery and the Coptic Orthodox Monastery group trip that could not have been

planned and implemented without the active engagement of parents. The continuous

collaboration between parents and Church leaders is an essential tool for youth retention.

Recommendations for Change to Retain Youth in the EOTC

When encouraged to share three change recommendations, interviewees again

illustrated a diversity of opinions about increasing youth retention at the EOTC.

However, the following ideas particularly were noted:

- Using the English language in Church events and services.

- Working with parents to increase youth retention.

- Customizing Church events, services, and activities to the needs of young people.

- Implementing various Sunday school reforms.

- Prioritizing young adherents' feedback.

- Organizing collaboration events, such as summer camps or trips.

In addition to these suggestions, two of eight interviewees believed that each

Church service and event is a critical learning moment for young people. Furthermore,

three of eight interviewees thought that the EOTC should promote a warm and

welcoming atmosphere so that young parishioners feel free from judgment and are

confident and willing to express themselves and state their opinions. Three respondents,

as stated above, believed that the EOTC should adjust services and principles to meet the

current expectations of youth. For example, Interviewee CL8 suggested creating a social

media or a digital platform dedicated to faith matters and Church affairs. Others go even

further, suggesting that traditional services and events should have more "wow" or

exciting moments to attract youth.

Other Comments Added at the End of the Interview

When answering the last interview question about additional thoughts or ideas,

Church leaders put forward several conventional and unconventional recommendations

regarding youth retention. Interviewee CL2, for example, assumed that young adherents

need more space for their spiritual growth, recommending that the EOTC not force

children to spend all their time inside the Church building. Interviewees CL5 and CL6, at

the same time, emphasized the importance of working closely with parents and together

creating a warm atmosphere so that young adherents feel accepted. Minister CL8 noted

that while some children from immigrant families might struggle with maintaining their

connection to Ethiopia, group trips and other engaging activities often assist youth in

remembering their roots and remaining attached to the Ethiopian culture and EOTC

traditions.

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Results From Youth Interviews

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To ensure a deep comprehension of the problem under investigation, examining

the perspectives of both Church leaders and youth is essential. Therefore, young

individuals who are still active members of their EOTC and those who have left the

Church offered insight into these retention factors. The researcher interviewed four active

and four inactive young parishioners; each of these eight youth was associated directly

with one different and distinct parish of the eight Churches that each clergyperson

represented. Of the eight youth participants, five were male (approximately 60%), three

were female (about 40%), and all resided within the boundaries of the targeted

geographic study area, namely, a large metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest of the

United States.

Perspectives of Youth Active in the EOTC

Table 2 summarizes the themes classified within the six interview topics

(interview questions) that youth active in the EOTC addressed (see Appendix C).

Table 2

Themes Within Interview Topics for Youth Active in the EOTC

Topics	Themes
1. Feelings about Church connection	• The Church strongly impacts the lives of young parishioners. • Young adherents are guided through a system of values. • The EOTC imparts many different feelings, among which are peace, serenity, love, and nostalgia.
2. Most valued Church attributes or elements	• Adherence to rich traditions. • Shared history. • Generosity by and empowerment of those who belong to the Church. • Acceptance by some EOTC members.
3. Enjoyable events or activities	• Sunday school lessons and activities. • Community events outside of the Church. • All Church events and activities.
4.A. Causes for youth leaving the Church	• Language barriers. • Lack of understanding of young parishioners' needs and expectations. • Failure of the EOTC to justify its importance for youth. • Lack of success in adjusting services and events to meet the unique needs of the diaspora.

	• Unwelcoming and judgmental atmosphere.
4.B. Causes for youth staying in the Church	• A sense of belonging. • Continued attachment to EOTC history and traditions. • Parental support and influence. • Faith.
5. Recommendations for change	• Work to eliminate the language barrier. • Prioritize the needs of young parishioners. • Customize Church events and services to meet modern world needs and expectations of the youth. • Listening to and act on young adherents' feedback. • Ensure the Church has bilingual ministers. • Support youth in choosing to engage in the Church. • Create a post-church program.
6. Other comments	• The EOTC struggles to remain relevant for the diaspora. • The Church will succeed in the U.S. if it demonstrates importance for the young diaspora and supports immigrant families in remaining attached to their history and culture.

Feelings About Church Connection

Active young adherents of the EOTC report many feelings about Church connection. For all four of them, the Church makes a crucial impact on their lives. Three interviewees emphasized that the EOTC provided them with core values and beliefs that guide their lives and influence their daily activities and fate. The adherents also reported other feelings associated with the Church, such as peace, serenity, love, and nostalgia. Half of the active adherents who took part in the study noted a sense of peace.

Most Valued Church Attributes

Active parishioners shared Church leaders' appreciation of the unique historical background of the EOTC and its commitment to upholding traditions. These two issues are the most valued Church attributes and elements discussed by interviewees.

Interviewee Y1 praised the EOTC for "preserving the true apostolic faith." This

respondent regarded the EOTC as unique because, "It is steeped in . . . rich traditions that

intertwine the Old Testament with the New Testament; and the way of drawing icons on

the walls is authentic and reflective of our own identities."

The interviewee went on to note, "The multitude of holy chants composed by St.

Yared are a gift to the ear." Interviewee Y2 shared similar perceptions, believing the

main reason for remaining committed to the EOTC is because, "The way that we worship

today is the same way that Christians worshipped 300 years ago and even before then."

As a result of preserving traditions, this interviewee felt a "deep-rooted connection to the

past, the Church fathers, and to Christ himself." Interviewee Y3 also emphasized the

value of "the authenticity of the kidassie [liturgy], the Mahilet [overnight liturgical

service], and traditions."

Two active youth Church members noted generosity and empowerment of those

belonging to the Church as important, valued attributes of the EOTC. Interviewee Y2

believed that the Church empowers youth to make a difference in their own lives and the

lives of other people around them. A key retention driver is this sense of belonging.

However, only one young adherent noted a direct link between the sense of belonging

and empowerment.

Enjoyable Church Events or Activities

Youth reported that Sunday school programs and activities such as teaching in the

Sunday school are the most enjoyable church events. Three active adherents supported

the importance of teaching children in the Sunday school as the most enjoyable activity.

Interviewee Y1 explained this by saying, "I feel like I belong the most when I teach kids

for Sunday school. I feel like I can relate to them better than other adults who have not

grown up in America." This interviewee further added that, "doing my part to make the

kids feel like they also belong gives me a purpose I don't take lightly."

Interviewee Y2 also noted that, "I am working with the youth in Sunday school or

after Church dialogue sessions (we used to do this formally at our Church); I feel a true

and valuable connection to the Church." Interviewee Y3 supported this activity and said

that, "I really like one activity that I did with the Sunday school in which the boys and

girls were assigned a competition. This competition was during the Holy Week, and we

were supposed to create ways to present the different weeks. I liked this activity because I

was able to work on something spiritual with my brothers and friends. It definitely helped

bond us in a spiritual way."

Causes for Youth Leaving the Church

The language factor is one of the most perceived issues raised by interviewees

when identifying the causes for youth leaving the Church. Interviewee Y1 indicated that,

"Having a robust Sunday school filled with resources for English-speaking youth can aid

in creating a community that motivates the youth to stay active; however, only creating

services and resources in a language the kids do not understand is a recipe for disaster."

This parishioner recommended that the EOTC "when possible, have a clergy member

such as a priest that can speak English to be the confession father for the kids and to

generally add resources of the Sunday school." Interviewee Y2 agreed that, "The EOTC

should have more English resources, sermons that include topics relevant to them

[youth]." Interviewee Y3 also mentioned the language issue, recommending the Church

organize English Bible studies. Interviewee Y4 was even more emphatic when discussing

the language barrier. This individual believed that, "The Church services alone definitely

discourage the youth . . . the main reason being the language barrier. Not all diasporas

speak Ge'ez or Amharic for various reasons, and even though the Church screen

translates in English, that still isn't enough."

Interviewees often mentioned the lack of customization to the modern world as a

relevant barrier impeding Church attendance among youth. Interviewee Y2 shared

nostalgic feelings about the past when Church leaders and the youth "would discuss

practical applications of the Church teachings to everyday life." Unfortunately, the

interviewee admitted that, "The Church . . . failed to make the connection of 'why' the

Church is important to our [young people's] daily lives." The respondent believed the

EOTC would benefit from being responsive to the modern world, with its challenges and

opportunities, so programs would be "geared specifically for their [youth] needs from

infancy to adulthood [and have] more examples of what right looks like, less judgment."

Two of four interviewees noted the importance of customizing Church services to meet

the needs of youth as a significant improvement that can affect the EOTC in the United

States.

Interviewee Y3 narrated childhood stories pointing at the prevalent pattern of

ignoring the interests of children and adolescents at the EOTC. As Interviewee Y3

emphasized, "Each time new board members were elected, the Sunday school's

curriculum would change. We would have a class for a few months, and then it would

eventually come to an end . . . if there were a mehaber (collection of individuals meeting

once in a week or month in the name of saints and eating, drinking, and sharing spiritual

knowledge together), we would be kicked out of the rooms so that the adults could use

them. Very little time and effort went into the young generation, and those who chose to

leave the Church are not at fault." The transcripts align with the arguments of Francis et

al. (2016), Burdick (2018), and Hope et al. (2019) concerning the negative impact of

conservatism on church service attendance of young parishioners as applicable to the

EOTC. However, according to statements from young active EOTC parishioners, EOTC

services are conservative and are not designed for youth, lacking current methods for

engaging young people.

Whereas the divide between old and the young generations is an element affecting

the sustainability of the EOTC, youth believe there is a gap between the relevancy of the

EOTC for people born in Ethiopia and those born in the United States. Interviewee Y4

admitted that, "Due to the fact that the EOTC mostly consists of those who were either

born in or are from Ethiopia . . . things like language and understanding are not the same.

You can't relate to those from the motherland because our upbringings were different,

and even our daily lifestyles aren't the same."

The ability for young people to feel free of judgment is another crucial factor that

substantially affects young adherents' attitudes towards the EOTC. Interviewee Y3

criticized the EOTC for being judgmental of youth. The respondent emphasized that, "It

is not healthy for someone to come to Church and then being scolded by other Church

goers for reasons that are minuscule." Davis and Kiang (2016) reported this gap between

the generations as a vital part of the youth retention problem; however, cultural issues

also substantially affect community relations within the Church because of the tendency

of many older adherents to judge young parishioners. Interviewee Y3 expressed

confusion concerning this trend, pointing out that, "There is obviously a generational gap,

and now there is a cultural gap as well, but 200 people do not need to comment on the

shoes someone is wearing. Some people forget what it is like being young; when people

go through phases, and it's mentally deteriorating for young people to come to Church

and end up being glared at and lectured by people they hardly know." This interviewee

cited the maintenance of an unwelcoming and judgmental atmosphere at EOTC events as

a prevalent cause for youth leaving the Church.

Causes for Youth Staying in the Church

Those interviewees who continue attending Church services explain their choice

by noting a sense of belonging, continued attachment to EOTC history and traditions,

parental support and influence, and faith. Stable, productive, engaging, and inspiring

relationships with other community members, noted as the main driver of the sense of

belonging, are a prevalent factor influencing young people to continue attending the

Church. For example, interviewee Y4 admitted that, "I grew up in an EOTC, literally,"

and that, "The Church and community watched me blossom into the man I am today."

Such an attachment to the Church community translates into a willingness to consider the

EOTC as an essential part of one's life. Similarly, Interviewee Y3 revealed that, "The

Church was a central meeting ground for the community and taught or encouraged me to

learn the Ethiopian traditions and the Amharic language."

When discussing the retention of young parishioners, it is essential to highlight

the significance of parental support. If parents lack investment in keeping EOTC

religious traditions, children of the family are unlikely to choose a different spiritual path.

Interviewee Y2 revealed that a parent's commitment to raising a child in the Church was

one of the critical drivers of Church attendance. The respondent believed that children

between the ages of 5 and 12 become committed adherents of the EOTC only if this goal

is shared and supported by their parents. Finally, one of the respondents mentioned the

factor of faith as a relevant issue, as the EOTC allows young adherents to remain

connected to God.

Recommendations for Change

When discussing three change recommendations, young adherents focused on the

following avenues for improvement:

- Eliminating the language barrier at EOTC events and services.

- Prioritizing the needs of young parishioners when planning and organizing

  Church events.

- Customizing activities to meet the needs and expectations of the youth.

- Listening to young adherents' feedback.

In addition to the retention drivers discussed above, an analysis of interviewee

transcripts revealed several other issues that might affect youth attendance at EOTC

services and events. One idea suggested by Interviewee Y4 was to have bilingual Church

leaders, an unconventional idea for reaching out to those parishioners who were born in

the United States and, thus, are likely to experience a language barrier when attending

Church. The respondent expressed confidence that, "Adding people who are bilingual

and speak fluent English would be essential because the youth won't be afraid to

communicate or ask questions at any time rather than being confused or lost [because of]

not being able to ask." Another recommendation revolved around a series of measures to

make participation in the Church less "forceful" for the youth. The term "forceful" in the

context of the interview refers to pressuring young parishioners into attending Church

services. Finally, another recommendation proposed the creation of post-Church

programs. Unfortunately, the interviewee did not provide sufficient details about the

make-up of such programs.

Other Comments Added at the End of the Interview

When offering final reflections, two of four active adherents again emphasized the

task of the EOTC to become and remain relevant for the diaspora. Interviewee Y4

pointed out that the Church will succeed in the U.S. only if it justifies its importance for

the diaspora and ensures that immigrant families remain attached to their history and

culture. Interviewee Y1 shared optimism concerning this matter, expressing confidence in

the Church's ability to achieve this goal.

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Perspectives of Youth Inactive in the EOTC

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Table 3 summarizes the themes classified within the six interview topics

(interview questions) that youth inactive in the EOTC addressed (see Appendix C).

Table 3

Themes Within Interview Topics for Youth Inactive in the EOTC

Topics	Themes
1. Feelings about Church connection	• Fond childhood memories • Deep commitment to the Church
2. Most valued Church attributes or elements	• Culture, history, and unchanging traditions • Feeling of community
3. Enjoyable events or activities	• Celebrations • Liturgies • Charity events and other activities
4.A. Causes for youth leaving the	• Lack of customization of Church events and services to meet young parishioners' needs and expectations. • Impact of mass culture on young parishioners' values

Church	and beliefs.	
	• Aging of the congregation.	
	• The forced nature of Church attendance.	
	• Language barriers.	
	• Negative influence of parents who are no longer active.	
4.B. Causes for youth staying in the Church	• Engaging activities.	
	• The sense of belonging.	
	• Involvement with the EOTC from a young age.	
5. Recommendations for change	• Prioritize serving young parishioners.	
	• Organize community-building activities.	
	• Customize events and services to meet young parishioners' needs and expectations.	
	• Organize exciting and engaging celebrations within the Church.	
	• Incorporate the English language in Church events and services to include accommodation of Western practices.	
	• Reinforce a warm and welcoming atmosphere.	
6. Other comments	• None.	

Feelings About Church Connection

Unlike active adherents, inactive parishioners may feel disconnected from the Church and hold nostalgic feelings and childhood memories. Based on interviews, individuals who have abandoned the EOTC primarily associate the Church with the past. Interviewee Y7, for example, stated that, "When I think of my connection to the Church, I think of my childhood, I think of learning mezmur [spiritual singing] with a select group of people, I think of happy and nostalgic feelings." However, for a significant number of the study's inactive participants (three of four), the EOTC does not play an active role in the future. The lack of a consistent vision about incorporating the Church into the lives of young Ethiopians in the United States may be the main reason behind the contradictory feelings, as reported by Interviewee Y5. As this individual elucidated, "The EOTC is the

last major institution of our past which remains intact . . . she is a stabilizing force."

Available evidence provides a premise for believing that many young parishioners do not

recognize the solid foundation provided by the EOTC, considering it a part of their past, a

source of nostalgic feelings, and a collection of valuable historical records. Only one

interviewee noted feeling a commitment or connection to the Church, while the three

other inactive adherents stated they have lost such a Church connection.

Most Valued Church Attributes

Youth who are no longer active adherents of the Church also noted the appeal of

history and heritage when discussing the EOTC. Specifically, Interviewee Y8 pointed out

the fact that, "Today it seems everyone is trying to evolve and outdo or improve on

themselves. The EOTC is unwavering in its foundational beliefs, practices, and values."

The authenticity of the EOTC was depicted by most previous parishioners (three of four)

as an essential facet of their perceptions about the Church. The feeling of community is

the second most popular subtopic raised by two of four inactive parishioners. Interviewee

Y6 pointed out that he values the community "as it is an important part of the Ethiopian

culture . . . everyone is there for the same reason: to praise and strengthen their

relationship with God."

Enjoyable Church Events or Activities

When asked to recall enjoyable events or activities within the EOTC, interviewees

mentioned celebrations, conferences, group trips, and charity events. Interviewee Y8

remembers EOTC events as "the celebration of the collective faith . . . the participants

were Church family and my immediate family." Another former parishioner noted that

each liturgy seemed like an engaging event. Interviewee Y7 narrated how a group of

youth fed the homeless at the shelters once a month on a Saturday. As this respondent

explained, "Not only did I feel like I belonged there, but it felt like going to the gym or an

event."

Causes for Youth Leaving the Church

Young adherents reported many reasons that cause youth to leave the Church,

including the lack of Church activity customization, the negative impact of modern

culture on young devotees, an aging congregation, forced Church attendance, the

language barrier, and a lack of parental influence. All four inactive adherents who took

part in this dissertation study agree that the EOTC failed to customize events and

services, evidenced by the length of services and the lack of engaging events that

promote their attachment to the Church community. This shortcoming applies both to

young parishioners who remain attached to the Ethiopian culture and those who try living

"the American way."

One of the interviewees mentioned the negative impact of the culture as a

relevant issue, admitting that the values and beliefs imposed by the American culture

might discourage people from attending the EOTC. Interviewee Y8 further explained

that, "Many children or youth of Ethiopian born members don't speak or fully understand

the language (Ge'ez)." Moreover, according to this interviewee, "In America, people

become accustomed to 'microwave thinking'" that affects attitudes toward the Church

and the willingness to shift to more "modern" churches than the EOTC. The term

"microwave thinking" in the context of the study refers to a tendency to make decisions

quickly and not spend a significant amount of time on enduring activities, such as

spending the entire day at the Church. In turn, Interviewee Y7 believed that the aging of

the congregation is the critical cause of youth leaving the Church. One of the

interviewees mentioned the lack of parental influence as a possible cause of youth

leaving the Church, admitting that sometimes parents who become disconnected with the

EOTC encourage their children to follow that example, which further reduces youth

retention.

Causes for Youth Staying in the Church

According to the interviewees, engaging activities, a sense of belonging, and

involvement with the EOTC from a young age are vital retention drivers. Many

respondents (three of four) believed the EOTC can better retain youth if Church events

become engaging for young parishioners while also helping them develop a sense of

belonging and collaboration with others, eventually becoming an organic part of the

Church community.

The promotion of a sense of belonging among young adherents is another crucial

objective for the EOTC. One respondent described involvement with the EOTC at a

young age as an instrument that prevents a young adherent from losing a connection with

the Church. He stated that, "Youth that has a stronger Church foundation from when they

were younger seem to remain active in the Church . . . when they are taught at a very

young age what it means to be an Orthodox Christian, they will carry that motivation and

willingness as they grow up."

Recommendations for Change

Interviewees noted that attention to the following all are elements that can

influence retention of young adults in the EOTC:

- Prioritization of serving young parishioners.

- Organization of community-building activities.

- Customization of events and services to better meet youth parishioners' needs and expectations.

- Organization of exciting celebrations within the Church.

- Incorporation of the English language in Church events and services.

- Reinforcement of a warm and welcoming atmosphere within the Church.

Interviewee Y6 explicitly stated that the EOTC should become "less forceful when doing activities or events because this discourages people from wanting to attend. They [youth] need to have the willingness to do it [attend] instead." The interviewee believed that many young parishioners attend Church because of parental and peer pressure. The respondent believed that by stimulating young people to participate in the Church instead of relying on force or pressure, the EOTC could improve the Church's image for the younger generation. The accommodation of Western practices is another recommendation offered by some interviewees. Interviewee Y8, who is no longer an active adherent, was under the impression that, "The Church would need to become something outside of itself . . . it would need to evolve to accommodate Western practices."

Overall Summary of Results

Eight clergy and eight youth took part in this study. During the interview process, the guidance and support of young people's success and the ability to monitor and fuel their spiritual growth are the two most important perceived leader rewards when working with youth. Also, Church leaders shared satisfaction with helping young people learn and discover new things, understand religious roots, and inspire young parishioners to

overcome life obstacles. The clergy consider their crucial contributions to include teaching, mentoring, and educating young people, helping the EOTC succeed and remain active in the U.S., helping youth learn about God, witnessing His blessings, and serving as a bridge between Ethiopia and the United States. In addition, church leaders consider lessons, conferences, group trips, collaboration projects, competitions, and charity events as elements that support youth retention.

An analysis of the leader interviews shows that ministers are aware of the EOTC's challenge to retain young parishioners. The clergy believe that accomplishing each of the following will help retain young adults: customizing events and services that meet young parishioners' needs, fostering stronger attachment to the Church community, sponsoring practical events and experiences, empowering youth through assigning them active roles in church matters, and creating meaningful learning opportunities. Church leaders' responses to the interview questions reveal an understanding that the existing EOTC youth programming must improve, in many ways, to contribute to youth engagement and retention. At the same time, some clergy do not seem to see or focus on the need for structural changes, such as customizing Church events to youths' needs and expectations and prioritizing the interests of young parishioners. Church leaders believe improvement comes by using the English language in Church events and services and working closely with parents.

Active young adherents who took part in the study predominantly perceived the EOTC as an institution that substantially affects their lives and teaches young people a system of values. These interviewees reported feelings of peace, serenity, love, and nostalgia when reflecting on their perceptions of the EOTC. They argued that adherence

to rich traditions, a shared history, and the generosity and empowerment of those belonging to the Church are key valued attributes of the EOTC. Active adherents are under the impression that the language barrier and the Church's failure to understand young parishioners' needs and expectations are the leading causes for youth leaving the Church. Another relevant issue is the Church's failure to justify its importance for youth and adjust services and events accordingly. In the opinion of these interviewees, a sense of belonging and continued attachment to EOTC history and traditions encourage active adherents to stay in the Church.

In contrast, some youth may also be motivated by faith and parental support. The respondents believe that the language barrier's elimination and young parishioners' prioritization at the EOTC could help the Church change to increase youth retention. Furthermore, customization of Church events, consideration of adherents' feedback, and youth support in choosing to engage in the Church actively are also relevant recommendations.

For inactive youth, the EOTC is primarily associated with childhood memories and, to a lesser extent, committed to the Church. The culture, history, and unchanging traditions are the most valued Church attributes for these interviewees. Inactive youth point out that insufficient customization of Church events and services to meet young parishioners' needs and expectations is an essential issue underlying low youth retention. Interestingly, two other factors cited by these interviewees as crucial causes for leaving the Church yet are complex for EOTC leadership to address: the mass culture's negative impact and the congregation's aging. Simultaneously, the forced nature of Church attendance and the language barrier are two relevant issues that the Church could change.

Inactive youth characterize engaging activities and promoting a sense of belonging as valid reasons underlying young adherents' choice to stay in the Church. Respondents noted prioritization of service to youth parishioners, organization of community-building activities, customization of events and services, incorporating the English language, and reinforcing a welcoming atmosphere within the Church to help the EOTC increase youth retention.

Active and inactive youth perceptions of why young people stay or leave the Church are surprisingly similar. Both recognize the Church's need to understand the needs and expectations of youth and adjust its events and services accordingly. These deficits are among the key drivers of low youth retention. At the same time, most youth in each group agree that the sense of belonging is the primary driver of youth retention. Interviewee responses note similarities regarding the most valued Church attributes and elements. Both active and inactive youth consider adherence to the rich traditions, culture, and history of the EOTC as critical and valued elements of the Church. At the same time, interview results show several differences between active and inactive parishioners' opinions on youth retention. The former considers the language barrier the most important recommendation for the EOTC to increase youth retention, whereas the latter regard it as a less critical factor.

Furthermore, active adherents cite drivers of youth engagement and retention that the Church could control as having a significant impact. At the same time, inactive youth often believe young people decide to leave the EOTC due to reasons beyond the Church's capacity, such as aging congregants, disengaged parents, or the negative impact of various aspects in American culture on adherents' values and beliefs. Furthermore, some

inactive followers complain about the unwelcoming atmosphere within the Church and the forced nature of Church attendance. In contrast, active parishioners praise a warm atmosphere for being an essential factor in youth retention.

The interviews show evident similarities between the perceptions of youth retention by Church leaders and young parishioners. Both groups of respondents agree that the EOTC is currently unable to retain young people because it does not prioritize youth and their needs and expectations. However, all respondents believe that engaging activities, a warm atmosphere, and leadership assignments for young people could improve youth retention in the Church. Furthermore, the interviewees believe that the EOTC will retain young parishioners if it promotes a sense of belonging while engaging them in Church services and the Church community. At the same time, many Church leaders still seem to not recognize the need for change due to concerns about the possible compromising effect of global modifications on the EOTC's historical mission. Therefore, instead of offering necessary transformations, some Church leaders propose slight changes, such as eliminating the language barrier, digitalizing church events, and working with parents. On the other hand, young parishioners, including active and inactive, appear ready for change, recommending that the Church prioritize outreach to youth and customize events and services accordingly.

The findings reported in this chapter form the basis for improvement recommendations in retaining Church youth. By situating these recommendations on a solid foundation of change theory and principles, the EOTC may begin to further build a culture of sustainability through full engagement and participatory leadership of its youth.

Chapter 5. Discussion

Overview of Findings

Interviews conducted during this study reveal similarities between the opinions of church leaders and young parishioners about the engagement of youth with the EOTC. Many of those interviewed share the same beliefs about the reasons underlying the Church's failure to engage young adherents with its services, even putting forward similar recommendations concerning making the EOTC more relevant for young people. Nonetheless, there are substantial differences between their perceptions of the problem under investigation. This chapter elaborates on similarities and differences in detail.

This dissertation study discovered the following three most important factors causing youth to leave the Church.

- The EOTC overall does not justify its relevance for young parishioners.

- Low engagement of young parishioners exists in Church communities, events, and services due to the conservatism of the EOTC, the language barrier, insufficient customization of Church events to meet the needs and expectations of youth, and the lack of community-building activities.

- Young adherents are exposed to external factors discouraging them from staying at the EOTC, such as American values and career aspirations.

Results also point to three significant areas for consideration to improve youth retention:

- Increasing a sense of belonging to a community of believers.

- Customizing engaging activities and leadership assignments that support youth involvement, empowerment, and learning.

- Encouraging support from parents.

The Church's Need for High Youth Engagement and Retention

This study's leader interviews suggest that the Church is unaware of or hesitant to change itself in ways that may increase relevancy for the younger generation. In the academic literature, religion is considered irrelevant by many young people (Hardie et al., 2016; Sanchez et al., 2016). The interviewees demonstrated that such a problem is also pertinent to the EOTC. The Church manages to reinforce the relationship between Ethiopians and their heritage and culture; however, it fails to become relevant for the daily lives of many young parishioners living in the United States.

Interviews of Church leaders and young parishioners reflect perceptions that the EOTC operates as a "guardian of the past" rather than a path to the future. As a result, contemporary leaders do not understand the needs and expectations of young people. This pattern is consistent with the overall lack of understanding about youth in most churches (Hardie et al., 2016; Kulis & Tsethlikai, 2016; Sakellariou, 2018; Hope et al., 2019). At the EOTC, this problem might be even more evident due to traditionally high standards regarding the parishioners' compliance with norms and traditions of the Church (Wordofa, 2017) and heavy reliance on conservative practices (Burdick, 2018). This conservatism manifests itself in languages that most young people do not understand, the lack of youth empowerment, and events that fail to align with young parishioners' needs and expectations.

The study suggests that Church leaders often fail to ensure that the EOTC remains relevant to all the parishioners exposed to the Western mass culture and lifestyle. Career ambitions of young people (Temesegen & Tsega, 2019), their role models (Burdick, 2018), and their family situations (Bruce et al., 2017) account for most factors affecting

youth affiliation with the church. Simultaneously, the mistakes of EOTC leaders also contribute to the Church's failure to engage parishioners from the diaspora. Migrants experience significant cultural shock and stress (Kindarara et al., 2018). In this situation, the Church could help young people adjust to new environments and life circumstances (Tura et al., 2017; Temesgen & Tsega, 2019). Since the EOTC fails to recognize the needs and expectations of youth, young people gradually lose their attachment to the Church because of a perceived lack of relevance to their daily lives. The EOTC's failure to assist adherents with the transition process in the United States is a valid reason for the decision of many young parishioners to leave the Church. These young people rely on other sources of support to relieve their cultural stress, which most probably influences the loss of their connection with the Church.

One fundamental reason behind low youth retention at the EOTC relates to the Church's difficulties in remaining relevant to those parishioners born in the United States and those young people who live "the American way." Interviews with youth reveal that young people living in America are fundamentally different from those born in Ethiopia. This factor impacts their attitude towards cultural traditions and their lifestyles, aspirations, and systems of worldview. The task of retaining these people as active adherents of the EOTC is undoubtedly challenging, one of the critical indicators being current low youth retention at the Church (Burdrick, 2018). Unfortunately, however, most leader interviewees did not provide practical recommendations for incorporating young people into the church community.

Ethiopians encounter problems related to a conflict between the younger and older generations because of a cultural gap. Those people exposed to the American values

and beliefs might not appreciate the Ethiopian history, culture, and traditions as much as those born in Ethiopia. The process of engaging these people with the church, therefore, is challenging. The EOTC does not have an adequate strategy for engaging such parishioners in Church communities, thus contributing to the absence of a sense of belonging that could encourage them to attend EOTC events and services.

The patterns described above illustrate that contemporary Church leaders of the EOTC tend not to exercise a transformational leadership style as recommended by Bass (1998). Instead of considering identifying and meeting the needs of followers, most continue implementing the same leadership strategies that promote conservative traditions and address expectations of the older (not younger) generation. Transcripts note that the EOTC should change its role from being a "guardian of the past" to being a strategic partner in faith matters and family issues, career aspirations, and other areas of life. The juxtaposition of preserving foundational beliefs of the Church while serving the needs of today's congregation is complex at best. As the results of this study suggest, the contemporary leadership of the EOTC overall fails to understand the needs and expectations of young people. This pattern is consistent with the overall lack of understanding of the youth in most churches (Hardie et al., 2016; Kulis & Tsethlikai, 2016; Sakellariou, 2018; Hope et al., 2019). At the EOTC, this problem might be even more evident due to the traditionally high standards regarding the parishioners' compliance with the norms and traditions of the church (Wordofa, 2017) and the heavy reliance on conservative practices (Burdick, 2018). This conservatism manifests itself in various domains, leading to low youth engagement.

A failure to understand the needs and challenges of youth is the underlying reason for the decision of many young people to leave the church. However, as interview transcripts demonstrate, engaging children and adolescents in community activities and becoming a close partner of people as they mature will likely influence youth to stay rather than leave the Church. This study shows that the sense of belonging, which Henderson (2014) and Hayashi (2016) cite as essential to Church adherents and a critical driver of engagement with the Church, is a crucial need shared both by adults and youth. The interview insights suggest that the EOTC fails to nurture the sense of belonging in many young parishioners, which is a crucial shortcoming of the current strategy of the Church, considering that both active and inactive parishioners find the sense of belonging as a critical youth retention driver. A failure to recognize the importance of engaging youth in the Church community, in this situation, may be a key reason for low youth engagement.

Most literature sources analyzed in the second chapter of this study argue that Church leadership does not understand the needs of youth, which are fundamentally different from the needs of older adherents (Hardie et al., 2016; Kulis & Tsethlikai, 2016; Sakellariou, 2018). However, the findings of this study note that the needs of young parishioners are fundamentally different from the needs of the older generation. Older Church members often resist change and cling to traditions. Developing a sense of belonging and meaning within church practices is the focus of young people (Henderson, 2014; Hayashi, 2016). A significant task of the EOTC is to utilize effective channels of communicating with young people and satisfying their deep need for belonging.

Overview of Possible Changes

Most of the people interviewed agree that the Church struggles with remaining

relevant for youth. At the same time, leaders' and parishioners' opinions on changes

necessary to address this problem vary. Leaders are concerned about possible changes

because they may affect the beliefs and cultural norms of the Church, changing its nature

and disrupting its connection to Ethiopian history and culture. On the other hand, youth

interviewed aspire to identified changes because they value the EOTC but recognize its

increasing irrelevance for many young parishioners. Given the findings in this study, it

seems justified to recommend a set of changes for the EOTC that could help address the

shortcomings that emerged from the interviews to make the Church more relevant for

young parishioners, meet the needs and expectations of youth from the diaspora, and

increase adolescent engagement. In particular, the Church could benefit from pursuing

each of the following practices.

- Designing engaging events for young parishioners that stimulate their connection
  with the EOTC and nurture a sense of belonging. The role of young people could
  include performing leadership assignments, planning charitable events, organizing
  informal trips and other gatherings, and leading practical discussions to help find
  solutions to daily problems.

- Targeting different groups of young immigrants to address unique challenges of
  the acculturation process and other issues unique to specific categories of youth.
  Based on their exposure to Western culture, young refugees likely move through
  several developmental phases when assimilating in a new land. By customizing

work with groups at differing developmental levels, Church support is likely to be

viewed as more effective and meaningful to young people.

- Promoting a transformational leadership style among Church leaders to make the

  Church more relevant for young adherents. By focusing on youth empowerment,

  stronger connections between the Church and young members are likely to result.

- Eliminating the language barrier.

- Working closely with parents to increase youth retention.

The following sections discuss these recommendations in detail in line with

change theory and the research objectives of this study.

Designing Engaging Events for Young Parishioners

The literature review associated with this study noted that engaging events and

activities are an essential driver of youth engagement with the Church. Zeiders et al.

(2016) clarified that Church leaders should initiate a process that seeks to maximize

young people's involvement in Church affairs by providing them with duties encouraging

responsibility and accountability. Without the provision of such responsibilities, young

people's engagement with the Church is likely to rely primarily on parental support

(Tura, 2017). This problem seems especially disturbing considering that many young

parishioners have little time for participating in Church activities due to career ambitions

(Temesgen & Tseega, 2019). Therefore, the EOTC must design a series of events that

would specifically target young parishioners and provide them with an opportunity to

participate in exciting activities and a chance to make crucial decisions and contribute to

the achievement of important goals.

The results from this study suggest that the EOTC should transform its image among young people by becoming a place in which they would not only seek advice on faith matters but also in which they could "hang out" in a similar way in which they spend their time at restaurants and malls. Of course, comparing a Church to a mall or a restaurant might seem inaccurate and even cynical. However, the idea of launching Church events that are common, interesting, and engaging for youth is a recommendation expressed both by young parishioners and by Church leaders. Several examples of engaging events provided by the interviewees illustrate activities that can be implemented and co-planned by the youth and therefore have significant potential to foster a strong bond between the youth and the Church, thereby more fully incorporating young parishioners into the Church community.

This study also suggests that leadership assignments for small-scale projects, such as charitable events and group trips, could be highly effective for involving youth. By asking young people to lead event planning, the EOTC could empower young parishioners to develop responsibility, increase belonging with the Church, foster community relations, and allow these events to be more interesting, engaging, and relevant.

The next important group of engaging events that the Church could promote are informal gatherings. The EOTC should encourage young people to spend time together inside and outside the Church, strengthening community relations. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of informal meetings, meals, and trips as a crucial driver of their engagement with the Church; therefore, the EOTC should encourage young people to organize such gatherings. The participation of Church leaders in the planning and

implementation of such informal events should be minimal, as a guide on the side, to empower young leaders to design these events in ways that meet their needs and expectations.

Whereas an opportunity for young parishioners to organize engaging events may likely play an essential role in their retention at the EOTC, the Church should prevent the isolation of young parishioners. To ensure that both young and adult adherents remain within the same community and are trying to understand the needs, interests, and expectations, the EOTC should use the strategy of small-group discussions incorporating representatives of different age groups. According to Henderson (2014), engaging in religious activities, such as Bible studies and small-group meetings, offers an opportunity for safe and trustworthy conversations. Church leaders could encourage young people to share their concerns with ministers and the rest of the congregation through this promising channel, fostering mutual connections and understandings. Furthermore, this recommendation could also help address what some perceive as an unwelcoming atmosphere at the Church, mentioned by several interviewees as a relevant cause of low youth retention. By putting adult and young parishioners together in small groups, the Church could create and realize a more accommodating setting with a warmer atmosphere, encouraging both adult and young adherents to openly share their experiences and problems. Simultaneously, specific small-group discussions should be dedicated exclusively to young parishioners' needs and expectations to make them feel valued.

Targeting Different Groups of Young Adherents

This study discovered that various groups of young adherents have fundamentally

different Church needs and expectations because of facing distinct life challenges.

Regardless of the efforts made by Church leaders to make the Church more relevant for

migrants, the EOTC is unlikely to remain relevant to all parishioners exposed to Western

values and lifestyles. Career ambitions of young people (Temesegen & Tsega, 2019), role

models (Burdick, 2018), and family situations (Bruce et al., 2017) account for most

factors affecting youth affiliation with the Church. Nonetheless, it seems justified to

argue that a series of changes in Church services and events and how people are more

strongly connected with the Church could stimulate members of the Diaspora to remain

engaged with the EOTC.

Available evidence provides a premise for believing that the ability of the EOTC

to retain young parishioners who were born in Ethiopia depends primarily on the

Church's role in their acculturation. The literature review notes that migrants experience

significant cultural shock and stress (Kindarara et al., 2018). The Church is an essential

partner in helping youth adjust to new environments (Tura et al., 2017; Temesgen &

Tsega, 2019). If the Church can prove relevant in lending critical support to youth during

the transition process, it might retain many Ethiopian migrants in the United States. In

many situations, Ethiopians arriving in the United States may lose their attachment to the

Church due to the inability of the EOTC to assist them with the transition process. As a

result, immigrants are forced to rely on other sources of encouragement to relieve their

cultural stress, leading to losing their connection with the Church. The Church should

target new migrant families, helping them with daily needs and attachment to Ethiopian

history, culture, and religious traditions. If the Church provides such valuable support, it can become a strategic partner for young people who are maturing and assimilating, helping these individuals maintain consistent values and beliefs while overcoming obstacles unique to most immigrants.

Simultaneously, strategies that effectively retain young people who are experiencing the acculturation process likely will not be effective to retain Ethiopians born in the United States. These people may more readily attend EOTC services and events if the Church helped them solve practical problems and, at the same time, remind them of their origin. Whereas both these groups of young parishioners could benefit from engaging events, the Church should consider different strategies for retaining young adherents from these two groups. In particular, whereas the Ge'ez and Amharic languages sometimes could be used in Church events and services for people experiencing acculturation, they should be replaced by the English language for Ethiopians born in the United States. Moreover, small-group discussions and organized events for migrants should help them balance the Ethiopian and American values. Small-group discussions organized for Ethiopians who were born in the United States, at the same time, should focus on reminding these people of their origins and guiding their values and beliefs rather than helping them understand "American ways." Furthermore, it also might be a promising idea to organize meetings in which Ethiopians born in the United States could serve as mentors for new immigrants.

Promoting Servant and Transformational Leadership

The effectiveness of small-group discussions outlined above and many other measures that the EOTC could take to increase youth retention, to a large extent, rely on

the Church's leaders. This study suggests that Church leaders of the contemporary EOTC

do not exercise the type of leadership that positively affects the engagement of young

adherents with the Church. The paradigm of servant leadership, focusing on the needs of

others and helping them achieve their goals (Greenleaf, 1977), is absent from the practice

of most Church leaders. Even though leaders express their willingness to work with

youth, most do not make compelling arguments about why the Church is vital for young

people and how they could better serve young adherents. Similarly, most Church leaders

fail to utilize a transformational leadership style, as their leadership practices are not

consistent with the principles of intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration,

inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1998; also see Figure 1 in

Chapter 2). None of the young parishioners who took part in this study mentioned the

charisma or effectiveness of Church leaders and the ability of these people to inspire

young parishioners. Furthermore, a failure of Church leaders to understand the needs of

youth in the congregation indicates the lack of individualized consideration of their

needs.

The Church predominantly seems to be perceived by most young parishioners as a

peculiar "guardian of the past" that reinforces people's attachment to the history and

culture of Ethiopia and the traditions of Orthodox Christianity. This study found that

most parishioners value such a role, including those who are active and inactive.

Nonetheless, in addition to ensuring Ethiopians' attachment to their history and culture,

the EOTC should also assume the role of a strategic partner for young parishioners. To

achieve this goal, Church leaders should change their approaches when working with

youth. For example, some EOTC clergy mentioned excitement from witnessing young

adherents' development and mature as individuals and expressed pride in helping youth

build and maintain holistic value systems. Such an approach is consistent with the

transformational and servant leadership styles (Bass, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977).

Simultaneously, others focused on describing conservative ideas and concepts, ignoring

the youth parishioners' needs and expectations. Instead, Church leaders should ask young

people about their needs, offer flexible youth services and activities, help youth overcome

barriers to personal development, and become partners with young parishioners. To

achieve this goal, the Church should conduct training to prepare clergy who will be

working with youth and develop a curriculum that considers the Church doctrine and the

needs and expectations of young parishioners. This training could help clergy understand

the importance of collaborative learning and formal lesson plans with stated goals and

outcomes.

Reducing the Language Barrier

This study suggests that the Church should remove barriers to improve and

support youth engagement in EOTC events and services, which interviewees indicated

was one of the most apparent issues discouraging youth from visiting the church. Most

young people of Ethiopian descent living in the United States do not understand the

Amharic and Ge'ez languages; therefore, they cannot understand ministers' words during

liturgies and other Church services and events. The use of English translations on a

screen fails to address this problem because the need to read translations on a screen

might distract people from listening to Church leaders and, as a result, disrupt the

atmosphere of unity. The idea of having bilingual ministers who would engage with

youth in a language that they understand could positively affect youth perceptions of the

EOTC. The continuous commitment towards using the Amharic and Ge'ez languages is a

part of the EOTC's commitment to preserving the Church traditions. However, although

it is important to maintain practices that ensure the foundation of the Church is stable, the

predominant use of the Amharic and Ge'ez languages discourages youth from attending

Church events and services. As a result, some eventually leave the Church, while others

arrive late to services and leave early.

Elimination of the language barrier is one of the most apparent recommendations

that the Church can follow to increase youth retention. Moreover, it is an idea supported

by all three groups of interviewees. Nonetheless, Church leaders and active parishioners

consider the language barrier one of the critical drivers of low youth retention at the

EOTC. In contrast, inactive youth do not place a significant amount of attention to this

factor. An analysis of their responses shows that the Church's inability to understand

their needs, expectations, and concerns is a more significant barrier to their engagement

with the Church than the language factor. Therefore, while eliminating a language barrier

is undoubtedly an essential step that could help the EOTC increase youth retention, it

should be regarded as only one component of a holistic change strategy that likely cannot

produce meaningful transformations on its own.

Working With Parents for Youth Retention

The issue of parental support is a relevant youth retention driver. Church leaders

interviewed in this study emphasized that parental support plays a crucial role in youth

retention, and many scholarly researchers hold the same point of view (Tura, 2017;

Wordofa, 2017, Cnaan et al., 2004). By working closely with parents, the EOTC could

increase youth engagement in various events and services while also stimulating young

people to become and maintain being a part of the Church community. Furthermore, study findings suggest collaboration with parents is crucial for encouraging young parishioners' Church attendance and for reaching out to parents who are no longer active adherents of the EOTC by not participating in the Church, which risks discouraging their children from coming to Church events. Thus, the main goal of working closely with parents is two-fold: (a) to use parents' help to increase youth engagement with the Church, and (b) to prevent young people whose parents are no longer active in the EOTC from leaving the Church.

The scope of this close work with parents should be broad. Parents should be engaged with youth in the planning and organizing of most activities and events for EOTC youth and the discussion of their children's problems when warranted. Simultaneously, it is vital to ensure that young adherents do not depend entirely on parents and feel safe working with EOTC clergy to problem-solve and seek support. Young people should trust the EOTC enough to share concerns about relationships with parents with both Church leaders and other designated members of the Church community. In other words, the Church should become a "second family" for young adherents and a strong supporter of their socialization. The arguments laid out here illustrate that working closely with parents to increase youth retention is complex, requiring a balance in the involvement of parents that could prevent youth from participating in activities, and insufficient involvement that could lead to the children's detachment from the Church (Cnaan et al., 2004).

How Proposed Changes Align With Change Theory

After describing the most promising changes that could help the Church increase youth retention, this section discusses them in relation to change theory. Early change theory divides change into a series of steps, including planning for transitions, implementing a plan, evaluating results, making changes to strengthen actions taken, identifying other changes that could occur, and beginning the cycle again (Crosby, 2020). Table 4 that follows aligns proposed changes at the EOTC with this change model.

Table 4

Implementing Change for Youth Engagement and Retention at the EOTC

Stage	Actions
Planning for changes	• Hiring bilingual ministers to incorporate the English language in liturgies and other events. • Composing detailed guidelines on how to work with parents during event planning and how parents should work in partnership with clergy and youth. • Creating strategies for working with (a) young parishioners born in the USA and (b) those born in Ethiopia. • Creating plans detailing the amount of funding allocated to youth events and activities and an approximate list of proposed engagement opportunities. • Introducing new guidelines for small-group discussions by distinguishing between those specific discussions for young adherents and those that would incorporate both adult and young parishioners. • Organizing training courses for Church leaders. By focusing on the promotion of transformational and servant leadership styles and developmental teaching and mentoring for young audiences, clergy become more effective in working with youth. • Designing a consistent change management plan. Elements in the plan should include proposed changes, specific resources allocated to each aspect, responsible people, measurable success criteria, and monitoring implementation processes.
Implementing a plan	• Plan implementation includes four focus areas: (a) designing engaging events for young parishioners that are co-created by youth, (b) promoting Church leader use of transformational and

servant leadership styles, (c) eliminating language barriers, and (d) working closely with parents to increase youth retention. In addition, practical measures implemented by the Church should be launched separately for two groups of young parishioners: those born in Ethiopia and those born in the United States.

Evaluating results	• Evaluation of results should occur on a monthly and annual basis. Key success criteria should include the number of young parishioners who attend different Church events, the number of young adherents who participate in various Church activities, their feedback concerning the improvements in services to EOTC youth, and the experience of clergy and parents who participate.
Making changes to strengthen steps taken	• Changes at the EOTC could start with testing several possible events and transformations and then evaluating their effectiveness with the help of interviews. If the results of interviews are promising, successful changes are implemented as organic principles of working with the youth at the EOTC.
Identifying other changes	• Suppose results of monthly or annual evaluations do not match planned parameters. In that case, Church leaders should conduct additional studies among the clergy, young parishioners, and parents to learn about improved recommendations for expectations.

While this study results in an outline of broad-based change recommendations, more detailed research is required to identify specific types of youth events and activities welcomed by youth and specific transformations that young people in the congregation can enthusiastically pursue. This research discovered promising change directions. It is recommended that the Church start by investing in a discussion about the proposed change, offering training and orientation to those involved, then testing various innovations that will lead the change effort. Church leaders will understand and support the most promising change options, then focus on planning and implementing them while eliminating those that did not seem to positively affect youth engagement. The EOTC is

encouraged to approach all the change areas by thoroughly testing ideas and efforts

outlined in this discussion, aiming to maximize youth engagement and retention.

Even when accomplished because of small initiatives, successful improvements

will increase the capacity of the EOTC to enact further positive change. Building a

culture accepting of and open to progress is essential for the Church's survival into the

future.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This research dissertation has several significant limitations and delimitations.

First, the study focused on one geographic area and one Church region; therefore, certain

specifics about youth retention in the Church inherent for this area and region could have

affected the study's findings. At the same time, the possibility of such a scenario seems

low, considering the outcomes of the study align with results from the literature review.

Second, the sample of interviewees was relatively small. Active and inactive young

parishioners were represented by only four interviewees each, while eight total clergy

provided input in this study. Specific personal characteristics, idiosyncrasies, or lived

experiences of this limited number of people could have affected their responses to the

interview questions.

Third, the current study is focused exclusively on the EOTC; its results may or

may not apply to other churches or denominations. The EOTC is unique in its history,

traditions, and practices. Its conservatism, the use of Amharic and Ge'ez languages, and

the predominant focus on preserving long-held traditions make it fundamentally different

from most other Christian churches in the United States and the world. Accordingly,

challenges experienced by the EOTC in retaining young parishioners are also likely to be

different in some instances from challenges experienced by other churches.

Implications for Further Research

The current research provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of youth

retention at the EOTC. Simultaneously, limitations of the study and the complexity of the

chosen research problem predetermine the inability of this dissertation to describe all the

relevant aspects of the problem under investigation. Future research may help analyze

youth retention at the EOTC in more detail and offer even more specific

recommendations on how the Church could increase youth engagement and retention.

First, future descriptive studies could focus on various geographic areas and Church

regions to increase the external validity of the findings in this dissertation study and

determine whether these findings apply to most activities of the EOTC in the United

States.

Second, future studies could be conducted as detailed investigations delving into

the experiences of young parishioners born in Ethiopia and those both in the United

States. For example, this dissertation study found that young people who migrated with

their parents to the United States experienced a challenging acculturation process. Their

peers born in the United States did not experience such a problem. Accordingly, the

strategies aimed at retaining youth in the EOTC born in Ethiopia versus the United States

most probably entail different challenges. A detailed investigation of the experiences of

young adherents from these two groups may better inform the development and

implementation of such strategies.

Third, future studies should be dedicated to the identified areas for change in the EOTC. The interviewees mentioned several specific changes, such as altering the time of a liturgy or making certain amendments in Sunday school lessons; however, the lack of details related to these changes precluded discussing them in this study. To better understand the relevance and possible implications of these changes, exploratory studies that focus on different services and activities of the Church from the perspective of youth would add to the body of evidence. Such studies may produce practical and concrete advice on how to improve work with youth in the Church.

Finally, future research should engage parents in a study of youth retention in the EOTC. For example, parents could play a more active role in event planning and other Church services and events, and it would be helpful to determine the extent to which this, or co-planning events with youth, would increase youth engagement. Simultaneously, this dissertation research did not provide insights into parents' opinions on their children's engagement with the EOTC and their expectations from the Church. A study focusing on the parents' perceptions could enrich an understanding of youth engagement and retention at the EOTC and new methods for optimizing the parental role in children's engagement with the Church.

Overall Summary

This study critically examines youth retention at the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the United States. The interviews with Church leaders and youth who were active and inactive in the Church revealed various barriers and enablers to youth engagement and retention. Results suggest the EOTC needs to become more

relevant to young parishioners, engage with young parishioners, address language barriers, customize youth Church events, and build relationships focused on belonging.

The leadership styles of the EOTC clergy may be barriers to providing meaningful and supportive experiences for young adults. Church leaders need to better understand young people's needs and expectations, customize learning experiences and events for youth, and help adolescents overcome practical obstacles to their personal development. To improve youth engagement, the EOTC should change its role from a "guardian of the past" to a strategic partner in the lives of young people. Church leaders are encouraged to use transformational and servant leadership styles when working with youth and parents to achieve this goal.

Finally, the findings of this study pointed to four practical recommendations that may help the EOTC increase youth retention. First, the Church should design engaging events for young parishioners that stimulate connection with the EOTC and foster a sense of belonging. Activities such as leadership assignments, informal trips, charitable events, and practical small-group discussions are examples of such events. Second, the EOTC should create two customized but different strategies to target those young adherents born in the U.S. and those born in Ethiopia. These strategies should address the unique challenges of the acculturation process, developmental stages, and other issues specific to each of these different youth groups. Third, the Church could benefit from incorporating the English language into its services and events and, thus, overcome the language barrier for youth. Fourth, Church leaders should work closely with parents to increase youth retention.

By implementing these four recommendations, the EOTC could change its approach towards working with youth and prioritize the needs and expectations of its young parishioners, thus increasing its relevance for young adherents by becoming their strategic partner. Retention of young people in the Church is essential to the future viability of the EOTC. This, in turn, has the potential of creating a faith community that meaningfully enhances the lives of all parishioners, including youth.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SITE PERMISSION, EOTC LEADER INFORMATION,

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE, AND INFORMED CONSENT

Site Permission

[*letterhead appears in the original signed letter*]

January 19, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter verifies that I have read Mr. Beimnet Bekele's research proposal and understand and support his research goals. I am fully informed about the participant selection process and what will be asked of those who take part in the study. My office will assist each church in providing access to clergy members and youth who will be interviewed. While we anticipate Mr. Bekele will need no other support from the EOTC church officials, we stand ready to support this important work in any way appropriate.

Attached is a table that will list church leaders from each of the eight churches, [*church names appear in the original signed letter*] in our service area asked to participate in the study.

On behalf of the EOTC Clergy Association in Seattle Great Area and the eight identified churches, I give my full permission for our participation in this study.

Sincerely,

[*signature appears in the original letter*]

Megabe Aelaf Father Surfel Wondimue

General Secretary

Phone: 206-765-0319 Email: eotckahinatusa@gmail.com
Address: 13608 26th PL S Seatac, WA 98168

Note. The original signed letter was reviewed and approved by Seattle University's IRB. It contains the names of the eight participating churches; therefore, the researcher will securely store the original signed letter to maintain confidentiality.

EOTC LEADER INFORMATION

Name	Contact Information (address, phone number, email address)	Name of Church Served

EOTC Leader Invitation to Participate

Dear EOTC Minister,

I am a doctoral student from Seattle University studying the experiences that young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families have in their Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). This research is part of my fulfillment of the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational and Organizational Learning and Leadership program at Seattle University. Results will provide EOTC leadership with information about ways to support young people, especially regarding church attendance and the ability to benefit and receive support from EOTC youth ministers.

I invite you to participate in an individual Zoom interview to share your views and experiences. The interview will include only you, be confidential, take about 45 to 60 minutes, and provide a unique opportunity to share your opinions on what helps or hinders EOTC youth attendance.

If you wish to participate, please select a first and second preference from one of the days/times listed below that works best for you, then email me at bekeleb@seattleu.edu with your choice. You will receive a confirmation email verifying the appointed interview date and time, a Zoom meeting link to join me by computer, and a "phone message reminder" the day before your scheduled interview. Thank you! Your opinion matters and can help improve young people's retention in the EOTC.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

- Monday, February 8 from 8:00-9:00 am
- Monday, February 8 from 10:00-11:00am
- Monday, February 8 from 1:00-2:00pm
- Monday, February 8 from 3:00-4:00pm
- Tuesday, February 9 from 9:00-10:00 am
- Tuesday, February 9 from 11:00-12:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 9 from 2:00-3:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 9 from 5:00-6:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 10 from 10:00-11:00 am
- Tuesday, February 10 from 12:00-1:00pm
- Tuesday, February 10 from 3:00-5:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 10 from 6:00-7:00 pm

If you have questions or concerns, please contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Tana Hasart, at Seattle University: hasartt@seattleu.edu or (253) 495-0878.

Sincerely,

Beimnet Bekele
Doctoral Student, Educational and Organizational Learning and Leadership Program
College of Education, Seattle University
P.O. Box 222000
901 12th Ave
Seattle, WA 98122

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
IN RESEARCH

Individual Interview – Leader

TITLE:	Ethiopian Orthodox Church Leadership Support of Youth from Ethiopian Immigrant Families in the United States
INVESTIGATOR:	Beimnet Bekele, Doctoral Student, Educational Leadership, College of Education, Seattle University, 901 12th Ave, Seattle, WA. Phone: 571-501-9984 Email: bekeleb@seattleu.edu
ADVISOR:	Dr. Tana Hasart, Educational Leadership, College of Education, Seattle University. Phone: 253-495-0878
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to learn about youth participation in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, especially what motivates youth to stay active in the church. You are being asked to share your opinions in an online Zoom interview that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
SOURCE OF SUPPORT	This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational Leadership program at Seattle University.
RISKS:	There are no known risks associated with this study.
BENEFITS:	The community may benefit by becoming more knowledgeable about supporting youth involvement in church.
INCENTIVES:	You will receive no gifts, incentives, or compensation for participating in this study. Participation in the study will require no monetary cost to you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	This individual interview will be recorded in Zoom, then transcribed and de-identified. Any names that may be spoken during the interview will be deleted in the transcription. The Zoom recording will be destroyed immediately after transcription. All participant input will be de-identified (no names) and therefore cannot be traced back to you. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of data/input (such as publications, presentations, etc.) nor disclosed to others. All research materials will be stored as encrypted files on the computer of Beimnet Bekele. Human subjects research regulations require that data/input be kept for a minimum of

three (3) years. At the end of three (3) years, all data/input will be destroyed. All the information you provide will be confidential. However, if I learn you intend to harm yourself or others, I must notify proper authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate any time without penalty by removing yourself from the interview before it ends. If you remove yourself from the interview before it ends, the Zoom recording will be destroyed immediately. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled. If you complete the interview, your input will be transcribed, de-identified (no names), and summarized along with all input from all participants. Therefore, your input cannot be removed from this study after you leave the interview because your input will not be identifiable in the transcription and will not be able to be traced back to you.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Please make your request for the summary by contacting Beimnet Bekele by phone at 571-501-9984 or by email at dbeimnet@gmail.com and a copy will be sent to you once the study is completed.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty, by removing myself from the interview. I understand that my decision to participate in this interview means that I am giving my ongoing, active consent to participate. On these terms, I verbally agree that I am willing to participate in this research project as long as I remain in this interview.

Please provide a verbal "Yes" or "No."

I understand that should I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may call Beimnet Bekele, who is asking me to participate, at 571-501-9984. If I have any concerns that my rights are being violated, I may contact Dr. Michael Spinetta, Chair of the Seattle University Institutional Review Board at 206-296-2585.

Please keep this Consent Form for your information. Thank you.

APPENDIX B

EOTC YOUTH INFORMATION, INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE, AND

INFORMED CONSENT

EOTC ACTIVE YOUTH INFORMATION

Name of Active Youth	Age	Church Affiliation	Contact Information (address, phone, email)

EOTC INACTIVE YOUTH INFORMATION

Name of Inactive Youth	Age	Church Affiliation	Contact Information (address, phone, email)

Invitation to Participate in EOTC Youth Interview

Dear Young Adult,

I am a doctoral student from Seattle University studying the experiences that young adults from Ethiopian immigrant families have in their Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). This research is part of my fulfillment of the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational and Organizational Learning and Leadership program at Seattle University. Results will inform EOTC leadership about ways to support young people, especially regarding church attendance and the ability to benefit and receive support from EOTC youth ministers.

I invite you to participate in an individual Zoom interview to share your views and experiences. The interview will include only you, be confidential, take about 45 to 60 minutes, and provide a unique opportunity to share your opinions on what helps or hinders EOTC youth participation.

If you wish to participate, please select a first and second preference from one of the days/times listed below that works best for you, then email me at bekeleb@seattleu.edu with your choice. You will receive a confirmation email verifying the appointed interview date and time, a Zoom meeting link to join me by computer, and a "phone message reminder" the day before your scheduled interview. Thank you! Your opinion matters and can help improve EOTC service to young people.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS
- Monday, February 15 from 8:00-9:00 am
- Monday, February 15 from 10:00-11:00am
- Monday, February 15 from 1:00-2:00pm
- Monday, February 15 from 3:00-4:00pm
- Tuesday, February 16 from 9:00-10:00 am
- Tuesday, February 16 from 11:00-12:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 16 from 2:00-3:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 16 from 5:00-6:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 17 from 10:00-11:00 am
- Tuesday, February 17 from 12:00-1:00pm
- Tuesday, February 17 from 3:00-5:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 17 from 6:00-7:00 pm

If you have questions or concerns, please contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Tana Hasart, at Seattle University: hasartt@seattleu.edu or (253) 495-0878.

Sincerely,

Beimnet Bekele
Doctoral Student, Educational and Organizational Learning and Leadership Program
College of Education, Seattle University
P.O. Box 222000
901 12th Ave
Seattle, WA 98122

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
IN RESEARCH**
Individual Interview – Young Adult

TITLE:	Ethiopian Orthodox Church Leadership Support of Youth from Ethiopian Immigrant Families in the United States
INVESTIGATOR:	Beimnet Bekele, Doctoral Student, Educational Leadership, College of Education, Seattle University, 901 12th Ave, Seattle, WA. Phone: 571-501-9984 Email: bekeleb@seattleu.edu
ADVISOR:	Dr. Tana Hasart, Educational Leadership, College of Education, Seattle University. Phone: 253-495-0878
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to learn about youth participation in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, especially what motivates youth to stay active in the church. You are being asked to share your opinions in an online Zoom interview that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
SOURCE OF SUPPORT	This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational Leadership program at Seattle University.
RISKS:	There are no known risks associated with this study.
BENEFITS:	The community may benefit by becoming more knowledgeable about supporting youth involvement in church.
INCENTIVES:	You will receive no gifts, incentives, or compensation for participating in this study. Participation in the study will require no monetary cost to you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	This individual interview will be recorded in Zoom, then transcribed and de-identified. Any names that may be spoken during the interview will be deleted in the transcription. The Zoom recording will be destroyed immediately after transcription. All participant input will be de-identified (no names) and therefore cannot be traced back to you. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of data/input (such as publications, presentations, etc.) nor disclosed to others. All research materials will be stored as encrypted files on the computer of Beimnet Bekele. Human subjects research regulations require that data/input be kept for a minimum of

three (3) years. At the end of three (3) years, all data/input will be destroyed. All the information you provide will be confidential. However, if I learn you intend to harm yourself or others, I must notify proper authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW   Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate any time without penalty by removing yourself from the interview before it ends. If you remove yourself from the interview before it ends, the Zoom recording will be destroyed immediately. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled. If you complete the interview, your input will be transcribed, de-identified (no names), and summarized along with all input from all participants. Therefore, your input cannot be removed from this study after you leave the interview because your input will not be identifiable in the transcription and will not be able to be traced back to you.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS   A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Please make your request for the summary by contacting Beimnet Bekele by phone at 571-501-9984 or by email at dbeimnet@gmail.com and a copy will be sent to you once the study is completed.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty, by removing myself from the interview. I understand that my decision to participate in this interview means that I am giving my ongoing, active consent to participate. On these terms, I verbally agree that I am willing to participate in this research project as long as I remain in this interview.

Please provide a verbal "Yes" or "No."

I understand that should I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may call Beimnet Bekele, who is asking me to participate, at 571-501-9984. If I have any concerns that my rights are being violated, I may contact Dr. Michael Spinetta, Chair of the Seattle University Institutional Review Board at 206-296-2585.

Please keep this Consent Form for your information. Thank you.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EOTC LEADERS AND YOUTH

Interview Questions for EOTC Leaders

1. When thinking about yourself as a church leader, what is most rewarding about working with youth?

2. What do you especially value about your work as a youth minister? What do you believe are your most important contributions as a youth leader?

3. Think of a church youth group activity or event that you were involved in that was highly successful. What do you think made this experience so successful? Explain.

4. From your perspective, what church practices make youth feel especially connected to the church? What do you think causes youth to experience joy or positive feelings about church?

5. What do you believe most encourages youth to participate and stay involved in the church as they mature into adults?

6. If you could change three things that would make work with youth more successful, what would they be, and why?

7. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Interview Questions for Youth

(same for active and inactive youth in the EOTC)

1. Think about your past or present experiences with the EOTC. What feelings most often come to mind when thinking about your connection with the church?

2. What do you most value about the church? Why?

3. Think about a church activity or event where you felt like you really belonged and were happy to be there. What was it about? Who participated? What made this such a good experience for you?

4. What church practices or activities do you think encourage or discourage youth to keep attending? In other words, what causes youth to stay active or to leave the church?

5. If you could change three things that might encourage more youth to stay active in the church, what would they be, and why?

6. Do you have anything else you would like to add?