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Church Participation and Spiritual Growth Among University Students: A Conceptual Framework for the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

Nigeria offers a distinctive setting for examining the relationship between church participation and spiritual growth among university students. Christianity is deeply embedded in daily social life, Pentecostal and charismatic movements have reshaped the religious character of higher education over the past four decades, and university students must navigate the tension between inherited faith commitments and the intellectual freedoms of campus life. Despite this, the relationship between church participation and spiritual development in Nigerian higher education has received little sustained theoretical attention. This paper addresses that gap by developing a conceptual framework for understanding how church participation shapes, and at times hinders, spiritual growth among Nigerian university students. Drawing on Fowler's Stages of Faith, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and reading these through African and Nigerian scholarship on religion, youth, and higher education, the paper proposes a model in which spiritual growth is understood as a function of three interacting sets of factors: individual dispositional factors, congregational quality factors, and the broader contextual ecology within which students are formed. The paper identifies four participation profiles characterising Nigerian university students' engagement with church life, examines the structural and relational mechanisms through which participation fosters or impedes growth, and identifies the particular barriers that the Nigerian university context presents. It concludes with conceptual and practical implications for congregations, campus ministries, chaplains, and university administrators committed to supporting students' spiritual flourishing during this formative period.

Keywords: church participation; spiritual growth; university students; Nigeria; African Christianity; Pentecostalism; faith development; campus ministry; conceptual framework

Introduction

Walk through any Nigerian university campus on a weekday morning and you will encounter something few universities in the secular West can claim: visible, unselfconscious, socially unremarkable religious practice. Students pray openly before lectures. Fellowship groups meet in dormitories, under trees, and in borrowed classrooms. Campus branches of denominations compete for membership with a vigour that mirrors the denominational competition of the towns and cities from which students have come. This competition is waged

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through an overlapping array of strategies rather than through any single method. Evangelism and open-air outreach remain the most visible of these, as fellowships organise crusades, hall-to-hall visitations, and street preaching aimed at drawing in new converts, particularly in the first weeks of each academic session when incoming students are still forming their social and religious attachments. Freshers' orientation programmes function as a critical recruitment window in this respect: fellowships compete to be first to welcome new students, offering campus tours, study-skills sessions, and social events that double as opportunities for religious affiliation before rival groups can make contact. Beyond initial recruitment, fellowships work to retain members through structured discipleship and Bible study programmes, small-group cell systems, and leadership development schemes that groom promising members for executive office, generating a sense of investment and belonging that makes departure to a rival group costly. Welfare initiatives, from examination-period prayer vigils and food distribution to peer counseling, financial assistance for indigent students, and mentorship by older members or alumni, further bind students to a particular fellowship by meeting needs that the university itself often does not. This competition is significant for reasons that extend beyond simple institutional rivalry. It transplants Nigeria's wider religious marketplace onto the campus, where denominational identity is entangled with theological conviction, social capital, and, in some cases, access to networks that matter for life after graduation. It also means that a student's spiritual trajectory during the university years is shaped not merely by an abstract decision to participate in church life but by which fellowship recruits them, how effectively that fellowship disciples its members, and how well it sustains their attention against genuine alternatives. The church, in its many Nigerian forms, is not peripheral to university life in Nigeria; in important respects, it is part of the architecture of it.

This visibility makes Nigeria a particularly instructive setting for examining a question that has occupied scholars of religion and higher education for several decades: what is the relationship between church participation and spiritual growth during the university years? Church participation feeds spiritual growth through several interlocking channels rather than through any single mechanism. Regular worship supplies the affective and liturgical rhythm within which faith is rehearsed and renewed, offering repeated occasions for encounter with the sacred that anchor a student's sense of the transcendent amid the competing demands of academic life. Biblical teaching and preaching furnish the doctrinal content that gives shape to belief, translating inherited faith commitments into a reasoned framework capable of withstanding the intellectual challenges students encounter in lecture halls and student unions. Structured discipleship, whether through cell groups, Bible study circles, or one-on-one mentoring by older students, chaplains, or pastors, provides the sustained relational context in which spiritual disciplines are modelled, practised, and corrected, allowing growth to proceed incrementally rather than in isolated bursts of enthusiasm. Fellowship, the simple experience of belonging to a community of shared conviction, offers students a stable point of identity at a time when family and hometown relationships recede in daily significance, while mutual accountability, ranging from informal peer check-ins to more formal pastoral oversight, restrains the drift toward nominal or purely cultural

religiosity that can accompany newfound independence from parental supervision. Community service and welfare activity, finally, translate private conviction into public ethical practice, giving students concrete occasions to enact the caring and charitable orientation that several models of spiritual development treat as evidence of authentic growth rather than mere profession. It is this bundle of mechanisms, rather than church attendance considered as a single undifferentiated variable, that determines whether participation issues in genuine spiritual maturation or in mere ritual conformity. The question matters because the university years are, by most accounts, among the most formative of a person's life. Students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four are not simply acquiring a body of knowledge; they are working out who they are, what they believe, and how they intend to live.[1]

The Nigerian context gives these general observations a specific texture. Nigerian Christianity is not a single tradition. It encompasses the historic mission churches established through colonial evangelisation, the African Initiated Churches that broke from those mission traditions to express distinctively African theological and communal sensibilities, and the vast, energetic Pentecostal and charismatic movements that have, since the 1980s, come to dominate the religious landscape of Nigerian cities and campuses.[2]

There is, moreover, a particular tension built into the Nigerian university context that makes it worth examining on its own terms rather than through frameworks developed elsewhere. Nigerian federal and state universities operate, formally, as secular institutions. Yet they exist within a society where religion is a primary organising principle of public and private life, where the boundary between the sacred and the secular is understood very differently than in European or North American contexts, and where the church and the university are frequently inhabited by the same people, serving overlapping and sometimes competing functions in their lives.[3]

Despite the significance of the Nigerian context, it has been relatively neglected in the international literature on religion and higher education. Studies from North America dominate the field, and while their findings are valuable, their applicability to a context as different as Nigeria is not self-evident. African scholars have begun to address this imbalance, and this paper builds on their work to develop a more

contextually grounded account of how church participation shapes student spiritual formation in Nigeria.[4]

[1] J. J. Arnett, Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 8.
[2] M. A. Ojo, The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), 3.
[3] A. Ukah, "Banishing God: Religiosity and Secularisation on University Campuses in Nigeria," Social Compass 58, no. 3 (2011): 305.
[4] A. Adogame, "Engaging the Rhetoric of Spiritual Warfare: The Public Face of Aladura in Diaspora," Journal of Religion in Africa 34, no. 4 (2004): 496.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and conceptual literature on spiritual growth, church participation, and the university as a site of faith formation, with particular attention to African and Nigerian scholarship. Section 3 outlines the conceptual framework proposed by the paper, including a typology of participation profiles and an account of the mechanisms through which participation influences growth. Section 4 examines the structural and contextual barriers that impede participation and growth in the Nigerian university setting.
Section 5 draws out the conceptual and practical implications and identifies directions for future empirical research.

Literature Review
Spiritual Growth: Conceptual Foundations

Theological and social scientific traditions have approached the concept of spiritual growth from very different angles. Within Christian theology, growth has classically been understood as a process of formation: the gradual reshaping of character, desire, and perception through sustained engagement with practices of prayer, scripture, worship, and communal life. The emphasis falls not on intellectual attainment or emotional intensity but on what the tradition calls sanctification, a slow and uneven movement toward the kind of person one is called to become.[5]

Social scientific approaches have sought more measurable definitions. Emmons locates spiritual growth in the progressive development of what he calls ultimate concerns: the overarching goals and commitments that give a life its direction and meaning.[6] Hill and Pargament define spirituality as a search for the sacred, and growth as the deepening and widening of that search over time.[7] Astin, Astin and Lindholm identify five dimensions of student spiritual development: Spiritual Quest, Equanimity, Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview.[8] These dimensions, though developed in a North American context, offer a useful analytical vocabulary that can be adapted, with appropriate critical awareness, to other settings.

What these definitions share, and what makes them relevant to the Nigerian context, is an insistence that spiritual growth is not merely private or interior; it has public, relational, and behavioural expressions. A student who is growing spiritually is not simply having more intense personal prayer experiences but is becoming, over time, a different kind of person in their relationships, ethical choices, and orientation toward others.[9]

[5] C. Smith and P. Snell, Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives ofEmerging Adults (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102.
[6] R. A. Emmons, The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 91.
[7] P. C. Hill and K. I. Pargament, "Advances in the Conceptualisation and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality," American Psychologist 58, no. 1 (2003): 65.
[8] A. W. Astin, H. S. Astin and J. A. Lindholm, Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 6.
[9] Astin, Astin and Lindholm, Cultivating the Spirit, 7.

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Nigerian theological scholarship has enriched this picture in important ways. Ojo's research on the charismatic movement in Nigerian universities documents how Pentecostal spirituality on campuses has historically combined intense personal piety with a strong ethic of communal care and social engagement, particularly in the early years of organisations such as the Scripture Union and the Fellowship of Christian Students.[10] Asamoah-Gyadu argues that African Pentecostalism offers a distinctively holistic account of spiritual formation, in which healing, deliverance, and moral transformation are understood as dimensions of a single work of the Spirit rather than separate concerns.[11]

Fowler's Stages of Faith in the Nigerian University Context

Fowler's stages of faith model remains the most widely used developmental framework in the field, and its core insights translate reasonably well across cultural contexts even where its specific stage descriptions require adaptation. Fowler proposes that faith develops through a series of structurally distinct stages, each characterised by a different logic of meaning-making. The stage most relevant to university students is what Fowler calls Individuative-Reflective faith: a form of belief that requires the individual to take personal responsibility for their convictions rather than simply inheriting them from family or community. This stage is inherently destabilising. It requires questioning what had previously been assumed and is often triggered by exactly the kind of intellectual and social disruption that the university provides.[12]

In the Nigerian setting, this developmental transition carries particular weight. Many Nigerian students arrive at university with what Fowler would call Synthetic-Conventional faith: a rich, communally embedded, emotionally vital religiosity that has rarely been subjected to sustained critical examination. The university then confronts them with evolutionary biology, postcolonial critiques of Christianity, Islamic intellectual traditions, secular philosophy, and peers whose religious assumptions differ sharply from their own. How students navigate this confrontation depends heavily on the resources available to them, and the church is often the most significant of those resources, for better or worse.[13]

For better, when the church provides honest accompaniment: a community that takes intellectual questions seriously, offers mentors who have navigated their own faith crises and emerged with integrity, and models a form of belief that is neither defensive nor dismissive of difficulty. For worse, when the church responds to intellectual challenge with authoritarian insistence on

[10] M. A. Ojo, "The Contextual Significance of the Charismatic Movements in Independent Nigeria," Africa: Journal of the International African Institute 58, no. 2 (1988): 177.
[11] J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 210.
[12] J. W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 182.
[13] Fowler, Stages of Faith, 179.

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certainty, social pressure to conform, and implicit threats of withdrawn belonging for those who ask the wrong questions. Nigerian research on campus religious culture suggests that both patterns are common, often within the same denomination.[14]

The Church as Community of Formation

Within practical theology and ecclesiology, the congregation is understood not merely as a venue for religious activity but as a formative community. Wenger's concept of communities of practice describes how members are shaped through shared habits of attention, language, and response.[15] Volf and Bass argue that corporate worship functions as a regular reordering of desire and perception, a practice through which the worshipper's sense of what is ultimately important is repeatedly recalibrated.[16] Small group fellowship, pastoral mentorship, and participation in acts of communal service are understood as practices that cultivate the specific virtues constituting mature spiritual character.

African and Nigerian scholarship has offered important contextual elaborations of this general account. Kalu argues that the African church has historically served as a total community, providing not only spiritual nurture but social welfare, identity formation, and a framework of moral meaning that the state has frequently failed to supply.[17] In the Nigerian context specifically, Ojo has documented how campus fellowships function as surrogate families for students far from home, providing the belonging, accountability, and emotional support that sustain religious commitment through the pressures of university life.[18] Adogame has shown how Nigerian Christian communities construct and maintain religious identity through practices of testimony, communal prayer, and shared service that are deeply embedded in African communal epistemologies.[19]

These African perspectives suggest that the formative power of the church in the Nigerian context may operate through channels that frameworks developed in more individualistic Western settings do not fully capture. The church's role as a social community, a moral community, and an identity community is inseparable from its role as a spiritual community, and any account of church participation that focuses narrowly on formal religious activity will miss much of what is actually happening.[20]

[14] C. Okonkwo, "Faith and the Academy: Religious Practice among Students in Nigerian Federal Universities," Journal of African Studies and Development 7, no. 3 (2015): 92.
[15] E. Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45.
[16] M. Volf and D. C. Bass, eds., Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18.
[17] O. Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67.
[18] Ojo, The End-Time Army, 89.
[19] Adogame, "Engaging the Rhetoric of Spiritual Warfare," 499.
[20] Ukah, "Banishing God," 308.

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The Nigerian University as a Site of Faith Formation

The Nigerian university environment shapes faith formation in ways both similar to and different from patterns documented in Western contexts. Like universities elsewhere, Nigerian institutions expose students to intellectual frameworks that challenge inherited certainties, social environments that make prior commitments feel optional, and time pressures that push religious practice to the margins.[21] But this occurs within a broader social context in which religion remains highly salient, peers are themselves predominantly religious, and the costs of visible religious practice are generally lower than in more secular environments.[22]

This does not mean, however, that Nigerian universities are simply conducive to religious formation. Ukah's research on religion in Nigerian higher education documents significant tensions between the intellectual culture of the university and the theological culture of the campus church, particularly in Pentecostal contexts where spiritual authority is sometimes deployed to foreclose rather than engage intellectual questioning.[23] The prosperity gospel, which has become deeply influential in Nigerian campus Christianity, creates its own particular distortions: it can reduce spiritual growth to a calculus of blessing and achievement, and it can make doubt or suffering feel like spiritual failure rather than a normal dimension of a maturing faith.[24]

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for holding the various levels of this context together. The individual student's spiritual trajectory is shaped by what happens in the local congregation, by the relationship between the church and the university, by broader institutional cultures and denominational structures, and by the wider cultural assumptions about religion, education, and selfhood that characterise Nigerian society at this historical moment. A change at any of these levels can facilitate or impede what is happening at the others, and effective support for student spiritual formation requires attention to all of them.[25]

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Three gaps in the existing literature are directly relevant to this paper. The first, and most significant, is the near absence of sustained conceptual or empirical work specifically addressing church participation and spiritual growth among Nigerian university students. The international literature on religion and higher education is dominated by North American and European research, and while African scholars have produced important work on African Christianity,

[21] P. J. Palmer, To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey (San Francisco: Harper S Row, 1993), 7.
[22] Okonkwo, "Faith and the Academy," 92.
[23] Ukah, "Banishing God," 312.
[24] Asamoah-Gyadu, African Charismatics, 215.
[25] U. Bronfenbrenner, The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.

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Nigerian religious movements, and youth religious culture, this work has rarely been brought into sustained dialogue with the theoretical frameworks that dominate the higher education literature. This paper is an attempt to begin that conversation.

The second gap is methodological. The bulk of existing research is either large-scale quantitative work that measures attendance without adequately capturing the quality of participation, or small-scale qualitative work that is rich in texture but limited in scope. What is needed, and what this paper argues should be the agenda for future empirical research in the Nigerian context, is mixed-methods work capable of examining both the patterning and the lived experience of the participation-growth relationship simultaneously.

The third gap is theoretical. Most existing frameworks treat church participation as a relatively uniform variable: one either attends or does not, and attendance is assumed to produce growth. What the literature consistently suggests, and what this

paper's conceptual framework makes explicit, is that participation is not uniform. The quality of congregational community, the availability of mentorship, the nature of worship engagement, and the degree of involvement in service are distinct variables with distinct effects, and collapsing them into a single attendance measure produces a picture that is, at best, incomplete.

A Conceptual Framework for Church Participation and Spiritual Growth

Four Participation Profiles

On the basis of the literature reviewed, it is possible to identify four participation profiles that characterise the range of ways in which Nigerian university students engage with church life. These profiles are not rigid categories; students move between them in response to changing circumstances, and the boundaries between them are genuinely porous. They are offered as analytical tools for making sense of a diversity that is otherwise difficult to discuss with precision.

The first profile is the Actively Engaged student. This student attends church regularly, participates in activities beyond Sunday worship, whether through small groups, choir, ushering, campus fellowships, or service initiatives, and has developed at least one meaningful relationship of spiritual mentorship or accountability within the church community. For this student, the church functions as a genuine community of formation in the senses described by Wenger, Volf and Bass, and Ojo: a place where identity is shaped, virtues are cultivated, and faith is both challenged and sustained.[26]

The second profile is the Occasional Attendee. This student maintains a

[26] Wenger, Communities of Practice, 73.

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connection with church life, but a peripheral one: attending when circumstances permit, participating in activities rarely, and relating to the congregation more as a service provider than as a community to which they genuinely belong. The Occasional Attendee is often not disengaged from faith as such; they may pray privately, identify strongly as Christian, and feel guilty about their inconsistent attendance. What they lack is the relational depth and formative regularity that the literature identifies as the primary drivers of genuine spiritual growth.

The third profile is the Spiritually Independent student. This student has effectively decoupled spiritual practice from ecclesial belonging. They pray, read scripture, engage with Christian content online, and consider themselves spiritually serious, but have concluded, for reasons that vary, that the local church offers little that cannot be found elsewhere. Sometimes this conclusion follows genuine disappointment with a particular congregation; sometimes it reflects a broader scepticism about institutional religion that the university environment has encouraged. The Spiritually Independent student is not lost to faith, but is missing the communal dimensions of formation that the literature consistently identifies as essential to certain kinds of spiritual growth, particularly growth in compassion, accountability, and ethical seriousness.

The fourth profile is the Religiously Disengaged student. This student has moved away from both church participation and private spiritual practice since arriving at university. The disengagement is often not dramatic or ideologically motivated; more commonly, it is the gradual result of competing demands, social environments that do not reinforce religious practice, and the absence of a community that makes belonging feel worth the effort. Disengagement during the university years is a documented predictor of lasting religious decline in adulthood, which gives this profile particular pastoral and practical significance.[27]

Mechanisms of Growth

The literature points consistently to four mechanisms through which church participation influences spiritual growth. Understanding these mechanisms, rather than simply measuring attendance frequency, is key to developing more effective approaches to student formation.

Community and Accountable Belonging

The most consistently documented mechanism is the relational texture of congregational life. What drives growth is not religious activity as such but the experience of being genuinely known within a community that takes one's spiritual development seriously. Ojo's account of Nigerian campus fellowships as surrogate families captures something important here: for students who

[27] J. E. Uecker, M. D. Regnerus and M. L. Vaaler, "Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood," Social Forces 85, no. 4 (2007): 1670.

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have left home communities and are navigating the anonymity of a large university, the church provides a form of social belonging that carries with it a particular kind of moral accountability. Students modify their behaviour, choices, and self-understanding in light of membership in a community that holds certain values and notices when they are violated.[28]

Worship as Reorientation

Corporate worship, when genuinely engaged, functions as a regular reordering of perception and desire. Students in the midst of university life face pressures that pull attention toward academic performance, social navigation, and economic anxiety. Communal worship offers a regular counter-practice: a structured, communal act of attending to what the community takes to be ultimately real and important. Volf and Bass describe this as a practice of remembering and re-ordering.[29] In the Nigerian Pentecostal context specifically, the experiential intensity of charismatic worship creates conditions for what participants frequently describe as an encounter that reorganises their priorities and renews their commitments.[30]

Mentorship Through Intellectual and Existential Crisis

The literature consistently identifies mentorship as among the most powerful mediators of spiritual growth during the university years.[31] Students at Nigerian universities are encountering, often for the first time, sustained intellectual engagement with evolutionary biology, postcolonial critiques of Christianity, Islamic philosophy, and secular social theory. How they navigate this encounter depends heavily on whether they have access to a theologically serious adult who can accompany them through it honestly. Without such a relationship, intellectual disruption tends to produce either defensive closure or uncritical capitulation. With it, the same disruption becomes, in Fowler's terms, the raw material of developmental advance.[32]

Service and the Transformation of Faith into Practice

Participation in church-based service activities represents a fourth, distinct mechanism of spiritual growth, one particularly well documented in the African context. Kalu's account of the African church as a total community providing social welfare where the state does not emphasis the degree to which service is built into the ecclesial fabric of many Nigerian congregations.[33] For students who participate in feeding programmes, hospital visits, prison ministry, or community development initiatives under the auspices of their church, the

[28] Ojo, The End-Time Army, 89.
[29] Volf and Bass, Practicing Theology, 22.
[30] Asamoah-Gyadu, African Charismatics, 198.
[31] S. D. Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), 14.
[32] Fowler, Stages of Faith, 200.
[33] Kalu, African Pentecostalism, 134.

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experience typically produces a shift from orthodoxy to orthopraxis: a recognition that faith is not primarily a set of beliefs to be held but a set of practices to be inhabited.[34]

An Integrative Model

Drawing these threads together, the paper proposes a model in which spiritual growth among Nigerian university students is understood as a function of three interacting sets of factors. The first set is individual and dispositional: the student's prior faith formation, openness to growth, tolerance for ambiguity, and readiness to take personal responsibility for their beliefs. The second set is congregational: the quality of community belonging, the nature of worship engagement, the availability of mentorship, and the degree of involvement in service. The third set is ecological: the institutional culture of the university, the peer environment, family religiosity, denominational culture, and the broader social meaning of religious practice in the Nigerian context.

Church participation operates as the primary, though not the exclusive, pathway through which the second set of factors shapes the first, always within conditions established by the third. This means that attendance frequency is a necessary but deeply insufficient measure of what is happening: the same frequency of attendance can produce radically different outcomes depending on the quality of community, the availability of mentorship, and the ecological conditions within which participation occurs.

Structural Barriers in the Nigerian University Context

Understanding the mechanisms through which church participation fosters growth is only half the picture. Equally important is understanding what impedes it, and the Nigerian university context generates a distinctive set of barriers that any serious account of student spiritual formation must address.

The most pervasive barrier is structural and temporal. Nigerian university students operate under academic pressures, examination schedules, and, for many, part-time economic activities that leave limited time and energy for church involvement beyond the most minimal. Campus fellowships that schedule their major activities at times that compete with lecture timetables or examination periods place an unrealistic burden on students whose commitment to attend is genuine but whose circumstances are constrained.[35]

A second barrier is what might be called theological mismatch. Students who arrive at university formed by one theological tradition and find themselves in a church culture operating from very different assumptions may find that the available ecclesial options do not speak their theological language. The result is often a drift toward the Occasional Attendee or Spiritually Independent profiles,

[34] Kalu, African Pentecostalism, 89.
[35] Okonkwo, "Faith and the Academy," 98.

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not because the student has lost faith but because no available community feels like home.

A third barrier, and one that deserves more attention than it typically receives, is the theological culture of the church itself. Where campus churches and fellowships respond to intellectual challenge with authoritarianism, where questioning is discouraged or treated as a sign of spiritual weakness, and where the prosperity gospel creates an implicit equation of faith with material success that makes suffering and doubt feel like personal failures, the church becomes a site of formation more likely to produce defensive rigidity than genuine growth. Ukah's research documents this pattern in Nigerian campus Christianity,[36] and Okonkwo argues that it represents one of the primary drivers of the gradual disengagement characterising a significant proportion of Nigerian university students.[37]

A fourth barrier is geographic and logistical: students whose home churches are distant, and who have not found a local congregation offering genuine community, are in effect ecclesially homeless during term time. This is a particularly acute

problem for first-year students, who arrive without established church connections in their new location and may spend a significant portion of their first semester attending different churches without finding one where they feel they belong. The window between arrival and settled belonging is, from a formation perspective, a critical one, and it is often inadequately addressed by both universities and denominations.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has argued that the relationship between church participation and spiritual growth among Nigerian university students is more complex, more contextually specific, and more theoretically interesting than the existing literature has generally acknowledged. The central claim is that attendance frequency, the measure most commonly used in sociological studies of religion and higher education, is at best a proxy for the variables that actually matter: the quality of congregational community, the availability of mentorship, the nature of worship engagement, and the degree of involvement in service. Collapsing these distinct variables into a single attendance measure produces a picture that obscures more than it reveals.

The four participation profiles proposed in this paper offer a more differentiated analytical vocabulary for understanding the range of ways in which Nigerian university students relate to church life. Each profile carries different implications for spiritual growth, and responding effectively to students in each profile requires different approaches. The Actively Engaged student needs a church that can sustain and deepen the engagement they have

[36] Ukah, "Banishing God," 315.
[37] Okonkwo, "Faith and the Academy," 95.

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found. The Occasional Attendee needs relational reconnection. The Spiritually Independent student needs to be taken seriously rather than simply recruited. The Religiously Disengaged student needs, before anything else, someone who notices their absence.

The Nigerian context adds dimensions to this picture that generic frameworks miss. The dominance of Pentecostal and charismatic culture on Nigerian campuses is both a resource and a challenge: a resource because of the intensity of communal life and the strong ethic of accountability that characterises many Pentecostal communities; a challenge because of the tendencies toward theological authoritarianism, prosperity gospel distortion, and the suppression of intellectual questioning that scholars have documented. Strengthening the formative potential of Nigerian campus Christianity requires addressing both sides of this reality honestly.[38]

The implications for practice are several. For local congregations in university towns, the priority is not attendance but the building of relational infrastructure: mentorship networks, small group communities built around both intellectual inquiry and service, and a culture in which questions are welcomed rather than managed. For campus fellowships and ministries, the challenge is to occupy the space between church and university with enough theological seriousness to engage both worlds honestly. For university administrators, there is a case to be made for policies that recognise religious community participation as a legitimate dimension of student wellbeing and accommodate it accordingly.

For researchers, the most urgent need is for rigorous empirical work conducted in the Nigerian context. The conceptual framework developed in this paper is offered as a foundation for such work, but it remains to be tested against the actual experiences of actual students. Longitudinal studies that track students across their university years, mixed-methods designs that combine statistical breadth with qualitative depth, and action research collaborations with campus ministries are all needed. The field of religion and higher education will not adequately understand the formation of Christian students in the Global South until it takes the Nigerian context, and contexts like it, as seriously as it has taken American and European ones.

The church in Nigeria, at its best, is not competing with the university for students' time and loyalty. It is offering something the university cannot provide: a community of formation, a set of practices through which identity is shaped at depth, and relationships of honest accompaniment through the hardest questions of a human life. Whether it succeeds in offering this to the students in its care during one of the most consequential seasons of their development is a question that deserves more rigorous, more contextually honest, and more sustained attention than it has so far received.

[38] R. Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

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