The Africa We (and God) Want: the Role of the Church in Promoting Equal Participation for Women and Young People

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Abstract

In May 2013, the African Union (AU), formerly the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with the adoption of *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. This treaty marked a shift from the union's historical focus on independence and anti-apartheid struggles to a vision of Africa as a global powerhouse. Envisioned as a fifty-year master plan, *Agenda 2063* emphasises Pan-Africanism, sustainable development, peace, freedom, security, and continental integration. Among its key aspirations is Aspiration 6, which seeks to empower and unlock the potential of women and young people as critical contributors to the continent's transformation. This article examines the church's role in addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with Aspiration 6. It highlights the significance of a contextual-*missio Dei* approach to public, feminist, womanist, child, and youth theologies, advocating for practical frameworks to promote equity and inclusivity. The paper concludes by proposing strategies for integrating these theological perspectives to ensure equal opportunities for women and young people in homes, churches, and broader society, aligning with the broader goals of *Agenda 2063*.

Introduction

In May 2013, the African Union (AU) formerly the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) marked its fiftieth anniversary. At the golden jubilee celebration, the heads of states gathered signed a treaty – *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* – which was to refocus the affairs of the union from the fight for independence and against apartheid towards placing Africa as a dominant player on the globe (African Union n.d.). The agenda becomes a fifty-year master plan for the continent in facilitating Pan-Africanism and an African Renaissance through continental integration, peace, sustainable development, freedom, and security. The treaty with its various aspirations and flagship programmes targets different groups of people and sectors of Africa. Among these aspirations is Aspiration 6 which is geared towards empowering and harnessing the potentials of women and young people in achieving the agenda. This article seeks to reflect on the role of the church regarding the plight of women and young people in line with Aspiration 6 of the AU's *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. The article concludes by proposing a contextual-*missio Dei* approach to public, feminist, womanist, child, and youth theologies and praxes as the way forward toward granting equal opportunities to women and young people in the home, church, and society.

A Brief History of AU (OAU)

In May 1963, the OAU was formed as a united front to address the various issues that were confronting Africa as a whole, particularly colonialism. Pan-Africanism

> was to protect, promote the dignity of the black race and assert their right to self-governance. This was against the orchestrated dehumanization of Africans through the Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent colonial brutalization. (Akani 2019:1367)

Pan-Africanism traces its roots to centuries ago; in 1787 a black cleric Prince Hall embarked on an unsuccessful campaign in Boston for poor blacks to return to Africa. Also, Bishop McNeal Turner formed the American Colonization Society. George Charles, the president of the African Emigration Association, spoke in 1886 to the United States Congress about plans to establish a United

States of Africa, leading to a Pan-Africanist congress held in Chicago in 1893. Names like Henry Sylvester Williams, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummel are significant in their efforts towards Pan-Africanism (Adejo 2009). W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey similarly saw the need for the recognition and study of African cultures and history, emphasising the need for the return of Africans in the diaspora back to Africa (South African History Online 2011).

Moreover, on the African continent, significant intellectuals and patriots like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Kenya, Sékou Touré of Guinea, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia also championed the Pan-African ideologies by organising a series of conferences. The independence of Ghana in 1957 led by Kwame Nkrumah had a significant influence on efforts towards the Pan-African dream. Disappointingly, not all African heads of state embraced the idea of a United States of Africa, which was held particularly by Kwame Nkrumah, as there were issues of sovereignty, security, currency, and the like at stake. They would later settle for a united organisation with a common goal to address colonialism and socio-economic, political, and security issues that confronted the continent. The criterion for membership was independence, hence South Africa was the last to join (South African History Online 2011).

In May 1963, there were delegates from thirty-two African countries who met in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to establish OAU. In terms of structure, the heads of state formed the General Assembly while the foreign ministers formed the Council of Ministers. There was a secretariat with a general secretary and different commissions that focused on the various aspects of their objectives. One of the major achievements of the OAU was the fight against colonialism and apartheid. Also, it is worth noting the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the South African Development Coordinating Commission (SADCC), the North Africa-Greater Area Free Trade Area and the Central Africa Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries, and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) among others (da Silva 2013; South African History Online 2011).

The deliberate efforts to address refugee situations and youth organisations were also very significant. These strides were not without challenges; the issues of sovereignty and the extent to which Africa could unite on various grounds still linger. Africa's indebtedness to the West has not been dealt with;

the OAU has been blamed particularly for the continent's poverty due to its decolonial and neo-colonial ideologies. The organisation had a drawback of constant coups and dictatorships with no proper approach to dealing with such situations; hence, guerrilla tactics as a mechanism to overthrow power became somehow acceptable. Reliance on external funding was also crippling as the OAU had internal funding challenges (South African History Online 2011). There was therefore the need to reconceptualise and reform the organisation; hence, the African Union (AU) was born in 2002 in this regard (da Silva 2013; South African History Online 2011).

Although the original ideology of Pan-Africanism was maintained, the AU is different in structure as it dissolved the various forms of central government systems like the Assembly for Heads of State and leaned more towards a decentralised system. Initially, the OAU would not interfere in the internal affairs of member states; however, the new union deemed it relevant to intervene in cases of human rights crises, genocide, and unconstitutional changes of government, and in situations where local conflict is a threat to regional stability (da Silva 2013).

The Constitutive Act of the AU envisages the establishment of a supranational type of executive body that can promote integration and sustainable human development more effectively than the OAU. The act has the following bodies as principal organs:

> The Assembly of the Union;
> The Executive Council;
> The Pan-African Parliament;
> The Court of Justice;
> The Commission;
> The Permanent Representatives Committee;
> The Special Technical Committees;
> The Economic, Social and Cultural Council;
> The Financial Institutions. (Constitutive Act of the African Union n.d.)

Among the AU's major objectives, as stated in Article 3 of the Act, are:

- Active greater unity and solidarity between African countries and the peoples of Africa;

- Acceleration of the political and socio-economic integration of the continent;

- A common market and economic community;

- International cooperation, taking dual account of the charter of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

- A common defence policy for collective security. (Adejo 2009:135)

Contentions remain about whether AU was a mere rebranding of OAU or was an actual shift (Adejo 2009). Akani (2019:1367) discovered that previous programmes of the AU show African leaders have 'abandoned or [been] coerced to abandon the self-reliant strategy of Pan Africanism'. Among the several initiatives to realise the Pan-African dream, which also includes an African Renaissance, is the *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, which is now the blueprint to guide the union's activities in the next fifty years (African Union n.d.).

Agenda 2063: Aspiration 6 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The *Agenda 2063* has seven aspirations in all; the aspirations are delimited goals for specific areas towards achieving 'the Africa We Want'. Aspiration 6 states:

> *An Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.*
>
> All the citizens of Africa will be actively involved in decision making in all aspects. Africa shall be an inclusive continent where no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded,

on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic affiliation, locality, age or other factors.

Goals:

Full gender equality in all spheres of life

> strengthening the role of Africa's women through ensuring gender equality and parity in all spheres of life (political, economic and social); eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls;

Engaged and empowered youth and children

> creating opportunities for Africa's youth for self-realisation, access to health, education and jobs; ensuring safety and security for Africa's children, and providing for early childhood development. (African Union n.d.)

The AU has a policy to recognise the charter of the United Nations (UN) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For this reason, it is appropriate to approach *Agenda 2063* vis-à-vis the social development goals (SDGs). The SDGs are global aspirations stated in the UN's *Agenda 2030* to address and eradicate poverty, also to ensure the protection and safety of the earth and promote peace and prosperity for all people. The seventeen goals focus on the climate, poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace, and justice (United Nations n.d.). The UN aims to achieve them by 2030. However, reports show that the COVID-19 pandemic and wars have hindered progress a great deal. It is uncertain if these dreams will be realised at the anticipated time (United Nations 2022). Boaheng (2022) is of the opinion that even though Africa's predicaments have been attributed to pandemics such as Ebola and COVID-19, the problem has to do with political structures and their operations.

SDG number five is on gender inequalities: 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (United Nations n.d.). The United Nations 2022 report on SDG 5 shows that it would take forty years for men and women to be on par regarding national political representation in leadership, and more than

one in four women have experienced some sort of abuse. It also indicates that, although women form 39% of global employment, they form 45% of global job losses. Furthermore, it is reported that only 57% of women have a say in their sexual and reproductive health. There are also issues with gender-responsive budgeting that need significant attention from governments.

Youth and children are affected broadly by the impact of the pandemic and wars on the various SDGs, particularly SDG 1: 'No Poverty', SDG 2: 'Zero Hunger', SDG 3: 'Good Health and Well-Being', and SDG 4: 'Quality Education' (United Nations 2022). The UN report has proven a retrogression in achieving all the SDGs, hence the current state of women and young people at the global level is devastating, which includes Africa (United Nations 2022). Aspiration 6 is geared towards granting equal opportunities and participation for women and young people in all spheres of life. The question is what the role of the church is in addressing these issues.

The African Church and Agenda 2023

The church, *ekklesia* in Greek, is the called-out ones who are the body of Christ; it also normally refers to the physical building where Christians gather for fellowship. The church has physical, spiritual, political, economic, and social dimensions to its ministries (Odeleye 2016). The African church in this context includes different denominations, African-initiated churches, and those started by foreign missionaries; once the church is on this continent, regardless of the origin or denomination, it is part of this conversation. According to Ayanfe (2016), the church is a dominant player in sustainable development; he highlights how prophets were relevant in national affairs because they gave guidance in biblical times. He further posits that prophecy is needed for sustainable development. Boaheng (2022) has similarly indicated the need for theological and spiritual dimensions to the *Agenda 2063*. Bello and Osakinle (2016) are of the opinion that the church and development are bedfellows; hence they move hand in hand. Development has been part of the Christian life, and for that matter the church's agenda, since the colonial days as colonialisation and Christianity were synonymous. Education accompanied the work of the missionaries then and now, although they are accused of imperialism. Healthcare was another integral part of missions, which was also coupled with condemnation of the traditional health systems of native doctors

and herbalists.No doubt, missionary enterprise in Ekiti as in most parts of Africa presents the church historian with a dilemma of irreconcilable contradictions.

In modern days, religion is usually separated from national affairs, but that is a mistake and the church in this sense must get involved as in the days when the prophets were part of national development in the Bible. Religious institutions are not only sacred but also act as sacred agents that call for reform (Bello and Osakinle 2016:44–45).

Regarding *Agenda 2063*, Boaheng (2022) asserts there has not been much theological engagement with the treaty, hence the need for such engagement. Interestingly, Boaheng seems to overlook the gender aspect of Aspiration 6 as he ignores that part in his summary of the aspirations. However, it is heartwarming to acknowledge a significant publication in theology which is mainly focused on *Agenda 2063*: a 2020 book edited by Sunday B. Agang, Dion A. Forster, and H. Jurgens Hendriks entitled *African Public Theology*. This chapter and the entire publication are similarly aimed at bridging the gap as posited above. I therefore engage some of the scholarship in the above-mentioned book later in this endeavour. The role of the African church is to reconstruct our theologies, ethos, and praxis if we truly want to see the Africa we want, and the Africa God wants, where women and young people are fully included and integrated.

The Plight of Women and Young People in the African Church

It is essential to highlight the place of women and young people in our churches to enable us to deal with the situation. To start with, it must be seen that women, the youth, and children are marginalised in Africa which in turn is reflected in the church. In this rich continent of ours, socio-culturally, it is rather unfortunate that it is just a man's world. As a woman, a pastor for over two decades, and a seminary lecturer for over a decade, I know the reality is that even this space remains a man's world.

> Patriarchy in the African cultures is just a way of life and the norm. In fact, this is the order of the day, anything contrary is either applauded with some '*Wow*' or detested with utmost fierceness. (Amenyedzi 2021c:173)

The man/father is always in charge; the mother and children do not have much say. The position of the African woman is a wife, mother, servant, and in dire instances a slave (Amenyedzi 2021a, 2021c). Although women are assuming leadership roles in all walks of life, it is evident that the inequality gap is still huge. The above report shows it will take four decades to close the lacuna in the political arena. That is just one aspect; how about other areas besides politics?

In present-day Africa, there are still churches that frown upon the leadership of women. Even in cases where women assume leadership, they are very few and it is not without patriarchal tendencies which often hinder their smooth progress. The women's experience is not only regarding leadership: the general discrimination and subjugation in society at large is also replicated in the church. According to Ozyegin (2018) patriarchy is structural and organisational, with principles and ideologies that reinforce the subjugation of women in socio-cultural institutions where men have absolute rights over women. This is just the norm in all spheres of life for the African woman. One of the unfortunate prevailing instances in the church is spiritual abuse. The Bible has been used to reinforce domestic violence; Pauline scriptures on silence, submission, and parenthood especially have been engaged in this regard. It is evident that pastors, especially men, have not been helpful to women who experience abuse in the church, which they have been compelled to endure as their biblical obligation (Amenyedzi 2024a; Cassiday-Shaw 2012; Phiri 2001).

For the young people, who are the youth and children of Africa, socio-cultural demands are placed on them to remain in the background without a voice. The norm is for a child to be seen but not heard. A young person with a voice, who tries to challenge misnomers, will definitely be tagged as disrespectful and uncultured. The young people include both the boy children and the girl children. Mombo (2020) underlines the recent cries of the boy child against discrimination as the girls are getting all the attention and opportunities. This makes me wonder if the tables are turning. I do not think so; the advocacy for the girl child is not and must not be at the expense of the boy child. We need a society where all genders have equity and access to rights, privileges, and opportunities in all spheres of life as stated in Aspiration 6. In the church, the activities of young people are usually limited to youth and children's ministries with less involvement in the main church activities. Klaasen (2018) admits that

power relations and misconceptions are the bases for alienation and marginalisation of the youth in faith-based organisations, and that the youth are in the margins (which is usually the space for the other) instead of the centre where decisions are made. The question here is: how do we get our young people involved in all aspects of life, including the church, in order to learn from the older generation and also contribute their quota to the sustainable development of the Africa we want (see Chiroma 2020)?

The AU has proposed the Africa we envisage to be one that does not discriminate against women and young people, but we all know that, per our socio-cultural and religious orientations, if nothing is done deliberately and rigorously this dream will be practically unattainable. Assuredly, the good news is that, as Christians, we are a people of hope; we trust God that if the church assumes its rightful position in the world at large and in Africa in this case then this is possible (Hendriks 2020). Women with disabilities and young people with disabilities should not be forgotten as their experiences are more severe. They experience multiple discriminations. I have indicated elsewhere that the African woman with disability experiences '3D disability' – three dimensions of disability, discrimination, and disadvantages (Amenyedzi 2021a, 2021b). Having pinpointed some of the underlying issues concerning women and young people in society, particularly in the Christian context, the African church has the role to reconsider our theological-biblical stances, ethos, and praxes moving forward. Below are some useful theological considerations in this endeavour, bearing in mind that our theologies inform our ethos and praxes which will in turn reflect the church's role in ensuring that women and children experience equity and access to rights, privileges, and opportunities in the church and society at large.

African Public Theology and *Agenda 2063*

Scholars from various theological disciplines assert and propose the need for an African public theology in the quest to actualise the aspirations of the AU's *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Agang, Forster, and Hendriks 2020). Even though we appreciate our continent passionately, it is also sincerely true that the current state of Africa is the one we do not want, hence the desire for 'the Africa We Want' which is also the Africa God wants (Agang 2020). Public theologians identify the divorce between the sacred and secular worlds,

making Christians somehow reluctant to embrace public and secular life as fully part of their Christian life (Agang 2020; Forster 2020). It is no new knowledge that it is impossible to separate the African people from spirituality. To the African, there is always a spiritual meaning to any occurrence in life, be it good or bad. The traditionalist will attribute their success or misfortune to the gods and ancestors while Christians would attribute theirs to God. For this reason, Christians in Africa would fast and pray for any situation for divine intervention.

A typical example is the declaration of national fasting and prayers in Ghana by the president when COVID-19 was first recorded in the country. The impact of the pandemic in Ghana was not as severe as other countries, and many Christians believe God intervened indeed. Another example from Ghana is the official prayers offered by the speaker of parliament before proceeding with any business of the day. These are but a few indications that spirituality is part of our public and secular lives already, even if theologians do not step in. The church must just take advantage of the already-existing structures and religious options in society and institutions to make an impact. While many have blamed the demons for Africa's woes, to Agang (2020:3) the actual darkest demons of Africa are 'bad governance, corruption, socio-economic injustice, religious competition, tribal and ethnic conflicts and political domination'.

What Africa needs now in waging warfare against the demons is an African public theology, one that calls for all Christians, not only the clergy but including the laity, not to limit their Christian lives to privacy but to also engage in the public space and all spheres of life (Agang 2020; Forster 2020). Such a theology is one that is biblically based (Musa 2020) but relevant to all aspects of life politically, socially, culturally, economically, spiritually, and all you can name (Michael 2020). We must keep in mind that biblical accounts prove God's involvement in the public lives of his people. Prophets and kings worked hand in hand in ruling God's people. The Levitical laws were not limited to their private and religious lives but belonged to their public lives too.

The church must not cease to be the 'salt and light' of Africa if we want to see the Africa we want and the one God endorses (Sebahene 2020). This implies that the body of Christ, churches in Africa regardless of denomination, the clergy, and laity alike all need to unite and make deliberate efforts to remain as salt which is relevant for preservation, taste, and healing and as light that will

always shine forth in the darkness to show the way. Having underlined the need for African public theology, now the onus lies on us as theologians and Christians to apply specific theologies to different relevant contexts. In the case of this chapter, the focus will be on feminist, womanist, child, and youth theologies as addressed below. I propose that, in line with the values of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) which this article stems from, the public theology we do in addressing Africa's issues must be one that is 'Christ-centred', 'Spirit-led', and 'Bible-based' (South African Theological Seminary n.d.).

A Focus on Feminist and Womanist Theologies

The place of the woman in the church starts from the theological construction of who a woman is and how God is portrayed. Christianity, among other religions, presents God as a patriarchal God with male priests who exert power over women (Amadiume 2015). There are those who profess the traditional and male-only theological view who even subscribe to the inferiority view of the woman. To such, there is no room for leadership roles of women over men. The notion is that only male priests existed in the Old Testament, Jesus had only male disciples, and other Pauline biblical references as mentioned below (see Culver in Clouse and Clouse 1989:25; Foh in Clouse and Clouse 1989:69–82). African churches continue to grapple with complementarianism and egalitarianism. Complementarians, even though they acknowledge the equality of men and women, are of the view that women can only hold complementary positions in the church (GotQuestions.org n.d.). Their discourse is based on interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 focused on the silence of women in the church and submission of women in marriage. The egalitarians, contrariwise, uphold a Pauline view of the equality of all genders as in Galatians 3:28 where Paul states

> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (*Holy Bible*, NIV)

African women theologians have argued that African theology is patriarchal; therefore they continue to make strides in developing feminist and womanist liberation theologies to emancipate the African women within the church

setting and society as a whole. Oduyoye together with other matriarchs formed the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to empower women in theology and ministry (Oduyoye 1995; Oredein 2016). Their several publications address gender inequalities and other related issues of discrimination. Masenya and Dube propose gendered reading and interpretation of the Bible. Masenya (1997) proposes a Bosadi womanhood approach while Dube (2020) proposes a postcolonial feminist reading of the Bible. Claassens (2016, 2020) writes on dignity, trauma, disability, and biblical interpretations from a feminist perspective. Mombo (Mombo and Joziasse 2012; Mombo 2022) focuses on disability and gender while Chirongoma writes on Mother Earth and environmental issues (Chirongoma and Kiilu 2022).

I have elsewhere proposed a womanist theology of disability in dealing with the extreme exclusion and lack of participation of women with disabilities in African churches and society and have also developed a methodology for doing African women research within African contexts: the Afrocentric Womanist Paradigm (Amenyedzi 2022a; 2024b). There are many other female voices on leadership, contextualisation, domestic violence, and many more feminist and womanist discourses. Most of these theologians argue from *imago Dei*, *missio Dei*, and egalitarian perspectives. These women and some men have constantly argued for reframing our theologies, ethos, and praxis to fully include women in our churches. Women are created in the *imago Dei* and the *missio Dei* includes women too. In fact, Jesus did not exclude women from his ministry as usually portrayed. A very significant instance is revealing himself to a woman (women) after resurrection. If Jesus himself entrusted the resurrection message to women to proclaim, who are we to prevent them (Amenyedzi 2021c)?

There is the adage that 'charity begins at home', so, if the church can play a role in ensuring gender equality, it must begin in the church and then spread out to society as a whole. If this is not so in the church, then it would be crippling to even raise this issue outside the confines of the church.

A Focus on Child Theology

The AU's *Agenda 2063*, Aspiration 6, recognises and proposes the need for the young people to be involved and not left behind. The question is: in an Africa

where age counts and where the adult is in charge and has the final say, how can this dream be actualised? Indeed, the church has a role to play. Talking of children, socio-cultural constructions of whom a child is in our African continent make us relegate them to the background. Decisions are made for them regardless of what they feel or think or the consequences those decisions may have on them. These attitudes towards children are also present in our churches, reflected in our theologies, ethos, and praxis.

Biblical and theological conversations around children and childhood are normally approached from three perspectives. First is the theology of childhood mainly addressing the child-parent relationship, 'child innocence', and 'spiritual naivety'. Second is child theology that focuses on how Jesus puts children at the centre of missions and Christian living. Last but not the least is children doing theology (see Geiger 2013). The challenges, exclusion, and discrimination children experience are not limited to the society alone but likewise occur within the church. The issue of child spirituality remains a contention as different denominations and church traditions have their theologies and dogmas around that. Age is key when talking of child spirituality; hence, the dispute is whether children are old enough to understand spiritual things and experience God for themselves. The acceptable age for partaking in communion, baptism, and confirmations and assuming leadership roles remains debatable in most African churches.

Weber and de Beer (2016) affirm that we do poor theology about children if we do not include their voices and experiences; therefore, they propose a child theology in Africa that acknowledges the children's role, position, and voice in the church as vital in intergenerational praxis. It is interesting to note that even the view of children in *Agenda 2063* is problematic. It states

> *An Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.* (African Union n.d.)

This suggests that with children the main concentration is on caring for them, which is typical of African cultures. The AU itself must reconstruct the perception of the African child from recipient to collaborator. In a continent where children are assets and the passport to inheritance for mothers in their

husband's estate, it is a taboo to be married without children (and the wife is always in trouble). One of the major prayer points in our churches is for babies; unfortunately, many so-called prophets have taken advantage to oppress and exploit women by taking them through inhumane ordeals in the quest for miracle children. The notion of children is that of a possession that needs to be preserved for their benefit, instead of a full human being created in the *imago Dei* who must be treated with value, dignity, and respect. Moving forward,

> the vision of Child Theology Africa is to advance a child-friendly continent by doing theology with, for, about and through African children. (Weber and De Beer 2016:1)

Some renowned child theologians, including those from Africa, present relevant discourses on how children experience God and child theology in the book titled *God's Heart for Children* (Tan, Petallar, and Kajidori 2022). If the African church reconstructs its theologies and praxes towards inclusion of children, there is the possibility of impacting societal attitudes towards children, which will enhance the African dream of equality and inclusion.

A Focus on Youth Theology

Young people include children and youths; sometimes we make the mistake of clamming them together but the reality is that their experiences are different. Youth is the period in-between childhood and adulthood but is mostly treated as childhood in African cultures. Adolescence is often used in place of youthfulness; however, while an adolescent is a youth, a youth entails more than adolescence. If the idea is to involve children, then it is just right to equally grant opportunities to the youth. It is difficult to define who is a youth. While different organisations, institutions, and churches put a particular age to who is a youth, socio-culturally, in Africa, age does not matter but rather independence and responsibility. So, in a scenario where there are two young people of the same age, and one is employed and married and the other is unemployed and still dependent, without question the former would be the adult while the later remains the child (Amenyedzi 2021b).

The youth go through various developmental stages, including puberty. On our continent, puberty is marked by various initiation rites to mark the transition

from childhood into adulthood. These rites are normally enshrined in the cultures and traditional belief systems that are not so charming to the contemporary youth, though the older generation upholds such ceremonies as significant and as instilling moral values into the younger generation. The absence of these initiations has been dreaded; moreover, one cannot reject the fact that some of these rites are often accompanied by some unacceptable practices like female genital mutilation and staying in the forest for boys, which all have their ethical, psychological, and health implications. There is always a constant clash between youth and adults on procedures, ideologies, ethics, and moral values. How does the church step in to address such circumstances? As indicated early on, the church cannot be excused for discrimination against and exclusion of the youth in the general life of the church and leadership. Here again, the starting point is reconstructing our theological discourses on the youth.

Youth theology, which reflects on the youth ministry approach, has been Eurocentric from time immemorial. It is for this reason that youth theologians in Africa have called for contextual and decolonised youth theologies and approaches (Bautista 2018; Ndereba 2021; Weber 2015, 2017). Klaasen (2018) calls for theologies and praxis that place the youth at the centre. Aziz (2022) proposes youth ministry as a public practical theology. Our theologies must be framed around contemporary issues and the experiences of the youth so that they will be relevant to them. Digitalisation must be considered in this discourse as this is the *new normal* and a common space for the youth. Chiroma (2020) has alluded to the idea that, in pursuit of the aspirations of *Agenda 2063*, there is a need to value intergenerational relationships where the younger generation must respect and learn from the older generation and the older generation must learn to also listen to the young generations, although this would not be an easy process.

Proposing a Contextual-*Missio Dei* Approach for Engaging Women and Young People in the African Church and Society

It is established that there is a dire need for spiritual and theological dimensions to the *Agenda 2063*, which are the responsibility of the church in collaboration with other stakeholders (Agang, Forster, and Hendriks 2020; Boaheng 2022). Sebahene (2020) is of the opinion that the African church as

the salt and light needs to shine forth to show the way and to preserve the nations towards actualising the 'Africa We Want' and the Africa God endorses. The situation of women and young people in Africa cuts across a long spectrum, in fact all spheres reflected in all the aspirations of *Agenda 2063* and the SDGs. The issues have to do with poverty, (un)employment, education, digitalisation, health and wellbeing, (no) hunger, gender equality, migration, trafficking, environment, pandemics, ocean life, marginalisation, exclusion/inclusion, and many more. All these relevant issues affect women and children in one way or another.

After all is well said, what next? There are proposals for theological interventions as mentioned above like public theology, feminist and womanist theologies, liberation theologies, inclusive child theology, decolonised and contextual youth theologies, etc. As we endeavour to reconstruct our theologies, what are the practical steps towards actualising *Agenda 2063* for the church in Africa? I propose a contextual-*missio Dei* approach. This approach must encompass our theologies, ethos, and praxis. A contextual-*missio Dei* approach is one that is relevant to the African cultural context and is all-inclusive – all-inclusive in the sense that the *missio Dei* includes everyone. The Great Commission was to all nations and every creature, meaning women and young people are also included. Women were used tremendously in the Bible to prophesy, care for prophets, bring deliverance, birth the saviour, minister to Jesus Christ and the apostles, and the list goes on and on. Similarly, young people in the Bible were called as prophets and kings and won wars, and Jesus particularly defied culture by placing children at the centre of Christianity.

A contextual-*missio Dei* approach will ask vital questions in theologising and praxis, such as: what are those elements in our cultures concerning women and young people and how dehumanising or redeeming are they? How are women and young people appreciated in our societies? What are the religious/theological views on women and young people and how do these views impact them? Moving forward, we would want to identify those redemptive elements in our cultures, theologies, and praxis that will enhance the full participation of women and young people in the home, church, and society at large (see the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm [Amenyedzi 2022a] and the Afrocentric Youth Paradigm [Amenyedzi 2022b]).

To this end, the African church has a significant role to play in actualising Aspiration 6 of *Agenda 2063* through interventions at the individual church, denominational, council, associational, and ecumenical levels to ensure that conversations on women and children are not pushed to the margins but placed at the centre of our theologies, ethos, and praxis. The set of questions proposed in the contextual-*missio Dei* approach will undoubtedly be a useful asset.

Conclusion

The article was a reflection on AU's *Agenda 2063* Aspiration 6 which calls for no women and young people to be left behind in any facets of life on the African continent. Africa being a patriarchal society, women and young people do not have a voice; hence they experience discrimination and marginalisation in society at large but also in churches. The church has a role to play in realising the Pan-African dream as stipulated in *Agenda 2063*. This can become a reality if the church desists from separating the sacred from the secular and understands that our spiritual, private, and public lives are interwoven and so must be captured in our theologies, ethos, and praxis regarding women and young people. This means that our theologies and ministry approaches must deliberately create spaces for women and young people at the centre instead of leaving them in the margins. To this end, I propose a contextual-*missio Dei* approach that is contextually relevant to the African continent and all-inclusive, as the *missio Dei* includes all.

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