



# Factors Leading Young Christian Adults to Elope in the Anglican Church of Kenya, Taveta East Archdeaconry

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## Abstract

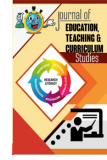
This study sought to establish factors leading young Christian adults to the practice of eloping in the Anglican Church, Taveta East Archdeaconry. The Human Psychosocial Development Theory, Ecological Model, and Moral Development Theory guided it. It adopted a descriptive research design. The target population was 110 youth who had eloped, were aged 20 - 40 years, had five clergies, and had 61 parents. The study used a purposive sampling method. The study's sample size was 176. Face-to-face interviews were used for the clergy. Focus group discussions were used for the parents. The questionnaires' accuracy and reliability were verified by the inter-rater method. Data cleaning and analysis were conducted. The analyses made use of the statistical package for social sciences version 28. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, mean and percentages. Qualitative data was organised into themes for analysis. The study findings include eloping factors such as peer influence, financial difficulties in a family, little guidance and counselling in church, parents' support for the eloping practice, use of phones and youth failing to embrace the Christian faith. The language barrier posed a challenge to some respondents. Some were more conversant with Kiswahili than English, prompting the translation of questionnaires from English to Kiswahili. Questionnaires require more time to reach the respondents, fill them out, and return them. This was solved by early communication to clergy and timely distribution. The number of respondents per focus group in some parishes was less than expected. This was solved by increasing the number of respondents in another station.

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## Introduction

Eloping is a phenomenon that is experienced all around the globe. Studies indicate that elopement is on the increase while church weddings are on the decline. In the United States, 62% of 1,000 currently engaged couples would consider an elopement-style wedding rather than a traditional one (Lesthaeghe, 2020). The number is higher for females at 69%. In the United Kingdom, the number of couples cohabiting has risen by about 16 per cent over the past two decades and has continued to rise as the number of marriages continues to fall (Giannelis et al., 2021). In England, elopement grew from one in four in the 1960s to about seven in ten, to about 70% in the early 1990s (Wächter & de Valk,

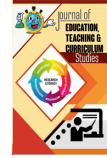


2020). In Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, it has been revealed that the stigma attached to eloping is far less than it was some decades ago. As a result, many couples find no problem eloping, as some regard their relationships as trial marriages (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In India, elopement is rampant because of caste differences. Elopement is used as a means of breaking barriers caused by the caste system (Pitre & Lingam, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, though there is a lack of statistical evidence, there is a high prevalence of elopement. In Kenya, particularly, the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), Taita Taveta diocese, Taveta East Archdeaconry, hereafter called the church, most parishioners start their marital unions by eloping. Those who eloped have not solemnised their marriages in church. Those church members solemnise their marriages after living together for many years.

Having interrogated various literature, mostly on cohabitation in various contexts, customary and church weddings, this study's point of departure is consideration of eloping as the entry point or starting point of a union between a man and a woman. A union which is unregistered as required by the civil law of Kenya and has not been blessed in church. This research interrogates the why of entering such a union. It should, therefore, not be confused with customary marriage. Most young people choose to elope and cohabit without any formal arrangement and processes and without belabouring to undergo either the Christian marriage in church or the customary marriage, which involves all marriage processes but the Church. Others elope to live under one roof in the same blanket without prior knowledge of their parents and church and without paying the dowry. They sign legal documents before an attorney and witnesses, avoiding the customary requirements and the Church. This, too, is considered as elopement by the Church (Wilson et al., 2019). Still, others follow the traditional process and avoid the church wedding. This is called customary marriage, which is recognised in the law of Kenya 2014, but the Church does not readily accept it because it excludes the Church and sometimes the legal requirement of civil law. This arrangement is mostly preceded by eloping.

The Church has a pastoral mandate for all its members' well-being and practice. This pastoral mandate embodies all the Church's activities to reduce the upsurge of elopement among young people. It deploys various spiritual and psychological strategies and techniques for behaviour modification, including teachings and guidance on purity of the entire church by the pastoral counsellors, mainly the clergy, and lay leadership, namely Mothers Union, Kenya Anglican Men's Association, Kenya Anglican Youth organisation and children ministry leaders in the spirit of priesthood of all believers, (1 Peter 2:9). These leaders have a role of ensuring decent and formal entry of its members into marriage through functional and effective pastoral care, guidance and counselling programs.

Eloping has a myriad of factors that enable it. These range from moral decadence, peer pressure exhibited by premarital sex, stopping to attend church services and a feeling of inability to connect to people in their Church to the rising use of mobile phones among young people. Phones have helped greatly to quicken the familiarisation process (Noori et al., 2023), discussions and subsequent elopement. They serve as catalysts for making elopement more dynamic (Köhler, 2017). The level of education, religion, age and place of residence are significant predictors of elopement ( Odimegwu *et al.* 2018). Peer influence is a major determinant of attitude toward elopement. Addah *et al.*, (2021) Lack of Christian counselling and proper orientation to youth on the destructive tendencies of peer influence could also be a factor that promotes eloping. Other causes of elopement include financial distress and stereotyping of church weddings as expensive. The culture of innocence and purity is hardly promoted and encouraged among the youth (Muhinat, 2022).



Parents seem to be propagating the challenge of eloping in church. While church leaders work hard to teach the congregation about chastity, most parents play a very minor role in counselling and teaching their sons and daughters on matters regarding chastity. In a session of guidance and counselling on purity to a group of girls, a clergy asked whether they had heard such teachings from their parents, and only two out of the fourteen raised their hands as proof that their parents taught them about chastity. This phenomenon necessitated this research journey.

This study was guided by Erick Erickson's psychosocial theory of human development, the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The Ecological Systems Theory, at the microsystem level, focuses on the family of origin and church as an influencer of youth's choices, particularly the choice of mode of entry into marriage. The theory purports that the microsystem (family, church) greatly influences an individual's character formation. This prompted the involvement of parents to represent families and clergy to represent the church. The theory also purports that, at the macrosystem system level, the interactions between institutions affect an individual's life. The institutions focused on this study are the church-clergy and family-parents. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development informed this study at the conventional stage of morality. Parental guidance and church ministry to young people have a great influence on the choices they make. At the interpersonal level, where behaviour is driven by social approval from peers, elopes are approved of by fellow elopes because they follow in their footsteps. Contrarily, eloping is not readily acceptable by the Church leadership because it is void of church rites. Young people tend to align their choices with their peers in seeking approval. For instance, young people may choose to elope just because their counterparts eloped. Elopes have a high tendency to influence fellow youth to elope. At the authority level, where behaviour is driven by obeying authority and conforming to norms □, the Youth's choice to elope does not conform to the church's and the parents' biblical instructions but is congruent with negative peer influence. Negative peer influence affects young people's choice to elope rather than to wed in church. A person's morality should first be formed and established at the family level and nourished still at the family and church level. Proper establishment of morality is supposed to be done and nourished at early stages of life, in early adulthood, during the intimacy versus isolation stage of development (Erick Erickson's theory of human development), in families of origin. In that case, young people will have the moral authority to counter any negative influence to eloping rather than marrying in church. Also, if the church's principles of honourable entry into marriage are well established and are known and adhered to by young persons to foster conformity, elopement will be reduced substantially.

### **The Hypothesis of the Study**

There is a significant relationship between destructive tendencies of peer influence, stereotyping of church weddings as expensive and eloping practices among young people in the Anglican Church, Taveta East Archdeaconry. This hypothesis was supported because respondents cited these reasons as key factors influencing eloping among church youth. Also, family of origin and the church greatly influence young people's moral behaviour, prompting them to elope or wed in church.

### **Limitations**

Some respondents faced a language barrier. Some said they were more conversant with Kiswahili than English, prompting the translation of questionnaires from English to Kiswahili. Questionnaires require more time to reach the respondents, fill them out, and return them. This was solved by early communication to clergy on the ground and timely distribution. In some parishes, the number of focus



groups was less than expected. This was solved by increasing the number of respondents in another station.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

To assess pastoral factors influencing elopement among the Christian youth, this study used a descriptive research design. The design was appropriate as it helped answer the research question of what factors make young people elope rather than marry in church. It provided a more accurate picture and characteristics of this group and their tendency to elope. It intended to offer insight to the stakeholders, namely clergy, parents, peer counsellors, teachers and various Church departments, to mitigate the practice of eloping among young people in the Church. This research used purposive sampling to use cases with the required objective information. The criterion for choosing this sampling method was based on the availability and willingness of the respondents to offer information. Those sampled were members of the church aged 20 to 40 years. This age bracket was informed by Erick Erickson's theory, sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation, human development. This group included both genders- men and women who completed the questionnaires. The clergy were interviewed, and parents were engaged in Focus group discussions.

### ***Sampling Procedures***

The study issued 110 questionnaires to the youth; 106 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 96%. All clergy targeted were interviewed, giving a response rate of 100%) 6 Focus Group Discussions with 55 out of the targeted 60 parents gave a response rate of 92%, which is sufficient according to Sammut, Griscti and Norman (2021) and López (2023). The overall response rate of this study was 95% and therefore reliable.

### ***Sample size***

Using the church statistics obtained from the audit report of 2019, the population of 314 gave the researcher a sample size of 176 by employing the Yamane (1967) formula as shown:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+N(e)^2)}$$

$n$  is the sample size;  $N$  = the population of the study;  $e$  = the margin error in the calculation.

$$n = \frac{314}{(1+314(0.05)^2)} \quad n = 176$$

The sample for each category of respondents was proportional to the population. The distribution of the sample size is as shown in Table 1.



*Table 1: Sampling matrix*

Category	Sample Size
Youth	110
Clergy	5
Parents	61
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>

**Results**

*Factors leading youth to elope*

To establish the factors that make young people to elope instead of wedding in church, the researcher obtained data from young elopes to help elucidate the challenge of eloping in church. The results are shown in table 3.

*Table 2: Factors leading youth to elope*

STATEMENTS	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	SA	A	N	D	SD
Peer influence contributes to eloping among the youth.	106	3.95	1.206	47	19	21	8	5
Eloping is quick and easy than church wedding	106	4.00	1.051	40	34	15	9	2
Financial difficulties in a family leads youth to elope than wed in church	106	4.12	1.217	53	29	0	13	5
Church has not taught and counselled its members enough to wed in church	106	2.50	1.318	12	14	13	36	25
Parents are quick to support eloping than church wedding	106	2.41	1.256	10	13	10	42	25
Phones have really made communication easy thus enabling eloping in youth	106	3.87	1.024	30	40	20	7	3
Most youth have not embraced Christian faith that's why they elope	106	3.68	1.134	28	34	17	19	2
Failing to attend church services and to church teaching contributes to eloping	106	3.77	1.275	35	37	7	14	7

*Source: Field data (2024)*

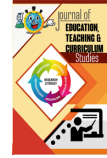
**Discussions**

Respondents cited several factors which influence eloping among young people in the church. They are; peer influence, parent’s support for eloping, financial challenges, lack of proper guidance and mentorship, mobile phones, young people failing to attend church services, among other factors as indicated below.

*Peer influence*

It was noted that peer influence is a factor in eloping among church youth. When peers or close friends have eloped or openly expressed support for eloping, it can create a sense of acceptance around eloping. Young individuals might feel encouraged to follow in their peers' footsteps, believing that eloping is an acceptable and admirable norm. Additionally, the desire to fit in with their social circle





can compel youth to make impulsive decisions, including eloping. The need for social acceptance and the influence of peer norms can significantly lower the perceived risks and increase the appeal of eloping young people. Peer influence, therefore, cannot be overlooked because it is a significant factor in eloping among young people.

### ***Support from Parents***

Fewer young people indicated that their parents were quick to support eloping. This indicates parental approval or support for eloping negligibly influences youth to elope. Nevertheless, when parents welcome and house their eloping children in their homes, it indicates their approval and gives young men and women a sense of acceptance. This may also explain why most elopes stay long without formalising their unions in church. Moreover, when parents disapproved of their child's chosen partner, the emotional stress and conflict pushed the youth towards eloping to escape the tension and be with the person they loved without further confrontation. This agrees with the findings of Hariri (2018), who indicated a direct relationship between elopement and family relationships. Parents' support, though negligible, is a factor that influences eloping among young people.

### ***Financial challenges***

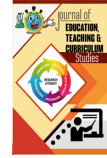
According to the youth, economic difficulties significantly drive young people to elope. For those coming from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, eloping seemed to be an escape from their economic hardships. Young couples avoided the high costs associated with formal ceremonies, instead, they opted to elope to alleviate some of the financial pressures. This verifies a study by Diane (2020), which found that the financial pressures that marriages place on youth and their families resulting from the high cost of weddings, the high cost of marrying an educated woman and unemployment lead to eloping. Indeed, the high cost of wedding ceremonies attached to church weddings could also hinder young people from weddings in church. Waruta and Kinoti (1994) and Singerman (2011) agree that modern weddings have become a social liability. The involvement of huge sums of money scares young people from the formal Christian wedding, otherwise known as a traditional wedding. Financial difficulties often create a sense of desperation and a need to escape from economic hardships, making elopement appear as a viable solution for a better future.

### ***Lack of proper guidance and mentorship***

The Lack of proper guidance and mentorship by the church and the family left young people feeling lost and unsupported. When they did not have access to reliable advice or role models to navigate their personal and romantic lives, they resorted to eloping. Lack of proactive and effective mentorship leaves youths to themselves, leading them to make hasty decisions out of a desire to take control of their own lives in the face of uncertainty and confusion. This aligns with the findings of □ those who assessed the mentor-mentee relationship, how it affects mentors' roles, and the factors that affect mentoring practice. The mentors within the microsystem (church and family) have a great role in ensuring effective guidance to young people to minimise eloping in church.

### ***Phones***

Youth are avid users of Phones, which gives them online access to all types of content and connects those near and far. Mobile phones have not only been used to search for sexual partners but have also been an effective tool used to enhance eloping. Phones have enhanced communication, meaning lovers have more contact hours through phones than when phones were unavailable (Kharono et al., 2022). The rising use of mobile phones has helped to quicken the process of familiarisation, discussions and subsequent elopement between young people. Thus, Phones act as catalysts, making elopement more dynamic.



### ***Failing to attend church services***

Failing to attend church services and church teachings significantly affects youth's elopement. Young people tend to be committed to church attendance until shortly after the confirmation rite. After that, some feel they have outgrown children's Church service and see no need to attend it. Conversely, they feel too young to assemble with the older group of the church, mainly their mothers, fathers and grandparents. They become more socialised across the sexes. This identity crisis, as described by Erik Erikson in his theory of Psychosocial Human Development (Maree, 2021) lead young people to stop attending church services. Such alienation from the church also keeps them from receiving biblical instructions and detaches them from would-be mentors, thereby giving room to eloping.

### ***Other factors***

An open-ended question to respondents as to why young people choose to elope rather than wed in a church gave the following factors: lack of awareness resulting in ineffective guidance and failing to attend church services, parents' perception of daughters as a burden, unsafe sexual behaviour, unwanted pregnancy and its risk to unsafe abortion, maternal and child mortality, deprivation of education, self-dependence, early pregnancies, social stigma arising from early pregnancies causing pressure to the young people to elope to legitimise their relationships quickly, intense feelings of love and the desire to be together without the constraints imposed by family or societal expectations drove many to take the drastic step of eloping making elopement appear romantic and trendy, seeking autonomy and emotional fulfilment. All these are significant factors that influence youths' decisions to elope.

### ***Information from Interviews and Focus Groups***

Interviews and focus groups helped obtain the following information: family pressure to marry, disapproval of a partner of choice, economic challenges, peer influence, media, psychological, and sense of independence from parental control.

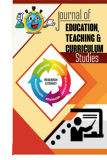
A clergy member, R1, indicated, *"Many young people elope due to intense family pressure and conflict. This can include strict parenting, forced marriage expectations, or disapproval of their chosen partner. When familial opposition is strong, eloping may seem like their only option to be with their desired partner."*

Additionally, R2 noted, *"In societies with rigid cultural and social norms, youth might feel stifled by the restrictions imposed on their personal lives. The desire for freedom from these constraints can drive them to elope, seeking a life where they can make their own choices without societal judgment."*

Another clergy member, R3, said, *"Economic disparities and lack of financial independence can also be significant factors. Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may see elopement as an opportunity to escape financial hardship or as an opportunity to find a better life with their partner. However, this should not be the case since a church wedding is not expensive; rather, expenses are caused by holding wedding parties, which is different from the wedding."*

R4 indicated, *"Poor communication within the family can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of emotional support. When youth feel unheard or unsupported, they might elope to assert their autonomy and find an emotional connection with their partner."*

R5 noted that: *"Moral degradation among youth has immensely contributed to the practice of eloping. Most young people stop attending church services and seminars; they are drawn to worldly affections rather than biblical moral principles. All this is because of the rejection of godly instructions the church gives."*



Additionally, through focus groups, the study inquired from the parents about the factors that lead youth to elope in the church. FGD 1 from the focus group, it was evident that Peers can have a significant impact on the decision to elope. *“If friends or acquaintances have eloped or if there is encouragement from the social circle, it might push young people towards elopement, believing it to be an accepted or even desirable course of action.”* From the results, it is also evident that Youth are avid users of Phones, giving them online access to all types of content and connecting different types of people near and far. Phones have enhanced communication, meaning lovers have more contact hours through phones than when phones were unavailable. R6 indicated, *“Media portrayals of romantic relationships and the idealisation of elopement can influence young people. Movies, Television shows, and social media often romanticise the idea of running away together, making it appear as a normal and passionate act, which can appeal to impressionable youth.”*

Another focus group discussion participant indicated, *“Emotional and psychological factors such as feelings of intense love, infatuation, or rebellion can contribute to the decision to elope. Youth might feel that their emotional bond with their partner is strong enough to overcome obstacles, leading them to make impulsive decisions like elopement.”*

One of the focus group discussants also said, *“The natural desire for independence and control over one’s life choices can drive youth to elope. Adolescents and young adults often seek to break free from parental control and assert their independence, viewing elopement as taking charge of their own lives.”*

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that the ecosystem in which a person grows has a great influence on the choices they make in life. The Church should impress upon the stakeholders, namely the clergy, parents, various departments of the church and other policymakers, the need to influence policy-making processes at the macrosystem level since the policy can affect the well-being and development of human beings by determining conditions of their lives. This will help address the problem of eloping from a narrow perspective of pastoral counselling and teaching on virtue in the microsystem (church and family). Young people, on the other hand, should make a deliberate choice to attend church services and stay sexually pure until they enter honourably into marriage.

When parents impose strict rules or disapprove of their child's chosen partner, young people may feel their autonomy is stifled, leading to rebellious behaviour. Eloping becomes a moral issue characterised by defiance against parental authority, providing a way to escape conflict and be with their loved ones without further confrontation. For those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, eloping may seem like an escape from financial hardships entailed in the hybrid type of marriage. The financial burden of church weddings also hinders young people from marrying in the church. However, young people should not stereotype church wedding as expensive since the church wedding rite is different from the expensive parties attached it. The lack of proper guidance and mentorship leaves young people feeling lost and unsupported. Without reliable advice or role models, youth may resort to eloping to solve their challenges.

The study concludes that promoting the practice of sex after marriage and ensuring fair dowry payments are crucial for fostering discipline and respect for marriage and reducing the stigma of premarital pregnancies while also making marriage more accessible and equitable by reducing financial burdens. Conversely, it is essential to discourage early marriage and female genital mutilation due to their harmful effects, including inequality, emotional distress, limited education, increased health risks and reduced personal autonomy. Youth education is important for personal





development and healthier lives, and comprehensive education and awareness programs reduce the chances of eloping. To reduce wedding costs, further research can be done on how to blend church wedding rites, customary procedures and civil procedures to reduce the number of ceremonies, thereby reducing the costs.

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