

Spiritual Nurture and Student Retention at Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Student spiritual growth and long-term church retention remain significant concerns in university-based church contexts. Although Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church conducts diverse nurture activities, including worship services, Bible study groups, prayer bands, discipleship training, and leadership initiatives, the relationship between these practices and students' sustained commitment requires deeper scholarly attention. This article explores students' lived experiences of spiritual nurture and retention practices within the campus church between 2022 and 2025. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study draws on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected students. Thematic analysis revealed that spiritual programs contribute to students' faith development when they are participatory, relational, and relevant to their university experience. However, weak follow-up systems, inconsistent mentorship structures, academic pressures, and limited personal connection contribute to disengagement. The findings suggest that sustainable retention requires more than program availability; it requires intentional relationships, coordinated discipleship pathways, student leadership inclusion, and structured follow-up mechanisms. The article proposes a contextualized ministry framework that integrates spiritual nurture, relational mentorship, leadership development, and accountability-based follow-up to strengthen student belonging and long-term faith commitment in campus church ministry.

Keywords: Spiritual Growth; Spiritual Nurture; Student Retention; Phenomenology; Discipleship; Campus Ministry

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual growth and sustained church engagement among university students remain central concerns for campus ministry. Universities are formative environments in which young adults encounter intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual transitions that shape worldview, identity, and faith commitment. Within faith-based institutions, the campus church is expected to nurture students through corporate worship, Bible study, prayer, discipleship, service, and leadership formation. These practices are intended to help students develop a personal, mature, and sustainable relationship with God.¹

In recent years, Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church, located within the North Buganda Field, has intensified efforts to promote spiritual nurture through structured programs such as worship services, Bible study groups, prayer bands, weeks of spiritual emphasis, and leadership training. Such practices are consistent with classic Christian understandings of spiritual disciplines as formative habits that shape devotion and character.²

Despite the presence of these initiatives, student participation does not automatically produce sustained spiritual maturity or long-term church commitment. Studies of youth and young adults have repeatedly shown that spiritual growth is influenced not merely by exposure to religious activity, but by the quality of engagement, the relevance of teaching, and the depth of relationships within the faith community.³ When church life is experienced as impersonal, routine, or disconnected from students' lived realities, disengagement may occur even where programs remain active.⁴

This article therefore examines how students experience spiritual nurture and retention practices at Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its central argument is that sustainable student retention requires a shift from a primarily program-centered approach to a relational, student-informed, and systematized ministry model. The study gives attention to worship, Bible study, prayer, mentorship, discipleship, leadership involvement, and follow-up systems as interconnected practices that influence spiritual growth and church attachment.⁵

Background and Problem

Campus churches operate at the intersection of faith formation and higher education. Students entering university often experience expanded freedom, intellectual questioning, social realignment, and pressure to define personal values. These transitions can strengthen faith when students encounter supportive communities that encourage reflection and commitment; they can

¹James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 56–60.

²Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 145–50.

³Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 165–70.

⁴Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91–95.

⁵Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 48–52.

also weaken participation when students feel anonymous, unsupported, or spiritually disconnected.⁶

The problem addressed in this study is that, despite the availability of diverse spiritual programs at Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church, student spiritual growth and long-term retention remain inconsistent. Many students participate actively during particular seasons but later become irregular or disengaged. This pattern reflects a gap between program availability and sustained spiritual commitment. Retention literature emphasizes that individuals are more likely to remain connected to institutions when they experience meaningful social integration and a sense of belonging.⁷

Within the campus church, the absence of coordinated follow-up systems, intentional discipleship pathways, and consistent mentorship relationships may contribute to fragmented spiritual development. Ministry programs may attract students, but without relational care and continuing guidance, some students struggle to remain integrated into the church community.⁸

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe students' lived experiences of spiritual nurture and retention practices in order to develop a contextualized and sustainable ministry framework. The study was guided by three questions: How do students experience spiritual nurture initiatives within the campus church? What factors promote or hinder students' spiritual growth and sustained church engagement? What strategies can strengthen student retention and spiritual maturity in the campus church?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Nurture

Spiritual growth refers to the progressive development of faith, values, beliefs, practices, and relationships with God. It involves transformation in attitudes, commitments, and patterns of life. Spiritual nurture refers to the intentional support offered by a faith community through teaching, worship, prayer, mentoring, fellowship, service, and accountability. Fowler's work on faith development underscores that faith matures through stages shaped by cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual experience.⁹

In university settings, nurture often occurs through scheduled activities. Yet spiritual formation is not reducible to attendance at religious events. Foster emphasizes disciplined spiritual practices, but such practices become formative when they are internalized and connected to a living relationship with God.¹⁰ Astin's work on higher education further suggests that student development is

⁶Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 12–15.

⁷Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132–35.

⁸Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Does Not Last and What Your Church Can Do about It* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 71–75.

⁹Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 16–18.

¹⁰Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1–5.

shaped significantly by involvement, meaning-making, and the quality of educational and communal experiences.¹¹

Student Retention and Belonging in Church Contexts

Student retention in a church context refers to the sustained participation, commitment, and integration of students into the spiritual and communal life of the church. Retention is not simply a matter of attendance; it includes belonging, identity, relational support, and participation in the mission of the faith community. Hull argues that discipleship involves forming believers who continue to grow and participate in the life and mission of the church.¹²

Retention is strongly influenced by social connection. Students who are known by name, supported during difficulty, and invited into meaningful participation are more likely to remain active. Conversely, students who feel invisible or neglected may withdraw gradually, even when they share the church's beliefs. This makes belonging a theological and pastoral issue, not merely an administrative one.¹³

Discipleship, Mentorship, and Follow-Up

Discipleship is a deliberate and continuing process of nurturing believers toward spiritual maturity through teaching, modeling, accountability, and participation in mission. Coleman's classic model stresses that spiritual formation is relational, intentional, and reproducible rather than merely instructional.¹⁴

Mentorship is especially important for university students because emerging adulthood often involves identity negotiation, vocational discernment, and moral decision-making. Parks argues that mentoring communities help young adults interpret their questions, commitments, and aspirations within a larger framework of meaning.¹⁵ In campus ministry, mentorship can provide accountability, encouragement, spiritual direction, and continuity between formal church programs and students' personal lives.

Follow-up systems refer to intentional practices by which a church maintains contact with students after initial participation. Such systems may include visitation, phone calls, digital communication, small-group accountability, attendance tracking, and pastoral care. Where follow-up is inconsistent, disengagement may remain unnoticed until students have already disconnected. Effective student retention therefore requires structures that make care visible, personal, and timely.¹⁶

¹¹Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 7–9.

¹²Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 45–48.

¹³Dean R. Hoge, *The Future of Catholic Leadership: Responses to the Priest Shortage* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 45–47.

¹⁴Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1993), 67–89.

¹⁵Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 48–52.

¹⁶General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Growing Disciples: A Guide to Discipleship in the Local Church* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 15–30.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by three complementary perspectives: Faith Development Theory, Social Integration Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory. Faith Development Theory explains how persons mature in faith across stages and how young adults often move toward reflective ownership of belief.¹⁷ Social Integration Theory clarifies why belonging and interpersonal connection are central to sustained institutional commitment.¹⁸ Experiential Learning Theory adds that students learn and grow through active participation and reflection on experience.¹⁹

Together, these perspectives support a ministry approach that treats students not as passive recipients of programs but as active participants whose experiences, relationships, questions, and leadership opportunities shape spiritual formation and retention.

Research Gap

Existing literature affirms the significance of spiritual formation, discipleship, belonging, and student involvement. However, less attention has been given to students' lived experiences of spiritual nurture and retention within African university church contexts. There is also limited integration of mentorship, discipleship, leadership inclusion, and follow-up into a single contextual ministry framework. This study addresses that gap by centering students' voices and interpreting their experiences in relation to practical campus ministry structures.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry sought to understand students' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to spiritual nurture and retention practices.²⁰ Rather than measuring the frequency of participation quantitatively, the study sought rich descriptions of students' perceptions, feelings, interpretations, and experiences.²¹

The study was conducted at Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church within the North Buganda Field. The target population consisted of students who were members, regular participants, occasional attendees, or former participants in campus church activities. Including these categories enabled the study to capture both engagement and disengagement experiences.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required students who had relevant experience with spiritual nurture and church involvement. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to

¹⁷Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 172–75.

¹⁸Tinto, *Leaving College*, 132–35.

¹⁹David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 38–41.

²⁰Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 13–15.

²¹Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 72–75.

narrate personal experiences in depth, while focus group discussions generated insights into shared perceptions and group dynamics.²²

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved transcribing interviews and discussions, reading the data repeatedly, identifying significant statements, coding the data, grouping codes into categories, developing themes, and interpreting the meanings of those themes.²³

To promote trustworthiness, the study attended to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through careful engagement with participant accounts and, where possible, member checking. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the context and findings. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by maintaining a clear audit trail and grounding interpretation in participant responses.²⁴

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their participation was voluntary, confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms, and participants retained the right to withdraw without penalty.

FINDINGS

The findings were organized around major themes that emerged from participant interviews and focus group discussions. Direct statements from participants were presented as illustrative quotations in order to preserve the authenticity of student voices.

Participant Profile

Fifteen participants were involved in the study. The participants represented a range of gender, academic year, and church involvement categories. This diversity provided a broad basis for interpreting students' experiences of spiritual nurture and retention.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Data Collection Method

Data Collection Method	Number Participants	of Percentage
In-depth interviews	10	66.7%
Focus group discussions	5	33.3%
Total	15	100%

Table 2. Distribution of Participants by Gender

Gender	Number Participants	of Percentage
Male	8	53.3%

²²David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 32–35.

²³Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 87–90.

²⁴Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 289–331.

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage
Female	7	46.7%
Total	15	100%

Table 3. Distribution of Participants by Year of Study

Year of Study	Number of Participants	Percentage
Year 1	4	26.7%
Year 2	4	26.7%
Year 3	4	26.7%
Year 4	3	20.0%
Total	15	100%

Table 4. Distribution of Participants by Level of Church Involvement

Level of Involvement	Number of Participants	Percentage
Active members	7	46.7%
Occasional attendees	5	33.3%
Disengaged students	3	20.0%
Total	15	100%

Theme 1: Experiences of Spiritual Nurture

Participants reported varied experiences of spiritual nurture through worship services, Bible study groups, and prayer bands. Many students described these programs as meaningful and spiritually strengthening. Worship services helped them reflect on their relationship with God, Bible study groups deepened scriptural understanding, and prayer bands supported personal devotion. One participant stated, *“The worship services help me reconnect with God, especially during stressful academic periods.”* These findings suggest that structured spiritual programs can support students’ faith development when they are engaging and relevant to students’ lived realities.

At the same time, some participants experienced certain programs as routine, overly formal, or insufficiently interactive. One participant observed, *“Sometimes the programs feel too formal, and it is hard to connect personally.”* This indicates that spiritual nurture is strengthened when students are invited into discussion, testimony, reflection, and practical application rather than treated only as observers of a program.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging and Community

A strong sense of belonging emerged as a critical factor in student retention. Students who felt welcomed, recognized, and valued were more likely to remain active in church activities. One participant explained, *“When people know your name and check on you, you feel like you belong.”* Such statements demonstrate that belonging is produced through ordinary but meaningful acts of recognition, welcome, and pastoral attention.

Other students reported feeling unnoticed, especially during their early period of attendance. One participant said, *“I attended for weeks, but no one really reached out to me.”* This lack of connection contributed to emotional distance and reduced motivation to continue attending. The findings support the view that retention is closely tied to integration into relationships, not simply attendance at services.

Theme 3: Mentorship and Discipleship

Mentorship and discipleship were repeatedly identified as important influences on spiritual growth. Students who had mentors reported stronger accountability, guidance during personal challenges, and a deeper commitment to church life. One participant stated, *“Having a mentor helped me stay grounded in my faith.”* These findings are consistent with discipleship literature that emphasizes relational formation and intentional guidance.²⁵

However, participants also noted that mentorship structures were not consistently organized. One participant observed, *“There are mentorship programs, but they are not well organized.”* This suggests that mentorship exists as a valued ministry idea but requires clearer structure, trained mentors, accountability, and regular evaluation if it is to contribute effectively to retention.²⁶

Theme 4: Barriers to Spiritual Growth and Retention

Participants identified academic pressure, weak follow-up, and limited personal connection as major barriers to sustained engagement. Academic workload affected attendance, especially during examination seasons. Students also reported that when they missed church, their absence often went unnoticed. One participant stated, *“If you stop attending, no one really follows up.”* This finding reveals that disengagement may become gradual and invisible when the church lacks systems for early pastoral response.

Some students further indicated that relationships within the church could be superficial. While services and programs were available, the absence of deeper relationships made it difficult for them to feel accountable or personally supported. In such cases, spiritual disengagement was not always the result of rejection of faith; it was often the result of weak relational integration.

Theme 5: Follow-Up Systems

Follow-up systems were found to be inconsistent and largely informal. Participants indicated that there were no sufficiently structured mechanisms for tracking attendance, contacting absent students, integrating newcomers into small groups, or providing sustained pastoral care. Several participants requested regular check-ins, small-group accountability, and personalized communication. One participant remarked, *“If someone checked on me, I would feel encouraged to come back.”* The finding confirms the importance of intentional follow-up for retention.

²⁵Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 67–70.

²⁶Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 89–96.

Theme 6: Suggestions For Improvement

Participants proposed several strategies for improving spiritual growth and retention. These included strengthening mentorship programs, creating smaller relational groups, increasing student involvement in leadership, developing structured follow-up systems, and making programs more interactive and relevant. These suggestions demonstrate that students desire ministry approaches that are participatory, relational, and responsive to their academic and spiritual realities.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the campus church has meaningful spiritual resources, but their effectiveness depends on how students experience them. Worship services, Bible study, prayer bands, and leadership programs are valuable, yet they function best when embedded in a relational culture that recognizes students personally, invites participation, and provides continuing support. Spiritual programs alone are insufficient where students do not experience belonging.²⁷

The study also confirms the importance of social integration in church retention. Students remained more engaged when they were known, mentored, involved, and followed up. This parallels retention theory in higher education, which shows that persistence is strengthened by social and institutional integration.²⁸

Mentorship emerged as one of the most important but underdeveloped areas of campus ministry. Students who had mentors reported stronger faith and accountability, while those without mentors often felt spiritually unsupported. This suggests that mentorship should not be left to informal chance. It should be structured as a ministry pathway with clear mentor selection, training, expectations, and evaluation.

The findings further show that follow-up is a pastoral necessity. Where students can disappear without notice, the church's retention capacity is weakened. A sustainable ministry model should therefore combine spiritual nurture with systematic care, small-group accountability, and responsive communication. Transformational groups, when properly organized, can provide a context for belonging, discipleship, and accountability.²⁹

Proposed Ministry Framework

Based on the findings, this article proposes a holistic ministry framework built around four integrated components: spiritual nurture, relational mentorship, leadership development, and follow-up systems. These components should not operate as separate programs but as coordinated parts of one student retention strategy.

²⁷Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 145–50.

²⁸Tinto, *Leaving College*, 132–35.

²⁹Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 120–25.

Table 5. Proposed Holistic Ministry Framework

Component	Key Practices	Intended Outcome
Spiritual nurture	Worship services, Bible study groups, prayer bands, weeks of spiritual emphasis	Deepened faith, devotion, and biblical understanding
Relational mentorship	One-on-one mentoring, peer discipleship groups, accountability relationships	Personal guidance, belonging, and spiritual maturity
Leadership development	Student participation in planning, ministry teams, leadership training	Ownership, responsibility, and ministry identity
Follow-up systems	Attendance monitoring, personalized communication, small-group care, pastoral visitation	Early response to disengagement and improved retention

The framework moves the campus church from a program-centered model toward an intentional discipleship ecosystem. Such an approach recognizes that spiritual growth is nurtured through repeated practices, meaningful relationships, opportunities for responsibility, and timely pastoral care.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores that sustainable spiritual growth and student retention require more than the presence of programs. They require intentional relationships, structured discipleship, meaningful participation, and consistent follow-up. At Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church, students value worship, Bible study, prayer, and leadership opportunities, but they also desire relational connection, mentorship, and pastoral care that continues beyond scheduled programs.

By centering ministry on students' lived experiences, campus churches can build environments that nurture faith, foster belonging, and sustain long-term commitment. The proposed holistic framework offers a contextual pathway for strengthening campus ministry through spiritual nurture, relational mentorship, leadership development, and structured follow-up systems. Such a model can help university churches move from episodic participation toward enduring discipleship and meaningful church retention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Bugema University Seventh-day Adventist Church

First, the campus church should establish a structured mentorship program that pairs students with trained mentors for ongoing spiritual guidance. Mentor selection should consider spiritual maturity, relational ability, availability, and commitment to student care.

Second, the church should strengthen follow-up mechanisms. A simple but consistent system for tracking attendance, contacting absent students,

welcoming newcomers, and integrating students into small groups would help identify disengagement early.

Third, the church should increase student involvement in leadership. Students should participate in planning and leading worship, Bible study, outreach, prayer ministries, and discipleship groups. Leadership inclusion fosters ownership and strengthens attachment to the church community.

Fourth, spiritual programs should be made more interactive. Sermons, Bible studies, and prayer meetings can include guided discussion, testimony, small-group reflection, and practical application so that students connect faith to university life.

Recommendations for the North Buganda Field

The North Buganda Field should support campus ministry by providing training for church leaders, chaplains, mentors, and student leaders in discipleship, mentorship, youth retention, and pastoral follow-up. It should also develop practical guidelines for student retention in university churches and encourage evaluation of ministry effectiveness.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should examine student spiritual nurture and retention in other university church settings for comparison. Future studies may also explore the impact of digital ministry on student spiritual growth, gendered experiences of spiritual nurture, and the long-term outcomes of mentorship programs in campus ministry.