



BELIEVING BUT NOT PASSING IT ON: WHY CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN EASTERN AFRICA STRUGGLE TO DISCIPLE THEIR CHILDREN AT HOME

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ABSTRACT

Christian parents in Eastern Africa find themselves at a paradoxical position. On one hand they are one of the most individually devout believers globally, yet most of them are unable to translate their devotion into deliberate faith formation within their respective homes. This article examines the gap between private religious practice and intentional parental discipleship among Christian parents across seven Eastern Africa countries: Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It draws on survey data from the OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report (2025), which surveyed 758 Christian parents from the aforementioned Eastern Africa countries. The report reveals that while 69% of parents pray daily, and 75% attend church weekly, only 36% discuss the Bible with their children frequently, and fewer than 10% feel fully equipped to disciple their children at home. The study employs a quantitative survey design, supplemented by interviews with 31 church leaders, to assess the frequency of spiritual practices, perceived barriers and parental confidence in faith transmission. Findings reveal that the primary obstacles are not spiritual indifference but a deficit of practical knowledge and confidence, compounded by an over-reliance on institutional structures such as the church to carry out what is fundamentally a parental responsibility. This article concludes that the most strategic investment Eastern Africa churches and ministries can make in the next generation is the equipping of parents with simple, culturally relevant, and accessible tools for practising faith at home, beyond daily church attendance.

KEY WORDS: faith transmission, parental responsibility, Eastern African Christianity, home-based faith practice, family spiritual formation

INTRODUCTION

The Christian home ideally is meant to be the primary source of religious education, where children are initially socialized to absorb the spiritual habits of their parents before they start attending church or Sunday school classes. In Eastern Africa, where Christianity is deeply embedded into the social fabric, this expectation carries particular weight. Parents are assumed to be natural first teachers of faith.

Yet, recent data from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report (2025)* reveals a complex paradox. While Eastern Africa Christian parents report strong personal devotion through frequent prayers, Bible reading, and church attendance, a significant gap exists when it comes to deliberate and consistently practicing these habits with their children.

This article examines this disconnect. It explores the distance between what Christian parents privately and what they practice with their children, considers what the existing literature says about family faith transmission, and draws on survey data from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report (2025)* to understand the scale and nature of the problem across the Eastern Africa region.

The Problem

Recent research findings from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report* of 2025, which surveyed 758 Christian parents across seven East African countries:

Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda in the months of September and October 2024, revealed devoted Christian parents. These parents demonstrate individual spiritual discipline, with most of the parents (69%) praying daily, and attending church on weekly basis (75%). Furthermore, they consistently read and listen to the Bible. The devoutness of these parents far exceeds that of Bible reading rate (16%) of Christian parents in the United States of America and Western Europe.

Despite parents in Eastern Africa possessing individual spiritual discipline, they are unable to translate their personal spiritual discipline into corporate family habit. Only 44% of parents indicate they read scriptures with their children, 36% discuss the Bible with their children frequently, and 53% pray with their children. Moreover, while family church attendance is notably high (90%), it is passive family routine rather than active, intentional parent-led discipleship.

Christian parents in Eastern Africa felt they were unprepared to transmit their faith to their children. Research findings indicate that 42% are ready but they have not yet started, and 33% revealed that they lack the necessary knowledge required to do so effectively. Fewer parents (6%) expressed confidence in the transmission of their faith to their children. In short, most Christian parents are either stuck on when to start or feeling they are not equal to the task.



This gap does not stem from lack of interest, as 75% of parents reveal learning how to transmit their faith and beliefs to their children as their top priority. While Christian parents are motivated to pass-on their faith and beliefs to their children, what they lack is the knowledge, confidence, and practical framework to translate their desires into actions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenges associated with intergenerational faith transmission is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a problem isolated to Eastern Africa region. Scholars from various academic disciplines, including but not limited to theology, sociology, anthropology, religious education, developmental psychology, family studies, and communication, have long examined how religious faith is either successfully transmitted or fails to be passed on between generations.

Sociologists of religion, Smith and Denton, in his seminal work on adolescent religiosity opined that parents exert the most profound influence on whether their children ultimately embrace or abandon faith (Smith and Denton, 2005), demonstrating that devoted Christian teenagers come from homes where their parents actively and visibly live out their religious convictions. Smith and Denton coined the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) to refer to a passive faith system prevalent among American youth, who inherit religious convictions but do not internalize them. This according to Smith and Denton (2005), is a consequence of homes where faith was assumed and never actively taught or discussed. This MTD-type religion is no longer isolated to the West, it is also observed across Eastern Africa Christian parents, who struggle to actively and consciously transmit their Christian beliefs to their own children. In line with Smith and Denton findings, a study by Norton and Nyanni (2023) examined Nigerian Christian families in London, and found that second-generation youth were less likely to identify as religious if their parents only attended church, but did not actively practice their faith at home through prayers, Bible reading and open discussions which contribute significantly to higher retention rate.

This stress on active engagement aligns with the findings of Vern Bengtson's longitudinal study across United States of America families, which identified warmth, openness, and the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship as the single strongest predictor of successful faith transmission, outperforming church attendance alone. Chris Smith's 2005 research further reinforces this by indicating that intensive, intentional socialisation, particularly spearheaded by mothers who have frequent daily interactions with their children, creates the strongest conducive environment for spiritual continuity. This insight is particularly critical for Eastern Africa parents, who according to *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report* (2025), active in church attendance, but they are unable to transmit their personal spiritual discipline into corporate family habit. The underlying mechanism here is explained by religious socialization theory, developed by Gunroe and Moore (2002), and Boyatzis (2005), posits that children acquire religious belief and practice primarily through observation and participation rather than formal instruction. Children internalize faith as an ordinary part of their lives when they consistently witness their parents praying loud, reading scripture or talk naturally about their faith in the context of daily life.

In addition, Powell et al. (2016) asserts that some Christian parents consistently underestimate their spiritual influence on their children and capacity to disciple their children. They instead, outsource their children formation to their respective church youth ministries. This outsourcing is not driven by indifference, but a feeling of theological inadequacy, as parents do not feel theologically trained or spiritually qualified to lead their children. This reflects the Eastern African context data precisely. One in three Eastern African parents revealed that that they need more knowledge to talk about faith to their children. The barrier is not motivation but confidence. Parents want to lead. They do not know how.

Although, Mbiti in his work, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1962), indicates that Africans are deeply religious people, implying that religion and religious practices are deeply embedded in African lifestyle and culture. The current happenings in Eastern Africa as revealed by data from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report* (2025), appears to contradict his assertion that Africans are "notoriously religious." This is because of apparent disconnect of inter-generation faith transmission by some parents to their children that is currently being witnessed in some Eastern Africa countries.

Conversely, Turaki (2010) argues that some African Christian families frequently integrate inherited communal religious customs with Christian beliefs in ways that can hinder intentional biblical instruction at their homes. Parents may feel their homes are Christian because they attend church, pray before meals, without recognizing these external markers are not the same as deliberate faith formation.

On the other hand, this tension between institutional reliance and parental discipleship is not merely a modern-day discipleship dilemma. It is a departure from a historical Christian theological conception of home as primary source and foundation of faith. In the late classical period, Saint Augustine of Hippo conceives the home as an important 'domestic' church, and parents as 'domestic bishops' (*domesticus episcopus*). He opines that parents have a non-delegable responsibility within their homes to guide, admonish and teach, their children under their care toward divine truth (Augustine, *Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 51.13). In his *Confessions*, Augustine acknowledges the spiritual influence of his mother, Monica towards his faith, and commitment to his Christian life (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 3, Chapter 11, Section 19).

Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* argues that homes are "spiritual wombs" (*uterus spiritualis*) that nurture and shield children until they achieve moral autonomy (Aquinas, II-II, q. 10, a. 12). In Thomistic context, the role of married couples is not only procreation, but also the holistic formation of children including spiritual formation. Following in the footsteps of saints Augustine and Aquinas, Martin Luther, in his *Large Catechesis*, reminds Christian parents of their roles as primary pastors and catechists of their children. He insists that faith can only be sustained if children's spiritual formation is a habitual parental reality at home (Luther, 1529/1959).

In the final analysis, when modern empirical data demonstrates that parents' church attendance alone is insufficient for long-term faith retention, it is simply reaffirming what Augustine, Aquinas and Luther positions on the important role of parents in faith disciple in their respective



homes. It is worth noting that while the local church exists to support Christian parents, but parents have a divine responsibility to transmit their faith into their children.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this article originated from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report* (2025). The study was conducted between September and October 2024 across seven Eastern Africa countries: Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The study participants had to identify as Christian and either have children living with them or hold a spiritual mentorship role.

A total of 758 Christian parents across seven Eastern Africa countries were surveyed, with data collected in person and online. The participants demographics was well distributed, In terms of gender distribution, the participants were evenly split, comprising 51% mothers and 49% fathers. Geographically, just under half of the study participants lived rural areas (47%), while 35% resided in urban centers, and 18% were based in semi-urban locations. The demographic profile was heavily characterized by married individuals, who accounted for 78% married couples, followed by single parents at 13%, and others at 9%. Finally, the age distribution skewed toward the 40-49 age bracket (41%), with age bracket 30-39 making the second largest at 33%. To provide contextual perspective on how churches are engaging parents, a separate survey was conducted with 31 church leaders in Eastern Africa

Methodologically, the study adopted a quantitative survey design with close-ended questions, which were used to evaluate the frequency of spiritual practices, perceived obstacles, resource use, and relational dynamics between parents and children. Where applicable, these contrasted with data from the *OneHope Family matters US Study* (2022) to offer a broader comparative framework.

However, certain limitations with this dataset warrant consideration. This is because self-reported data on religious behaviour, is vulnerable to social desirability bias, a phenomenon where participants may over report the frequency of their spiritual practices. Consequently, the actual gap between personal and family faith practice may be even wider than the figures suggest.

CONCLUSION

The data from the *OneHope Faith Foundations Eastern Africa Report* (2025), reveals a distinct paradox among Eastern African Christian parents, while they are personally devout they are practically hesitant in intentionally disciplining their children at home. This gap between private belief and family practice does not stem from spiritual indifference or skepticism. It is driven by lack of knowledge, a deficit of practical tools, and the assumption reinforced by the institutional structures such as the

church and community religious networks bear the primary responsibility of children's spiritual formation.

Consequently, the strategic trajectory for Eastern African churches and ministry is clear. The most effective investment they can make in the next generation is not in refining the conventional Sunday school curricula, but rather in empowering parents. Churches must focus in empowering parents especially those who feel that they lack necessary knowledge and confidence to disciple at home, with simple, accessible, culturally relevant tools for bringing faith off the church pews into the daily family life. The willingness of parents and receptivity of children present an important opportunity for the transmission of faith and its sustainability across various generations.

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