

The Impact of Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS) Program on Students' Spiritual Formation: A Case of Selected Universities in Kenya

Hornette Digne Gakima^{1*}, John Jusu¹, Alice Mambo¹

¹Department of Education, Africa International University, Kenya

*Corresponding author email: dignehornette2022@gmail.com

Accepted: 27 April 2026 || Published: 06 June 2026

Abstract

This study examined students' perceptions of the impact of the Christian Union (CU) discipleship program on their spiritual formation in Kenyan universities. The purpose was to explore the extent of this impact and to identify specific activities that contribute to students' spiritual development. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, involving final-year students actively participating in CU programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed thematically through coding and categorization, ensuring credibility and ethical compliance. Findings revealed that students perceive the CU discipleship program as highly transformative, fostering spiritual growth, character development, a sense of belonging, and leadership skills. Key practices such as prayer, Bible study, mentorship, fellowship, and service were identified as central to cultivating sustainable spiritual disciplines. These practices were categorized into inward, outward, and corporate disciplines, all of which contribute to long-term spiritual growth and influence beyond campus. The study concludes that CU discipleship programs play a critical role in holistic student formation and in preparing graduates as spiritually grounded and socially responsible leaders. The study recommends that FOCUS expand student engagement by increasing recruitment and offering more accessible programs, strengthening mentorship and peer-discipleship structures, and prioritizing the building of strong, supportive Christian communities. Additionally, stakeholders should enhance support for CU initiatives to sustain their long-term impact.

Keywords: *Christian Union, FOCUS, discipleship, spiritual formation, university students, mentorship*

How to Cite: Gakima, H. D., Jusu, J., & Mambo, A. (2026). The Impact of Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS) Program on Students' Spiritual Formation: A Case of Selected Universities in Kenya. *Journal of Education*, 6(4), 1-15.

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning were long believed to be places hostile to faith and spirituality. University education was associated with secularism and skepticism (Guest et al., 2013). However, scholarship on students' spirituality has shown that spirituality does matter among university students. College years are critical for young people on a spiritual quest, seeking purpose and meaning (Astin et al., 2010). A multiyear study on spirituality in higher education has shown that religious and spiritual issues are important to students and proposed that higher education should also focus on student spiritual development because "spirituality is essential to students' lives" (Astin et al., 2010). However, there are still many questions about what this

interest in spirituality entails and the extent to which students are growing in their spirituality (Setran, 2013; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Rasor, 2018).

In Kenya, public universities are secular. But they are not left without religious and spiritual activities. The rise of secularism in colleges and universities has created an opportunity for campus ministry organizations to step in and cater to students' spiritual needs (Akaranga, 2013). All Kenyan public universities allow these Christian student organizations, clubs, and groups to work among students and attend to their spiritual needs. One of the most prominent student Christian organizations in universities and colleges is Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS), which has the motto *Reaching Students, Changing Nations*.

FOCUS's mission is to reach students and promote fruitful Christian living. Discipleship is one of the strategic priorities to achieve it (Focus Strategic Plan, 2021-2025, n.d.). Nonetheless, empirical data on FOCUS's effectiveness in achieving this mission through discipleship are unavailable, particularly regarding students' perceptions of its impact. There is an expectation that students involved in Christian Unions affiliated with FOCUS would experience growth and transformation in their spiritual life and not merely in their religiosity. The latter can be defined as an outward performance of rules and rituals, or participation in religious activities, whereas the former involves the inner life of a person and is expressed through godliness and perceived intimacy with God (Akaranga, 2013).

Students who join public universities in Kenya come from different religious backgrounds, typically following their parents' or family's religion. When they join as freshmen, they may be recruited into different religious clubs on campus. Akaranga posited that these students are now likely to be exposed to preachers with higher qualifications than those they might be familiar with in high school or in their home area. Furthermore, the intellectual and introductory challenges during lectures can lead students to question their original beliefs, leading to new insights about religion (Akaranga, 2013). This observation raises the question of how students who join a FOCUS-affiliated Christian Union on campus are challenged in their basic beliefs and how they are helped to understand what they believe as Christians on matters of doctrine, thereby becoming biblically grounded and spiritually nurtured.

Moreover, universities are places where modern and postmodern ideologies converge with cultures and behaviors contrary to Christian ethics. The question of how Christian Unions help students navigate all that cultural mixture and grow towards a Christian culture and ethic is likewise important.

Hence, a study on the impact of FOCUS is timely since it is now represented in almost all public and private universities and colleges in Kenya. The movement is made up of 151 Christian Unions on private and public campuses. It ministers to over 45,000 students who are members of Christian Unions. Every year, FOCUS releases thousands of graduates (estimated at 7,000) who are expected to go and impact the marketplace, the Church, and the wider society (Focus Strategic Plan 2021-2025, n.d.).

1.1 Problem Statement

The establishment of Christian Unions in higher education institutions is a widespread practice across Africa and beyond, with the primary objective of nurturing students' spirituality and preparing them for the transformation of both their personal lives and society after graduation. However, as soon as students arrive on campus, they encounter many positive and negative influences that challenge their original beliefs. FOCUS aims to significantly influence students through Christian Unions. Therefore, the question arises about the impact of Christian Union

activities in higher education institutions on students' lives. There is insufficient empirical evidence to assess the effectiveness of Christian Unions under FOCUS in achieving their stated mission of changing students' lives. Without a proper understanding and pursuit of this impact, Christian Unions will find it difficult to attain their goal of instilling a Christian life in students beyond campus.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To explore the students' perceptions of the impact of the discipleship program on their spiritual formation and transformation.
- ii. To discover activities and practices of the Christian Union discipleship program that the students believe have contributed to their spiritual development.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. To what extent do students perceive the Christian Union discipleship program to have aided them in their formation and transformation during their time on campus?
- ii. What specific activities and practices of the Christian Union discipleship program do students believe have contributed to their spiritual development?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in Fowler's Stages of Faith, which posits that spiritual development progresses through a series of sequential, hierarchical stages influenced by cognitive, moral, and psychosocial growth (Anthony, 2001). University students are typically situated within the synthetic-conventional and individuative-reflective stages, where they begin to critically examine, personalize, and take ownership of their beliefs. This makes Christian Union (CU) contexts particularly influential, as peer interactions, mentorship, and communal engagement significantly shape students' faith formation and spiritual growth during this transitional phase.

In addition, Gregory's theory of perception (top-down processing) explains that individuals interpret experiences based on prior knowledge, expectations, and contextual factors (Démuth, 2013). Consequently, students' perceptions of the CU discipleship program are shaped by their previous spiritual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal motivations. Positive prior experiences may enhance their receptivity to the program, while negative ones may lead to skepticism. Thus, the perceived impact of the CU program on spiritual development depends not only on its structure and activities but also on how well these align with students' expectations and lived experiences.

2.2 Understanding Christian Spiritual Formation

Dallas Willard distinguishes between spiritual formation and Christian spiritual formation. He explains that spiritual formation is a universal human reality because every person's inner life is continuously being shaped by experiences, relationships, beliefs, values, and surrounding influences. According to Willard, "the most despicable as well as the most admirable of people have had a spiritual formation" (Willard, 2014, p. 19). In this sense, spiritual formation refers to the process by which the human spirit, or inner self, develops a particular character and way of life, whether positive or negative. Willard further describes the spiritual aspect of human beings as the "nonphysical" or the "inner world," from which worldview, attitudes, choices, and actions emerge (Willard, 2014, p. 20).

In contrast, Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional shaping of a person's inner life toward conformity to the character and will of God through a relationship with Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Unlike general spiritual formation, which may be influenced by any worldview or life experience, Christian spiritual formation is grounded in biblical teachings and seeks to cultivate Christ-likeness in attitudes, values, choices, and actions. Willard emphasizes that "fortunate or blessed are those who are able to find or are given a path of life that will form their spirit and inner world in a way that is truly strong and Godward" (Willard, 2014, p. 20). This distinction is important because while all people undergo spiritual formation, not all formation leads toward godliness or alignment with God's purposes. The Bible, therefore, stresses the importance of guarding the heart: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23, ESV).

This distinction is particularly relevant to Christian Union discipleship programs in universities. Students are constantly shaped by various influences during campus life, including peers, social media, academic environments, and cultural ideologies. Participation in Christian Union activities provides opportunities for intentional Christian spiritual formation through Bible teaching, mentorship, fellowship, prayer, and discipleship programs. These activities seek to nurture students toward spiritual maturity and Christ-like living. However, if students fail to intentionally engage in such formative practices, the freedom and exposure associated with university life may instead shape them in ways that are contrary to Christian values and principles.

2.3 The Role of Christian Unions in the Spiritual Formation of Students

The primary strategic priority of FOCUS Kenya is discipleship. The discipleship program seeks to deepen and strengthen students' spiritual lives while equipping them to live Christ-like lives during and after their time on campus through service and witness in various spheres of society (FOCUS Kenya, 2021, p. 31). To achieve this goal, FOCUS supports students' spiritual formation through a variety of discipleship activities and programs. During its golden jubilee celebrations, FOCUS published a book titled *The Mustard*, which documents stories of the ministry's impact over the years. In the book, the organization compares its ministry to a mustard seed that was initially small but has grown significantly over time. The publication traces the origins and development of FOCUS, reflects on its achievements, and projects its future commitment to God's mission. In reflecting on its impact, FOCUS asserts that Christian Unions have served as catalysts for authentic spiritual formation among students. This claim is grounded on several factors. First, Christian Unions are interdenominational or non-denominational in nature while sharing common doctrinal beliefs. Second, the ministry philosophy of FOCUS emphasizes a student-led approach in which students are trained, mentored, and empowered to minister to their peers. Third, programs such as the Bible Exposition Self-Training Program, midweek fellowships, Sunday services, and transition programs for finalist students have played a significant role in nurturing students spiritually (FOCUS Staff & Associates, 2023, p. 237).

In its 2021–2025 Strategic Plan, FOCUS recognizes the changing context and emerging trends affecting discipleship efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the organization to adopt virtual meetings and alternative discipleship approaches, many of which are still used today. The internet has increasingly become both a platform for meetings and discussions and a source of discipleship materials. However, this expanded digital access also presents challenges, including exposure to competing worldviews on issues such as sexuality, gender, relationships, morality, and ethics, which often challenge Christian perspectives and discipleship efforts.

Additionally, FOCUS discipleship initiatives face challenges associated with the growing number of younger university students, many of whom are non-resident and come from dysfunctional family backgrounds. It is within this dynamic context that FOCUS seeks to nurture students toward Christ-likeness (FOCUS Kenya, 2021).

Following an analysis of its contemporary context and prevailing challenges, FOCUS identified several key result areas in its strategic plan. These include fostering deep prayer commitment among associates and students; strengthening students' ability to engage with and apply biblical teachings in daily life; cultivating a Christian worldview capable of addressing emerging societal issues through critical thinking and biblical application; equipping students with essential personal and professional life skills; mentoring and nurturing new believers and Christian Union members toward spiritual maturity; and encouraging alumni participation in mentoring students through discipleship programs (FOCUS Kenya, 2021). Given the dynamic nature of student ministry and the evolving social context, there is a continued need for learning, adaptation, and regular evaluation of discipleship programs to assess their effectiveness and impact on students' spiritual formation.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore students' perceptions of the impact of the Christian Union discipleship program on their spiritual formation and transformation. The study was conducted among final-year students actively involved in Christian Union activities at the University of Nairobi, Kikuyu Campus, and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Approximately 35 finalist students formed the target population, and convenience sampling was used to select participants who were available and willing to participate. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely share their experiences and perceptions regarding their spiritual development through Christian Union activities.

To ensure credibility and dependability, the interview guide was refined through pilot interviews conducted at the Africa International University Christian Union and feedback from supervisors and colleagues. Interviews lasted approximately 5–7 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent, while field notes captured additional observations and insights. Data collection was conducted over a period of one week and four days. After collection, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, cleaned, and organized for analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to familiarize herself with the data, after which she coded and grouped meaningful statements into categories and themes. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the study objectives and relevant literature. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study, including obtaining approval from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), securing informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and respectful treatment of all participants.

4. Findings

4.1 RQ1. To what extent do students perceive the Christian Union discipleship program to have aided them in their formation and transformation during their time on campus?

In response to RQ1, participants indicated that involvement in the Christian Union (CU) discipleship program contributed significantly to their spiritual formation, personal transformation, leadership development, and social relationships. Many respondents described the CU as a supportive spiritual family that nurtured their faith, strengthened their commitment to God, and shaped their character through fellowship, mentorship, leadership opportunities, and Bible study activities.

Several respondents highlighted spiritual growth and transformation as major outcomes of their participation in the CU. For instance, Respondent R17 explained that the CU contributed to spiritual maturity, purposeful living, leadership development, and a deeper understanding that service should be directed to God rather than human approval. Similarly, Respondent R19 described the CU as a home that transformed his character, strengthened his integrity, improved his stewardship, and enhanced his prayer life and interpersonal relationships. Respondent R11 also reported spiritual growth, accountability in devotion, and the development of values such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility through fellowship with other believers.

Other respondents emphasized the role of mentorship, discipleship training, and Christian fellowship in shaping their lives. Respondent R15 noted that mentorship, leadership training, and consistent Bible study helped him grow spiritually and develop peaceful, godly relationships with others. Respondent R3 explained that the discipleship program helped cultivate contentment, positive character change, and healthy perspectives toward life challenges. Respondents R5, R8, and R9 similarly reported that participation in fellowships, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and leadership opportunities strengthened their devotion to God, enhanced personal discipline, and encouraged Christ-centered living and service to others.

Through open coding, the data was broken down into the following discrete parts and assigned the following codes:

Table 1: Open coding

Codes	Extract of Responses
Spiritual Growth	I have learned a lot, really. I have grown spiritually. (R11) It became a place where my faith was refined, and my understanding of God's word deepened. (R5) I have built that consistency in the study of the word so that I can grow increasingly. R15)
Emotional Satisfaction	Generally, I can say it has been one of the most awesome experiences of my life. (R17)
Identity Formation	I can say that I am not the same person right now as I was when I came to this institution. (R19)
Character Development	I have been able to be more committed and more purposeful in whatever I am doing. I have just not been doing something because of it. I have come to know that, indeed, we are doing this for God. (R17) Over time, I have changed; I have become more patient,

	<p>responsible, and committed to serving others. (R9)</p> <p>My life has greatly changed after being involved in a discipleship program, and my character as a person has been positively impacted.</p> <p>I used to envy non-believers for spending money lavishly... I have learned how to be content with whatever I have and to wait upon the Lord. (R3)</p>
Belonging	The Christian Union has been home for me. (R11)
Community Life	<p>Through fellowships with my brothers and sisters, I have learned how to interact with people and how to share and how to support each other under the importance of staying together and the importance of teamwork, cooperation, and communion. (R19)</p> <p>It provided a community of believers who not only encouraged me spiritually but also challenged me to grow deeper in my relationship with God. (R5)</p>
Social Skills	It has impacted me with different views of how to live with different kinds of people in the university and, more importantly, how to interact with them in my day-to-day activities outside the institution. (R3)
Mentorship	I have been mentored. I have met good people who have held my hands to this point, where I am almost leaving campus. (R15)
Accountability	For accountability, I have had a good accountability partner with whom we constantly check how far we are reading the word, and what we have learned. We also check in with each other on how far we are getting with our devotions. And we also check on each other to attend fellowships; this helps spiritually and even socially. (R11)
Leadership Opportunities	I have had opportunities to serve in different leadership positions within the executive, within the dockets, in many places, and generally in service. (R19)
Leadership Skills	I have also learned leadership skills, which have been acquired through serving at various levels in CU and attending training. (R8)
Skills and Values	I have incorporated new skills and values, such as integrity, honesty, and accountability. (R11)
Transformation Journey	Being involved in the Christian Union has been one of the most transformative parts of my university journey. (R5)

Following the open coding process, the researcher applied axial coding to link open codes to form broader themes. Four broader themes emerged from the open coding.

Spiritual Growth and Identity Formation

Students have experienced discipleship as a journey of personal transformation and increased growth. Their spiritual life has been greatly impacted, their faith has been deepened, and their consistency in studying the word and knowing about God has been remarkable. More importantly, there have been character transformations among the students in terms of character development, transformational journey, and skills and values.

The change in character has been reported many times to result from involvement in the discipleship program. Many Christian values and qualities, such as integrity, responsibility, accountability, love, cooperation, contentment, forgiveness, and peace, were mentioned. Students affirmed that they now possess those qualities. When it comes to aspects of community belonging and relational growth, students tend to have positive experiences in community life, including emotional satisfaction, mentorship, and a sense of accountability.

Basically, all participants said that the CU has been a great place to be and that their experience has been good and amazing. The CU has provided students with a place where they formed meaningful relationships that carried them through campus life and impacted them in many ways. A positive emotional experience was attached to those relationships because many reported that their experience in the Christian union was amazing, great, transformative, and impactful, and they explained that it was because of the relationships they were able to build and the friendships they gained, which brought a sense of belonging. They felt at home; they were supported, encouraged, and challenged through accountability and mentorship relationships. Also, being part of the CU has remarkably improved their leadership skills, leadership opportunities, and social skills.

The discipleship program has equipped students with skills to navigate life on campus, relate with others, and handle leadership responsibilities. Retreats and conferences have addressed important areas of life, including managing finances, relationships, life on campus, and life beyond campus. The researcher attended a Vuka fit activity on marriage and Christian dating, which was interactive and engaging. She also attended one online session, Vuka Fit, that guided students in preparing to leave campus, introduced them to job-hunting tips, and urged them to trust God for their future. The leadership skills were developed through service opportunities and leadership training that empowered them to lead ministry among themselves.

4.2 For the RQ2. What specific activities and practices of the Christian Union discipleship program do students believe have contributed to their spiritual development?

In response to RQ2, participants identified several Christian Union (CU) activities and practices that significantly contributed to their spiritual development. The most frequently mentioned activities included discipleship classes, Bible study and Consistent Bible Reading (CBR), prayer meetings, mentorship programs, accountability partnerships, fellowships, leadership opportunities, missions and outreaches, retreats, and service within different ministry docket. Respondents indicated that these activities strengthened their relationship with God, cultivated Christian discipline, developed leadership skills, and promoted spiritual maturity.

Several respondents emphasized the importance of discipleship programs, Bible reading, and prayer in shaping their spiritual lives. Respondent R5 noted that discipleship sessions, outreaches, and early morning devotions strengthened accountability, boldness in evangelism, humility, and servant leadership. Similarly, Respondent R7 explained that prayer and Bible reading played a central role in strengthening faith and resilience during challenges.

Respondent R17 highlighted the impact of Consistent Bible Reading (CBR), daily prayer, small group fellowships such as Anza Fit and Vuka Fit, leadership experiences, and participation in missions, all of which contributed to spiritual growth and confidence in sharing the gospel. Respondent R10 also reported that discipleship classes and fellowship groups helped shape spiritual growth, interpersonal relationships, and openness in seeking support during personal struggles.

Other respondents pointed to mentorship, accountability relationships, retreats, and fellowship as important contributors to their spiritual development. Respondents R10 and R11 explained that accountability partners encouraged consistency in Bible study, devotion, and attendance at fellowship while also providing social and spiritual support. Respondent R8 described CU retreats as opportunities for interaction, confidence building, and learning to view life from a godly perspective. Additionally, Respondents R5 and R16 emphasized the value of mentorship programs and associate meetings, in which experienced Christian mentors shared testimonies, guidance, and encouragement to help students navigate challenges and grow spiritually. Overall, the findings suggest that the CU discipleship program provided both spiritual and relational support systems that positively shaped students' faith and personal development.

In Table 2, the different activities students mentioned are presented, along with how many times each activity was cited, indicating its impact on many students.

Table 2: Presentation of the activities and the number of students who cited those activities as impactful

Activities	Number of respondents	Students' responses
Bible Studies	15	Bible study groups where we met with fellow brethren in small groups and studied the word on Tuesdays and, on Thursdays and Fridays too, were very important to me. (R11) My devotion has really changed since I learned to study the Bible by myself. (R12)
Prayers/Devotions	16	I have learned prayers because there is a morning devotion I pray every day. And then there are prayers during weekdays. So, I have grown in prayer. (R12)
Anza Fit/Vuka Fit/Endelea /Year Fellowships	7	Anza Fit and now the Vuka Fit have helped me shape my all-around life on how to grow spiritually, how to communicate with people, and how to interact with them freely. (R10)
Missions Outreach/Evangelism	7	Missions gives you a different exposure and being able to go to different parts of this country, different counties, just to do missions to share the gospel, to share my faith. And this has helped me to express myself so well. (R17)
Events: Retreats, Overnight Prayer Meetings (Keshas)	4	CU Retreats where we were able to interact and know one another better and see and approach life from different perspectives in line with the will of God. (R8)

Mentorships /Accountability Partnerships	16	The practice that I have learned is that it is good to fellowship with brethren, and it is good to be open to your fellow believers so that even when you are struggling, you will not struggle alone. They will be there to help you grow, to help you cope with the challenges, and show you ways in which you can handle the challenges in a godly way. (R10) Some of the activities that have significantly impacted my walk with God are the mentorships. (R16)
Consistent Bible Reading	15	I have learned to do CBR, which is Consistent Bible Reading. Daily Bible reading, where I read from Genesis to Revelation, was so helpful. (R17)
Sunday Services	8	CU Sunday services that gave a room for the word to be broken down for easy understanding. (R8)
Bible Exposition (BEST P)	1	Best P is an expository Bible self-training program. So, I have gone through hermeneutics to understand how to place the Bible in the correct context and interpret it correctly.
Leadership and Leadership Trainings	4	The most impactful activities I have had were, first, leadership. Being a leader has helped me become more selfless, look beyond myself, and now serve others. (R17) Being a leader, as I said, I had to go through different programs and training sessions that have shaped me to know how to live well with people and to understand that I am a letter that is to be read. (R15)
Dockets: Choir/ Ushering	4	Second, it is also serving in the docket. I served in the ushering docket, and I gained more courage among the ushers, directing people to the church. Also, I have been able to learn new skills. (R17) Ushering has impacted me because I find it pleasing to do God's work, and there is always a sense of calm that comes with serving God. (R14)

Bible studies, devotional prayers, fellowships, mentorships, and accountability partnerships were cited repeatedly as the most impactful activities. Table 2 served as open coding. The activities and the number of times that are cited serve here as codes. The researcher did not see the need to label them and code them.

For the axial coding, the researcher grouped these activities into three categories, forming three broad themes. The first one is the Inward disciplines. It encompasses activities such as Bible studies, devotional prayers, Consistent Bible Reading (CBR), and BEST P.

Engaging with scriptures through regular, consistent, and various activities like weekly Bible studies (small groups discussions), Consistent Bible Reading (CBR), Bible expositions (systematic exposition of the books of the Bible), and Sermons has equipped students with not only the skills to handle the Bible but also with the spiritual discipline of regular reading, studying, meditating, and applying God's word.

Through structured prayer sessions from early morning prayers, lunch hour prayers, students have learned to have ample time devoted to God in quiet time and prayer, and have developed the spiritual discipline of daily devotion and dependence on God in prayer.

The second theme is the outward disciplines. It involves missions, evangelism, leadership roles, and docket. The CU provided services and leadership opportunities through which students have learned the Christian quality of service and the servant leadership style. Almost all students have had an opportunity to lead and serve in one of the activities. Missions and evangelism are also opportunities to share their faith and life with other students outside the CU and in other communities where they get to reach out. These outward disciplines have helped students become confident in their faith, bold, and grow as they lead and serve different people and face various challenges.

The third theme is corporate disciplines. It entails Sunday services, worship, fellowships (Anza Fit, Vuka Fit), events such as retreats, mentorships, and accountability. Students have developed the Christian value of community, which is doing life together. They have learned it through worshipping together, striving to learn God's word, and praying together, while encouraging one another through accountability groups and mentoring relationships. Students have developed resilience and consistency in their practice and growth in these disciplines, and have achieved spiritual heights.

5. Discussion

5.1 In view of the theoretical framework

This study investigated students' perceptions of the impact of the Christian Union (CU) discipleship program on their spiritual formation. The findings can be understood in light of Richard Gregory's theory of perception, which explains perception as a constructive process shaped by prior knowledge, expectations, emotions, motivations, goals, and contextual experiences (Gregory, 1970). In this study, students' perceptions of the CU discipleship program were shaped by their lived experiences within the Christian Union community and by the personal outcomes they associated with their participation. Many participants described the CU experience as transformative, supportive, and spiritually enriching. Students reported experiencing spiritual growth, a deeper understanding of God, improved character, leadership development, accountability, and stronger interpersonal relationships. One participant stated that "the CU became a place where my faith was refined, and my understanding of God's word deepened," while another reported that "without the CU I would not be the person I am today." These findings suggest that students interpreted their spiritual formation positively due to the meaningful experiences and perceived changes associated with their involvement in the discipleship program.

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on Christian discipleship and spiritual formation among university students. Studies by James K. A. Smith (2009) and Dallas Willard (2014) emphasize that spiritual formation occurs through intentional practices, habits, relationships, and participation in faith communities that shape beliefs, character, and behavior toward Christ-likeness. Similarly, Astin et al. (2010) found that participation in religious communities and spiritual activities within higher education contributes positively to students' spiritual growth, sense of purpose, moral development, and emotional well-being. The findings also align with Tinto's (1993) research, which highlights the importance of supportive communities and peer relationships in fostering students' personal development and persistence within university environments. The current study, therefore, supports previous research showing that faith-based student communities and discipleship programs contribute significantly to students' spiritual and personal transformation.

The findings can further be interpreted through James W. Fowler's stages of faith development (Anthony, 2001). Fowler explains that individuals in Stage 3, known as synthetic-conventional faith, are strongly influenced by peers, faith communities, and significant relationships in shaping their beliefs and identity. Many participants in this study appeared to reflect characteristics of this stage, as they emphasized the importance of fellowship, accountability groups, mentorship, and encouragement from fellow believers in strengthening their faith. One participant stated, "I felt welcomed into a community that genuinely sought to grow in Christ," while another explained that the CU provided "a community of believers who not only encouraged me spiritually but also challenged me to grow deeper in my relationship with God." These findings suggest that the CU community played an important role in nurturing students' faith during a critical developmental stage.

The study also revealed evidence of Fowler's Stage 4, individuated-reflective faith, in which individuals begin to personally examine, internalize, and take ownership of their beliefs. Some participants demonstrated personal conviction and confidence in their faith, rather than relying on the community. For example, one participant explained that participation in the discipleship program enabled him to share the gospel with confidence because he now understood both what he believed and why. This indicates movement toward a more reflective and personally owned faith. The findings therefore suggest that the CU discipleship program contributed to students' spiritual formation by providing a supportive environment, intentional discipleship activities, mentorship, and opportunities for leadership and personal reflection, thereby nurturing faith development and spiritual maturity.

5.2 In view of Broader Literature

In response to RQ1, which sought to establish the extent to which students perceived the Christian Union (CU) discipleship program to have aided their spiritual formation and transformation during their campus years, this study found that participants reported significant spiritual and personal transformation through involvement in the CU. Students reported growth in their relationship with God, character transformation, improved interpersonal relationships, development of leadership skills, and a stronger sense of identity and purpose. Many participants stated that they were no longer the same after joining the CU, describing their experience as spiritually enriching and transformative. These findings support Dallas Willard's argument that individuals are shaped by the experiences, relationships, and influences to which they are consistently exposed (Willard, 2014). The students' sustained engagement in Bible study, prayer, fellowship, mentorship, and discipleship activities throughout their university

years appears to have significantly contributed to their spiritual growth and character formation.

The findings also align with Evan B. Howard's description of Christian spiritual formation as a process of reorienting and rehabilitating the inner life (Howard, 2008). The CU discipleship program appears to have facilitated such reorientation by encouraging students toward Christ-centered living and the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines, including prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and accountability. Participants reported learning values such as patience, forgiveness, accountability, integrity, and Christian love through their interactions within the CU community. These findings are further supported by Smith (2009), who argues that repeated spiritual practices and communal worship shape individuals' desires, habits, and character over time. Similarly, Reed (2011) explains that Christian spiritual formation seeks not only individual transformation but also the manifestation of God's kingdom through Christian community, fellowship, and mission. The findings of this study reflect this perspective, as participants described the CU as a supportive faith community that nurtured spiritual maturity while encouraging evangelism, service, and communal growth.

In response to RQ2, participants identified several discipleship activities and practices that contributed to their spiritual development. These included regular prayer meetings, Bible study sessions, Consistent Bible Reading (CBR) plans, fellowships, mentorship programs, retreats, missions, leadership opportunities, and structured discipleship programs such as Anza Fit, Endelea Fit, and Vuka Fit. Students perceived these activities as important in strengthening their faith, deepening their understanding of Scripture, cultivating discipline, and equipping them to navigate life challenges in a godly manner. These findings support Lawrenz's (2000) argument that spiritual formation occurs through the intentional and continuous practice of spiritual disciplines and formative activities. According to Lawrenz, the repeated practice of such disciplines renews the mind, transforms conduct, and shapes Christian character over time. The present study confirms this view, as students associated their spiritual growth, moral transformation, and development of virtues such as love, patience, self-control, and commitment to God with their regular participation in these discipleship practices and communal spiritual activities.

6. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the Christian Union (CU) discipleship program plays a significant and transformative role in students' holistic development, particularly in their spiritual formation. Students perceive the program not only as a platform for deepening their relationship with God but also as a nurturing environment that fosters meaningful social connections, character development, and the acquisition of essential life and leadership skills. The integration of spiritual, social, and personal growth underscores the program's effectiveness as a core driver of both formation and transformation during students' university experience.

Furthermore, structured discipleship practices, such as prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and service, are critical to cultivating sustainable spiritual disciplines that extend beyond campus life. These practices equip students with enduring habits that support continuous spiritual growth and inspire a ripple effect in which program beneficiaries intentionally mentor and disciple others. Overall, the CU discipleship program is perceived as having a lasting and impactful influence, shaping not only students' present spiritual lives but also their future roles as leaders, mentors, and agents of positive change.

7. Recommendations

The findings indicate that although students who actively participate in the Christian Union (CU) perceive it as highly impactful for their spiritual, social, and personal development, its membership remains relatively small compared to the wider student population. Therefore, FOCUS should prioritize strategies to increase student recruitment and active participation in CU programs. Expanding outreach efforts and making discipleship programs more accessible and appealing to a broader range of students will be essential in amplifying the program's overall impact.

Additionally, FOCUS should strengthen mentorship structures and peer-based engagement, as these were identified as key factors in attracting and retaining students. Intentional cultivation of small groups, accountability partnerships, and student-led mentoring can enhance commitment and continuity in discipleship. Emphasis should also be placed on building strong, supportive Christian communities characterized by love, shared worship, and collective spiritual growth, as this was found to be central to sustained transformation.

Finally, university leadership, parents, CU patrons, and other stakeholders should continue to support CU activities and, where possible, increase their support. The study clearly demonstrates that CU programs play a vital role in shaping spiritually grounded, ethically responsible, and socially impactful individuals. Sustained investment in these initiatives will not only benefit students during their university years but will also contribute to the development of principled leaders capable of driving positive change in society.

References

- Akaranga, D. S. I. (2013). The Dynamics of Religiosity and Spirituality in Kenyan Public Universities. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(6).
- Anthony, M. J. (2001). *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century*. Baker Academic.
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2010). A National Study of Spirituality in Higher Education: Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose. *Spirituality in Higher Education*.
- Démuth, A. (2013). *Perception Theories*. Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310832124_Perception_Theories
- FOCUS KENYA. (2021). *Focus Strategic Plan 2021-2025*. <https://www.focuskenya.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/>
- FOCUS Staff and Associates. (2023). *The Mustard: How Students Reach Students and Transform Nations*. Published by FOCUS.
- FOCUS STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2025. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2024, from <https://www.focuskenya.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/RevisedSPFullVersion.pdf>
- Gregory, R. L. (1970). *The Intelligent Eye*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Guest, M., Aune, K., Sharma, S., & Warner, R. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Howard, E. B. (2008). *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. Baker Publishing Group.

- Lawrenz, M. (2000). *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation (Ministry Dynamics for a New Century)*. Baker Books.
- Mayrl, D., & Oeur, F. (2009). Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(2), 260-275.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446.x>
- Rasor, R. M. (2018). Assessing the Impact of Student Involvement in Campus Ministry on Retention and Academic Success: A Mixed Method Study. *Boyce Digital Repository*. 08kkmoklmk
- Reed, A. H (2011). *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Setran, D. P. (2013). *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry*. Baker Academic.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Baker Publishing Group.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Willard, D. (2014). *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Tyndale House.