A REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA: A CASE STUDY OF ATONSU DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES OF GOD, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent times, the role of the church has been expanding from purely spiritual and moral survival concerns of their members to include components which foster the healthy psychological and social development of children. However, many Christian children of today are standing at crossroad, facing challenges including teenage pregnancy, child malnutrition, juvenile delinquency in their total development. **Objective:** The objective of this study was to examine, in details, the concept of child development from the perspectives of psychology and theology and to find out how the Atonsu District Assemblies of God Church, as an agent of child development, is carrying out her duties in that direction. **Methodology:** The study adopted qualitative research approach and data was collected from 50 purposively selected respondents using questionnaire, interviews and observation. **Data Analysis:** Data gathered were analysed using thematic content analysis. **Results:** The results of the study revealed that the church and child development are two inseparable entities. The holistic development of the child must take into consideration habits of his caregivers; and the role of the church as an agent of child development cannot be ignored. **Conclusion:** The Assemblies of God Church as a dynamic community with considerable human and financial resources can effectively carry out a critically needed ministry to children. A community focused on children's ministry with a sense of urgency and permanent commitment, supported by appropriate structures and programs, and above all supervised and guided by inspired and trained leaders and personnel, will not only bring about essential benefits in the holistic development of the children but will also beckon the Church to a more secure future in the fulfilment of its mission. **Recommendation:** The Assemblies of God Church has a mandate to focus on the priority of children's ministry through the development and implementation of effective programs, coordinated by the Regional children's Department. Therefore, the leadership of the Assemblies of God Church in the District under study should make it a point to develop and expand qualified Church personnel engaged in child development at all levels. Correspondingly, professional teachers and child development facilitators must be connected to the appropriate Seminary or Theological institution which should serve as the highest centre for research, publications, and training pertaining to child development and children's ministry.

Keywords: Assembly of God Church, Role, Child Development, Atonsu District, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Child development refers to the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy (Kail, 2011). Because these developmental changes may be strongly influenced by genetic factors and events during prenatal life, genetics and prenatal development are usually included as part of the study of child development (Kail, 2011). The

development typically occurs naturally through exposure to helpful stimulus, repeated opportunity to practice the same things to facilitate learning and a wide range of life experiences. As such, child development generally occurs naturally without much conscious thought on the part of the parents (http/www.)

Related terms in the study of child development include <u>developmental psychology</u>, referring to development throughout the lifespan, and <u>pediatrics</u>, the branch of medicine relating to the care of children. Developmental changes, according to Kail, may occur as a result of genetically-controlled processes known as maturation, or as a result of environmental factors and learning, but most commonly involves an interaction between the two. It may also occur as a result of human nature and our ability to learn from our environment. Human beings have a keen sense to adapt to their surroundings and this is what child development encompasses (Kail, 2011).

Child development is not the same as growth. As growth is described as changes in size, development is characterized by changes in complexity of function. Child development encompasses the unfolding behaviour from immaturity, patterns of behavior that expand from simple to complex and the evolution of a child from dependency to autonomous adulthood. Additionally, child development is a process of change in which the child learns to handle more complex levels of moving, thinking, feeling and interacting with people and objects in the environment (Kail, 2011). Therefore, the optimal development of children is considered vital to society and so it is important to understand and appreciate the roles played by all the agents in the child developmental process.

Some of the agents in the early development of the child include the family, the school, peers, and the child's religious affiliation. Most children are inducted into Christianity by virtue of their parents' affiliation. This admission makes the church a vital agent in the development of the child. Osborn (2004) defines a church as a physical structure where people gather to worship, learn and to have fellowship with others who believe in Jesus Christ. In another sense, a church, according the above authors, could be a spiritual community of all people who believe in Jesus Christ. In its primary sense it means a visible, local congregation, or an organized company of disciples meeting at a given place and for a given purpose. Therefore, a Church is a congregation of baptized believers united by covenant to carry into effect the will of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church has a mandate, among other things, to ensure the total development of their members including the children. The church, as an agent of child development plays a vital role, in conjunction with other stakeholders, not only in the spiritual and moral aspects of the child's development, but also see to the social, educational and psychological status of the child through its (the church's) peripheral functions. Therefore, an effective faith-based children's ministry program requires an understanding and recognition of children's growth, development, needs and cognitive abilities.

Many Christian children of today are standing at crossroad, facing some challenges in their total development. There is the prevalence of teenage pregnancy, child malnutrition, juvenile delinquency and other developmental challenges grappling the lives of children in the Ghanaian communities. In the face of these challenges, there are resources both in the Bible and the Ghanaian traditional value systems that could be explored for the benefit of the child's wellbeing which Christians and Christian institutions can apply to meet the current global child

developmental challenges. There is the need for the church to explore these resources and also to uncover these challenges and develop strategies to respond to them.

On the ground, it appears the Assemblies of God, Ghana is helping in this direction by setting up children ministries in all the branches. However, it is obvious that the mere setting up of children's ministry without the requisite resources is not enough to ensure holistic child development. Is the Assemblies of God Ghana in the Atonsu District of Kumasi doing enough to stem the tide of the challenges facing the children in their locals through the children's ministry? It is in the light of finding answers to these and many other related questions that prompted a critical reflection on the role of the church in child development in Ghana, using the Atonsu District of the Assemblies of God Church as a case study.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Theoretical Foundation of the Study
First, we consider the concept of child development. According to Kail (2011), child development refers to the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy. Because these developmental changes are strongly influenced by genetic factors and events during prenatal life, genetics and prenatal development are usually included as part of the study of child development. Child development therefore involves the scientific study of the patterns of growth, change, and stability that occur from conception through adolescence. The child development may be categorised into physical growth and development, motor development, cognitive development, and social and emotional development.

Physical growth and development in **stature** and weight occurs between 15-20 years following birth, as the individual changes from the average weight of 3.5 kg and length of 50 cm at **full term** birth to full adult size (Tanner, 1990). According to Tanner (1990), as stature and weight increase, the individual's **proportions** also change, from the relatively large head and small **torso** and **limbs** of the **neonate**, to the adult's relatively small head and long torso and limbs. Genetic factors play a major role in determining the growth rate, and particularly the changes in proportion characteristic of early human development. However, genetic factors can produce the maximum growth only if environmental conditions are adequate. Poor nutrition and frequent injury and disease can reduce the individual's adult stature, but the best environment cannot cause growth to a greater stature than is determined by heredity (Tanner, 1990). Individual differences in height and weight during childhood are considerable. Some of these differences are due to family genetic factors, others to environmental factors, but at some points in development they may be strongly influenced by individual differences in reproductive maturation. (Tanner, 1990).

Willingham (1999) defined motor development as the increasing spatial and temporal accuracy of movements with practice (Willingham, 1999). This development according to him can be divided into two categories: first as basic skills necessary for everyday life and secondly, as recreational skills such as skills for employment or certain specialties based on interest. Willingham explains that normal individual differences in motor ability are common and depend in part on the child's weight and build. However, after the infant period, normal individual differences are strongly affected by opportunities to practice, observe, and be instructed on specific movements. A typical motor development such as persistent primitive reflexes beyond 4 to 6 months or delayed walking may be an indication of developmental delays or problems such as autism, cerebral palsy, or Down syndrome. Lower motor

coordination results in difficulties with speed accuracy and trade-off in complex tasks. Children with Down syndrome are late to reach major motor skills milestones. A few examples of these milestones are grasping, rolling, sitting up and walking. This aspect of child development is very crucial to the church since any delay at this stage will greatly hamper the total development of the child.

Next considered is the child's cognitive development. The capacity to learn, remember, and symbolize information, and to solve problems, exists at a simple level in young infants, who can perform cognitive tasks such as discriminating animate and inanimate beings or recognizing small numbers of objects. Patterson has done detailed studies on this aspect of child development. According to her, during childhood, learning and information-processing increase in speed, memory becomes increasingly longer, and symbol use and the capacity for abstraction develop until a near-adult level is reached by adolescence. Cognitive development has genetic and other biological mechanisms, as is seen in the many genetic causes of mental retardation. Environmental factors including food and nutrition, responsiveness of parents, daily experiences, physical activity and love can influence early brain development of children. However, although it is assumed that brain functions cause cognitive events, it has not been possible to measure specific brain changes and show that they cause cognitive change. Developmental advances in cognition are also related to experience and learning and this is particularly the case for higher-level abilities like abstraction, which depend to a considerable extent on formal education.

In social and emotional development newborn infants do not seem to experience fear or have preferences for contact with any specific people (Robinson, 2012). In the first few months they only experience happiness, sadness, and anger. A baby's first smile usually occurs between 6 and 10 weeks (Anisfeld, 1982; https://www.whattoexpect.com/authors/sara-novak-411), increasing in frequency between two and six months (Malatesta, Culver, Tesman, & Shepard, 1989), and becoming more communicative as infants mature (Venezia, Messinger, Thorp, & Mundy, 2004). By about 8–12 months, they go through a fairly rapid change and become fearful of perceived threats; they also begin to prefer familiar people and show anxiety and distress when separated from them or approached by strangers (Malatesta, Culver, Tesman, & Shepard, 1989). Separation anxiety is a normal stage of development to an extent. Kicking, screaming, and throwing temper tantrums are perfectly normal symptoms for separation anxiety. Depending on the level of intensity, one may determine whether or not a child has separation anxiety disorder. This is when a child constantly refuses to separate from the parent, but in an intense manner. This can be given special treatment but the parent usually cannot do anything about the situation. (Robinson, 2012). The capacity for empathy and the understanding of social rules begin in the preschool period and continue to develop into adulthood. Middle childhood is characterized by friendships with age-mates, and adolescence by emotions connected with sexuality and the beginnings of romantic love. Anger seems most intense during the toddler and early preschool period and during adolescence.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Stages Moral Development
Kohlberg's (1987) stages of moral development constitute an adaptation of a psychological theory. The theory holds that moral reasoning, the basis for ethical behaviour, has six identifiable developmental stages, each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas. These stages include: pre-conventional stage, Conventional stage, Post-Conventional stage, Spiritual development in children, the Bible and child development, and the Biblical command to teach children.

The pre-conventional level of moral reasoning is especially common in children, although adults can also exhibit this level of reasoning. Reasoners at this level judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences. The pre-conventional level consists of the first and second stages of moral development, and is solely concerned with the self in an egocentric manner. A child with pre-conventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society's conventions regarding what is right or wrong, but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring (Colby et al., 1987).

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typical of **adolescents** and adults. Those who reason in a conventional way judge the morality of actions by comparing them to society's views and expectations. The conventional level consists of the third and fourth stages of moral development. Conventional morality is characterized by an acceptance of society's conventions concerning right and wrong. At this level an individual obeys rules and follows society's norms even when there are no consequences for obedience or disobedience. Adherence to rules and conventions is somewhat rigid, however, and a rule's appropriateness or fairness is seldom questioned (Kohlberg's (1987).

The post-conventional level, also known as the principled level, is marked by a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society, and that the individual's own perspective may take precedence over society's view; individuals may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. Post-conventional moralists live by their own ethical principles—principles that typically include such basic human rights as life, liberty, and justice. People who exhibit post-conventional morality view rules as useful but changeable mechanisms—ideally rules can maintain the general social order and protect human rights. Rules are not absolute dictates that must be obeyed without question (Kohlberg's (1987).

In the spiritual development in children, most child development workers can describe the process of mental, social, or emotional development that we expect as children grow. However, child development is not holistic unless it addresses spiritual development as well (Roy Zuck, 1996). This is one important matter in the discussion of Christian holistic child development to which only the Church can respond. Even in primarily Christian contexts, there are many serious theological questions surrounding the child that have important consequences to our view of holistic child development. Roy Zuck, in his book, *Precious in His Sight* (Roy Zuck, 1996) *asks* these among other probing questions: What is the age of accountability? What should young children be taught before conversion? Most of these questions are beyond the scope of this study. They hint, however, at the depths of possible theological inquiry surrounding children in the Bible. Spirituality has traditionally been framed in terms of religion, and so the issue of church comes up when the issue children's spiritual development comes into discussion. Many children actively search for spiritual understanding, beginning at a young age. Young children have the ability to think abstractly. Many experts in early childhood development, however, believe just the opposite – that young children's early expressions of faith can only be rooted in the concrete experiences of seeing, hearing, and touching. Other children seem to be more openly engaged by the concept of a higher power, according to David Elkind, professor of child study at Tufts University (*http/www.familyeducation.org/ "Children's Development of Spirituality"*).

Like Piaget and Kholberg, Elkind has identified three stages of spiritual development in children—(i) the global stage, (ii) the concrete stage, and (iii) the personal connection stage.

The global stage embraces children aged six or seven. According to Elkind, most children within this category lack an understanding of abstract belief, and therefore cannot conceptualize the differences between religious faiths. They can appreciate religious symbols and rituals, but will not necessarily connect them to the notion of an "invisible" God. The concrete stage follows from the global stage. According to Elkind, children aged seven to twelve are still much grounded in the concrete, and are beginning to develop a greater sense of spiritual identity based on personal experience and religious practice. Elkind says that rituals, whether lighting candles in church or opening the ark holding a Torah in a synagogue, are very effective in helping children this age understand religious themes. During the personal connection stage, usually connoted as pre-adolescence, a feeling of personal closeness to God often emerges, the budding of what feels like an actual relationship. For some young teens, Elkind alludes that God becomes a confidante to them, because they do not want to share their thoughts with anyone else who will tell their secrets. Children's thoughts and feeling about God or other spiritual themes appear to be a natural part of human development, a search for some force in the universe that represents eternity and the absence of change. He concludes that even children who are not raised in a religious home are likely to ask spiritual questions.

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE
The Bible and Child Development
 In as much as several scholars have propounded theories on child development, the Bible has also some provisions that guide how children should be raised by Christians. Some of these models include birth and care of children, duty of parents in training of children, importance of children among many others. Let us look at each in detail.

Birth and Care of Children in the Bible
There was among Jewish wives a universal longing for, and joy in the giving of birth to children. Howard (1991) explains that this longing is well expressed in the words of Rachael to Jacob "give me children, or else I will die" (Gen. 30:1). Christians hold that children are signs of blessings from God. "Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body" (Deut. 28:4). The Psalmist pictures a man blessed of the Lord, and says of him, "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house" (Psalm 128:3). Therefore, sterility in marriage was considered to be a divine visitation or a curse (Howard, 1991). Care for infants in the Bible was done much as when Jesus was born. Instead of allowing the young baby the free use of its limbs, it is bound hand and foot by swaddling bands and thus made into a helpless bundle.

At birth, a child is washed and rubbed with salt and then with its legs together, and its arms at its side, it is wound around tightly with linen or cotton bandage. The prophet Ezekiel indicates that these same customs at child birth were practiced in his day. "In the day thou was born ….. Thou was not washed in water to cleanse thee; thou was not salted at all, nor swaddled at all" (Ezekiel 16:4)

Biblical Command to Teach Children
Under this, the Bible spells out clearly what to do with children for them to grow up as adults who know God. "Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6), "these commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 4: 6). The above texts set the tone for the children ministry. In the above verses the command to teach children is given, and must be followed. The commandment to Israel, to teach their children the word of God came from God himself. Some will argue it was Moses' command because it was Moses who spoke to the

hearing of the people. It should be noted that Moses made it clear that he spoke for God. "These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe" (Deut. 6:1). God is the one who commanded his people to teach their children his commands, decrees and laws. It is He who instructed His people to train their children the way they should go. God is the source of the command.

To be commanded is to be given an authoritative or peremptory order. Israel received a peremptory order to teach their children. What this means is that God's people are to include the children in their responsibility toward God. "One key word to express love for God is to be concerned with the spiritual welfare of our children and strife to bring them into a faithful relationship with God. The godly training of children should be a foremost concern of parents" (Grand Rapids, 1992).

The Lord seeks universal empire, and commands his people to teach the word to everyone. Every church and every Christian must understand that they have marching orders. Not only is every saint commanded to go, or to take steps to take the gospel to other lands, but the objective is stated. They are to make disciples, or pupils, for Christ. They have entered the school of Christ and are to be taught and afterwards to be made Disciples of Christ. Not only were the Jews to benefit but all nations. Christ came to be the Savior of the world. His is a universal religion. In the Great Commission he looks beyond Judea, and commands that the Gospel should be offered to all nations.

In the words of Coleman, every child is born with innocence, though doctrinally declared sinful with an inherent sin. Nevertheless, a child comes into this world knowing nothing; his first language is from his parents. They learn everything here. The armed robbers of today were innocent children of yesterday. What went wrong is their environmental exposure. A child grows to become what he or she is exposed to. Frank Coleman said, "No child should be left to grow up in our world of unbelief and fragrant sin without having heard the gospel with a persuasive invitation to believe it and accept its salvation" (Coleman, 1947).

To transmit God's word to the children is to ensure their commitment to God. God wanted his people of all generation to remain loyal to him. God's people must love God with all their heart, obey him and serve him with all their might and their entire mind. To be able to do this, they needed to know God's word to know his ways. This is the surest way to be successful, just as Joshua was commanded to meditate on God's word to be successful. This is evident in these explanations from the Life Application Bible. The Hebrew were extremely successful. The reason for their success was that religious education was life oriented, not information oriented. They used context of daily life to teach about God. If you want your children to follow God, you must make it a part of your everyday experience. You must teach children diligently to see God in all aspects of life (Tyndale et. al., 2011). God's purpose in instructing his people to teach their children his word is to make them successful among other people of other nations. He wanted his people to be different and distinct. Transmitting his word to the children will guarantee continuity. Generations instructed in God's word will benefit from it, and be blessed.

Children are the future leaders who need to be prepared for leadership. Teaching is the means to prepare the younger generation for future responsibility. The result of obeying the command to teach children is to have a people prepared to take over from the older generation. Cutty thus affirms that "the Bible is a mode of God's self-disclosure. Through these writings he is making his nature known to man."(Cutty, 1952). The future of the children depends on the training they receive today.

God's word which came to His people through Moses was received and practiced among God's people. Moses repeated the instruction as a reminder to the people when he got close to the end of his life. The aftermath of Moses' life and the people's response to the command needs to be discussed. A careful observation reveals, at least, two different levels of response.

There was an indication that the command was fully carried out. In an attempt to fulfil God's word the Israelites established the synagogue schools. It was the practice that every Jewish child was to be trained in the synagogue school from a very tender age. Historical events were told and retold to enable listeners to paint a mental picture of the event in their minds. The event of the crossing of the Red Sea was to be preserved and narrated to their children's children. God commanded them to pick up twelve stones from the middle of the river. These stones were going to be point of reference to their posterity about what God did for them. All proper care should be taken to keep in mind the mercies of the Lord; and to transmit knowledge of them to their children and all coming generations. Commenting further on this historical incidence in Joshua 4, William indicates that

> *"The LORD directed that twelve men (one man from every tribe) should carry one stone apiece out of the bed of the Jordan and erect a memorial marker where Israel first camped west of the Jordan. Accordingly, the monument was set up at Gilgal as a permanent reminder to future generations of God's miraculous stopping of the Jordan so that the Israelites could cross over ... on dry land (Thomas Nelson, 1997")*.

Children were the main focus of their education because they were going to be the leaders of the next generation. Jewish education took place in the midst of living. The parent, prophet, and priest were their teachers. "Education was not lifted out or segregated from the other major sectors of life. It was so intricately interwoven with life that to fail in teaching and learning was to fail in life itself." (Broadman & Holman, 1996).

After some years had elapsed in the history of the Jews, the leaders relaxed in their obligations toward God and the people. The situation worsened after the passing away of God's great leaders such as Moses and Joshua. The book of Judges records the outcome of Israel's failure. Chapter 2: 8-10 state it clearly: the next generation did not know the God of their fathers. Their fathers did not teach them about the God of heaven who delivered them and brought them to where they are. MacDonald notes that,

> *"Failure to obey God's command led to the sad state of affairs described in verse 10, where a lack of spiritual leadership is seen to result in a corresponding lack of obedience on the part of God's people. The previous generation had not taught their children to fear the LORD and to keep His commandments. The neglect of the fathers led to the apostasy of their sons. (Nelson, 1997)"*.

The next generation did evil in the sight of God, because they were ignorant of his word and his ways. Their parents deprived them of understanding, which resulted in darkness upon the nation. They forsook God and turned to other gods and worshiped Baal. Their action provoked God's anger, and they were sold into captivity. Describing the Israelites in these times Walvoord says that "they knew neither the LORD nor what He had done for Israel could imply a failure of the older generation to communicate God's acts to them (Walvoord John, 1983). Human beings are the same everywhere, therefore, if the church of today wants the children to hold on to the faith and continue in its teachings, it must make children ministry very important. It must find a way to communicate God's word to the next generation, for it is said "children are the single most important population group for the Church to focus upon, because what you

believe by the time you are 13 is what you will die believing."(Http/www.barna.org/cgi-bin.) Children Ministry is important in fulfilling the Great Commission. Ministry to children was commanded by God in the Old Testament. It was intended to achieve godliness in all Israel throughout their generations. Israel's obedience to the command brought blessing to the nation, but their disobedience resulted in backslidden, sin and captivity.

Holistic Christian Child Development

Since this study is primarily about holistic child development and well-being of children using the church, it is good at this point to clarify what we mean by this term. We start with the word "holistic". Holism has to do with wholeness. In the context of this study, we are talking about the truth of children made in the image of God being spiritual as well as physical beings. Biblical holistic child development sees all aspects of the person as equally significant, and refuses to dichotomize the spiritual from the physical or other aspects of the person.

Therefore Christian holistic child development emphasizes that the attention given to any component of the person needs to be done from a biblical perspective. We seek to understand God's view of personhood. By definition, a biblical or Christian view of development will include spiritual nurture as well as attention to physical, social, psychological, and other aspects of the person. Holistic child development thus embodies the ideas of completeness, perfection, oneness, integration, soundness, integrity, harmony, regained health, restored relations with God, peace with oneself and with fellow human beings, and respect for the environment.

Luke 2:52 is a key verse that provides a model for the kind of development we are talking about. This verse simply says, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men.ʻ These four components—wisdom, stature, favour with God, and favour with man—neatly encompass all aspects of the whole person. They also provide a useful model around which to create meaningful holistic child development programs. Our objective in this study is that all children have the opportunity to grow and develop in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and man.

Child development, in the perspective of the church, is also a ministry. For the purpose of our study, we are talking specifically about the work that Christians do on behalf of the needy, and in our case, what they do on behalf of children. This ministry is the work of the Church and God's people to enable needy children and families to overcome their poverty and neediness and to become all that God has intended them to be.

Below are a few things that may characterize Christian holistic development with respect to children. Child development from the perspective of the church is characterized by helping children grow like Jesus did. It also involves helping children know the truth of their worth and potential because they are made in the image of God. Enabling children to become what God wants them to be and awakening children to their self-potential—that they can and must make a difference in their own lives.

The rest include helping children understand their role as stewards and their relationship to creation, providing children with opportunities—not just things—and a mindset to grasp those opportunities and ensuring that goals, motivation, and methods are biblical and seek to bring people into a right relationship with creation and their Creator.

One other important aspect of issue is that the direction of child development is always toward wholeness. It is not enough to improve only one dimension of a child's life and leave other

dimensions inadequate. For example, to treat parasitic infection is noble but if a treated child is left in an unsanitary environment with contaminated water, the intervention is incomplete. If a family's economic situation is improved but a debilitating health problem is not solved, the intervention is incomplete. If a person receives an education but social structures prevent him from getting a job, the intervention is incomplete. If a person is introduced to faith in Christ and enjoys spiritual freedom but is left in poverty and oppression, the intervention is incomplete. Therefore, the scope of development is toward completeness and holism.

Assemblies of God Church, and the Child Development Agenda in the Atonsu District
Brief History of the Assemblies of God, Ghana
The Assemblies of God, Ghana is a member of the worldwide fellowship of Assemblies of God spread in 212 countries of the world. Missionaries from Assemblies of God, U.S.A. in the persons of Rev. Lloyd and Margaret Shirer, who were then in Moshiland, Ouagadougou now Burkina Faso crossed over to the Northern Region of the then Gold Coast on horse backs in the early 1931. With their first recruits, Miss Beulah Buchhwalter and Guy Hickok, Rev. Lloyd and Margaret Shirer started the first Assemblies of God Congregation in Yendi.

To give practical meaning to the Biblical teaching of caring for the needy and alleviating the suffering of the people, the female missionaries organized literacy classes for the indigenous women whiles the men organized work crews teachings their male counterparts to make swish blocks, door and window frames, and roof trusses. This improved the economic lives of the people tremendously.

Children's Ministry of the Assemblies of God, Ghana
"Train up a child, the way he should go so that when he grows he may not depart from it". Prov. 22:6. In this light, the church has established a children's ministry to steer the affairs of children. It is their responsibility as church ministry to see to the spiritual and physical needs of our children.

The goal of the ministry is to "to reach the unreached children with the saving knowledge of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to prepare by training up these children in the fear of God to become responsible and faithful adult Christians in future for the Lord Almighty, the church and the nation as a whole". (http/www.assebliesofgodghana.org/children's ministry). The core mission of the church is therefore to train, encourage, motivate and network all who minister unto children for Christ; "to seek and find the lost children, and prepare them for heaven" (http/www.assebliesofgodghana.org/children's ministry.)

The above mentioned mandate of the Children's Ministry is carried out by working to meet spiritual and physical needs of all children through evangelism and discipleship. They also organize vacation Bible classes, children camps, rallies, picnics, as a means to nurture the children for a better future. Other activities include leadership training, workshops, retreat and seminars for children teachers and children workers. The ministry also seeks to reach children through children annual camp meetings, Bible quiz competition, rallies, games, excursion and visitations action and special song, annual children get-together as well as contribute and advice on children growth structure in Assemblies of God, Ghana.

History of the Assemblies of God, Ghana in the Atonsu District
The Atonsu District in the Ashanti region was formed in the year 2000. Greater proportion of the local assemblies that formed the district was from the then Kumasi East District and the

rest from Kumasi West. The Atonsu District was formerly known as Kumasi South District until the year 2008 when the name changed to Atonsu District.

The topography of the district starts from Kaasi in the Kumasi Metropolis through to Atonsu, Gyinyase, Abono and ends at Akokofe in the Bosomtwi Distrct. The District has twenty-eight branches. Rev. John Ewusi Kuranchie is the current District Pastor. The District has twenty pastors one of them a female. However, the focus of this research will be on eight (Rev John Ewisi Kuranchie). The purposive sampling method was used in selecting these branches.

The Church as an Agent of Transformation
We will now examine how the Church functions as agent of transformation. By transformation is meant the process of changing the whole person to become healthier, lighter, more energized and aware (Philips, 2010). In transformation one's awareness expands, mindset is redirected, and emotional bumps and past bruises are healed. The real transformation has spiritual connection and takes place inside in one's being. This means that one begins to awake and become aware of his true nature, purpose, strengths, as well as potentials. There is a change in old beliefs, habits, and life style. One experiences spiritual rebirth and decides to make an effort to live a life full of joy, love and purity.

From the perspective of the Christian faith, transformation simply means being 'born again' or experiencing a change from within. According to Obed, to be born again means the Holy Spirit quickens one's spirit and becomes spiritually alive and renewed (Obed, 2008). He continues to affirm that if genuine change fails to occur at the point where one claims to have received Jesus as his personal Lord and Saviour, then no transformation will follow in his life. The Church then has a significant role to play in the transformation process. It must be noted that much of child development agenda is concerned with helping children know what their teachers or facilitators know. Child development is literally concerned with helping children become what their teachers are.

The children's ministry of the church is concerned with transformation. They teach the children to communicate and to build up the life of God which faith in Christ firmly plants in them. Gradually the child is driven to Jesus' words to capture the meaning of teaching and learning as they are understood. The identity of the individual remains the same but his spirit and life are so renewed and changed (transformed) that he may in a very genuine sense think of himself as a new person. It should, however, be noted that the Holy Spirit operating constantly in the Church is the agent of transformation.

Holy Spirit in the Teaching and Learning Process
Dickson in his submission on the Holy Spirit in education points out that the often neglected person in the teaching/learning process is actually the most important (Dickson et al, 1991). The Holy Spirit is the sovereign, most wise and ultimate teacher of spiritual truth. He makes God's truth relevant to the persons involved and enables application that causes life and growth. Thus, child development efforts are in vain unless there is a corporation with the spirit.

Zuck identifies one Scriptural principle by which the Spirit operates in the teaching role (Zuck, 1998). This is the principle of personal cooperation whereby the Holy Spirit seeks to teach through Christian teachers. Christian teachers are therefore called upon to be under the full employment of the Spirit as clean and capable instruments. What this means is that it is not they who teach but the Spirit. As instruments of the divine teacher, they teach what the Spirit of God has revealed in His word. The Holy Spirit is a person who enables of the learner and

the person of the teacher to interest for corporate growth.

Similarly, Williams identifies the role of the Holy Spirit as a major factor in determining the difference between Christian holistic child development and a secular one (Williams, 2008). Through the Spirit's illumination, believers are shown the truth of God's Word, and this is not present in the secular milieu. Secular and Christian child development facilitators may use similar methodologies, but this does not make them the same. In this regard, one cannot agree more with Williams that "Christian education is Christian when teachers and learners are dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit in the learning environment".

Life transformation is the need, Christ likeness is the goal, and the Holy Spirit is the key dynamic. We, therefore, say effective child development ministry in the church is dependent on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then plays a vital role in child development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The study was conducted in Atonsu District of the Assemblies of God Church Chapter. Qualitative research approach was used. Questionnaire supplemented by field interviews and observation were used in generating the data. The population for the study was made up of selected pastors, children's ministry instructors as well as selected women leaders all in the Atonsu District of the Assemblies of God Church. The rest included some selected members of the church who have passed through the children's ministry.

The sample size was 50, comprising seven (7) pastors, seven (7) women leaders, and two (2) selected children's ministry instructors from each of the seven (7) selected local assemblies. One (1) District children's instructors' representatives and the Ashanti Regional Children Ministry representative were also part of the sample. The main instrument of data gathering from the above respondents was personal interview. Twenty (20) former members of the Children's Ministry also responded to questionnaire. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select the sample. The researcher used this sample recruitment method because these personalities can provide the necessary information needed by the study by virtue of knowledge or experience they possess (Lewis & Sheppard 2006).

Pastors and children ministry teachers were also purposively chosen because they are with the children, and in one way or the other, the stakeholders in the development of the children. The Regional Director together with the District representatives were selected to give us administrative sides of the church's child development drive. Finally, the past members of the children's ministry were chosen to give us feedback on the effectiveness of the child development activities of the church. The presentation has been done mainly along the lines of the branches in the district as a whole. However, when the need arose, names of individual respondents and their respective local assemblies or capacities have been mentioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The purpose of the study was to explore the role of Assemblies of God Church in the Atonsu District in the child development. The results of the study revealed four issues for discussion. These issues emerged from the observations as well as the various responses from respondents. Though not exhaustive, these issues bogged down to the following: The New Role of The Church as Partner in Holistic Christian Child Development; The Church-Home Partnership in Child Development; Biblical and Other Resources for the Development of Children; Challenges in Child Development and Related Issues in the Church and the Way Forward

The New Role of the Church as Partner in Holistic Christian Child Development

Child development encompasses the upbringing of the child holistically into meaningful adult. Is the church being an agent of child development aware of its roles in child development? The findings from the field raised several issues which are discussed below.

Child development refers to the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy (*Kail, 2011)*. Child development therefore focuses on the changes that take place in humans as they mature from birth to about age 17 (Baltes, 1987; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006).

Therefore, we posed this question to respondents to identify their opinions on the concept which is also the central focus of this study. Responses generally centered on the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and end of adolescence. Some of the respondents touched on the physical changes like height, sitting, crawling as well as mental changes. Others also looked at the concept from the religious perspective. Praise Aban, for instance indicated that:

".. There is child development when a child is taught the word of God and is able to do away with bad behaviors."

All the respondents made references to the Bible as the center of Christian child development. Afia Agyeiwaa, did not leave out the provision of good and nutritious food for their children as one of the main catalysts for proper child development. She said when children are not fed with the right food, they retard in growth and development. The responses given above bring to mind our earlier assumption that all respondents would have a fair idea about what child development means. However, they looked at it from different perspectives− social, religious and biological. We should note that child development is a holistic affair encompassing all aspects of the child growth. Therefore, to develop a child, we must consider all the aspects as stated in our working definition. Also, the church should also bear in mind that it is part and parcel of the child development agenda as the children spend part of their life time in there.

Child development is holistic, encompassing the entire spectrum of the child— physical, cognitive, motor development and social development. For the purpose of this study spiritual development has been added. So how is the church single-handedly or collectively executing these aspects of child development?

Physical growth and development in stature and weight occurs over time following birth, as the individual changes in weight and size at full term birth to full adult size.

[Does the church have a role to play in this?]

Respondents pointed to the provision of the nutritional needs of the children in the church. According to *Ashanti regional Mark Kesse and the Atonsu District Directors of the Children's Ministry stated that:*

> *"...during most programmes, resource persons are invited to talk to the parents as well as the children on nutrition and the need to stay healthy (Interview, Atonsu District).*

In addition, the children are made to undergo physical exercises every morning during their camp meetings. *Royal Rangers, a cadet corps in the children's ministry was found in five out of the seven assemblies under study.* Members in this group get the opportunity to exercise their bodies frequently during their meetings. We witness three of such meetings where the children were taken through rigorous body and mental training. Thirteen out of the twenty past members of the children's ministry indicated that

"...the activities of the Royal Rangers really helped them in shaping their lives. Three of them are now personnel in the Ghana Police service. Our observation is that the leadership of the church understands what it takes to help the children develop physically. There are conscious efforts to train and equip the children physically.

In the area of cognitive development—the capacity to learn, remember and symbolize information and solve problems exist at a simple level in young infants, who can perform cognitive tasks such as discriminating animate and inanimate beings or recognizing small numbers of objects—the respondents were interviewed on church's contribution to help develop their children intellectually. Almost all the respondents' made mention of the Bible quizzes and tests. They also added that after the quizzes and the tests, prizes were awarded to children who excelled and that encourage or motivate others to also develop their brains. Georgina Asiamah specifically pointed to cordial relationship between teachers and the children and the minimization of the use of cane as a correctional measure to help the children feel free to think and be creative. *She said:*

> *"Children develop mentally by listening so when there is cordiality they listen well. The church in the district also takes keen interest in the secular or formal education of the children. Some of the branches in the district have instituted scholarship schemes and academic excellence award for very brilliant BECE candidates. Nine of the past students interviewed who have been beneficiaries of the scheme lauded the initiative.*

As indicated earlier, the holistic development of the child refers to the increasing spatial and temporal accuracy of movement with practice. As children grow, they are expected to develop their body movement and accuracy. Perhaps, this is one of the least known areas in child development so far as the church as an agent is concerned. From our findings we identified that most of the songs that were sung by the children in all the branches the study covered were accompanied by actions. Some of the words in the song are accompanied by corresponding action. This enabled the children to exercise their bodies even when they were worshiping. Football and other sporting activities were regular feature in most of the activities of the selected branches. This normally took place on Sundays.

According to Margaret Amankwaah, the District Missionette Representative:

> *"Children are given physical training when they go on rallies and camps. This was done through the cadet corps at the local levels. However, not all the assemblies had the cadet corps established during the time of this study."*

Mathew Gariba made mention of the Royal Rangers club for the boys as an effective way of developing their motor skills. The children in this group are taken through military drills and they usually take charge of all the security duties during camp meetings.

We indicated in our earlier submission that motor skills can be divided into two categories: first as basic skills necessary for everyday life and secondly, as recreational skills such as skills for employment or certain specialties based on interest. The activities of the children's ministry cover all these areas. However, there was no special provision for physically challenged children in the church as far as motor development is concerned. Almost all the activities were purposefully for children who had no disability. Reacting to this, some of the teacher-respondents noted":

> *"Lack of resources and the know-how to engage children with special needs.*
"
With this shortfall in mind, we may say that the church, though is doing well in motor development, is being selective.

Another component of holistic child development is social development. This is one of the most important aspects of child development. This is so especially in our part of the world where human interaction is vital in any form of social discourse. The ability of a child to adjust to the social norms of the society is an important indicator of proper child development. In our earlier submission, we concluded that the capacity for empathy and the understanding of social rules begin in the pre-school period and continue to develop into adulthood. Middle childhood is characterized by friendships with age-mates, and adolescence by emotions connected with sexuality and the beginnings of romantic love. Camp meetings, rallies, and children's day celebrations and other social events were identified as some of the conscious efforts by the church to help the children socialize with their peers and the rest of the members of the society. The organization of camp meetings enables the children to associate themselves with other children from other branches. One of such camp meetings was organized during our research period. Children from all local churches in Ashanti Region met and stayed at Nsuta Kwamang for three days and during the period, some of them probably might have made some new friends and also learnt how to live together. Furthermore, respondents indicated that during children's day celebrations, the children are sent to the adult church to lead the service and this helps them to develop skills like stage fright control, assertiveness and confidence building.

One key area of child development as far as the church is concerned is the spiritual development of children. All respondents made mention of efforts to help the children in this aspect of their development. The children are taught the word of God, how to fast and pray and this also help them develop spiritually. Some of the children are made to prepare their own sermons and are given the opportunity to preach in the children's church and sometimes the adult church during children's day celebrations. This development was identified in almost all the assemblies we visited.

The Church-Home Partnership in Child Development
Admittedly, the primary source of acceptance and belonging is the home. The Church needs to address concerns and strengthen its pastoral care pertaining to marriage, family life, and parenting. Parents are the first crucial 'others' with whom children build up bonds of trust and loyalty. The family provides the secure ground for venturing to build up relationships in the neighbourhood, school, and other wider areas of society. The influence of the home is virtually incalculable in the formation of the identity and the expressions of conduct of children. To be sure, during the teenage years, children also need to establish relationships beyond the home and such groups may exercise greater influence on them, especially if the family environment is not strong.

Next to the home, the Church as a community always has a tremendous potential for providing a sense of acceptance and belonging to children. One way is through the fostering of effective peer groups of various kinds under the auspices and spiritual guidance of the Church in order to satisfy their need for friendships and social interaction. To belong to a Church group signals important implications for the identity and developmental direction of a child. An effective Church group can often influence a child in instances and areas where parental advice or intervention might only bring resistance and reaction. Parents, while clearly and firmly holding to its spiritual ideals and truth standards, must at the same time show Christ-like love, forgiveness, understanding, and openness towards their children. For example, their flexibility can be shown not by merely handing down "official instructions and punishment", but by willing to discuss vital issues in the context of the dignity of personal freedom and accountability. Teenage children may disagree or even rebel against parental instruction and sometime teaching of the Bible, but they grow in respect and trust for the Church when the Church shows love and understanding towards them while maintaining its spiritual standards.

Resources for the Development of Children
One of the major tools available to the church in child development is the Bible. Christian children are expected among other things to abide by the teachings of the Bible and emulate the character of some of the notable biblical figures. Aside the bible, there are other vital resources that the church can equally utilized if it wants to achieve a complete child development.

[How are the various assemblies in the Atonsu district going about this?]

All respondents indicated that the Bible and the Sunday school books or manuals for children are among some of the available resources for the development of Christian children in the church. The church has designed some materials such as picture story books taken from the bible, dramatization of episodes in the Bible, character sketches from the Bible and the traditional society among others to drum home the values and virtues in the Bible and the society.

We witnessed some of these situations in Lake Land Assemblies of God, Jesus is Alive Assemblies of God as well as Light of the World Assemblies of God where as part of the teaching and learning process in the children's church, some of the stories in the bible are acted out by the children under the direction of the teachers. Six (6) of the past members of the children's ministry collaborated that the use of such methods have really helped them in their adult life by teaching them public communication skills. Some of them recounted the roles they played in those short sketches. "To me, it was the best moment in my life in the children's church when I was asked to play the role of Jesus". One of the past members of the children's church remarked.

On other resources aside the bible, Margaret Okyere, The Women Ministry President, House of Prayer Assemblies of God (Atonsu Esereso) specifically stated that:

> *"...in her outfit usually selected professionals are invited to give talk to the parents and the children on some child developmental issues. The topics included nutrition, general health issues, social vices and National Health Insurance Scheme among others. Some of them organize vacation classes and special prayer sessions for the Junior High School BECE candidates before they write the examinations."*

It became clearer from response and also from our observations that the Assemblies of God Church in the district make use of the Bible as a major resource in training their children. Aside the Bible, some of them use other resources in achieving the same purpose. However, there was much focus on the Bible than the other resources. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that the church is a religious organization and has the Bible as its fundamental resource.

Available Human Resources for Child Development
We set out to identify the quality and quantity of human resource available to the church for the purposes of bringing up the children. When the teacher-respondents were asked whether they had any formal training and experience on child development, eight 8 out of the fourteen 14 of the children's church leaders indicated:

> "*Having gone through training organized by the church to equip them with child development skills. Seven (7) out of the fourteen (14) were already trained teachers and it is assumed that all trained teachers have some form of training in child psychology and development. The remaining seven (7) of the local children's' church teachers were mostly Senior High School graduates who have been brought on board to help in handling the children.*"

Therefore, the quality of teachers in the district is on the average and this is expected to reflect in the quality of their delivery.

Challenges in Child Development and Related Issues in the Church and the Way Forward
From our observations, financial and human resource constraints appeared to be two major challenges facing the church and most of the parents in the church. Aside the above, low financial and social status of parents, lower intelligence quotient among some of the children and physical disabilities have been identified as some of the challenges. Issues like low self-esteem on the part of the children were noticed among some of the children in Jachie Pramso, Chirapatre and Gyinyase assemblies.

The Women's Ministry Leader of House of Prayer Assemblies of God specifically mentioned that:

> "*...due to the working schedule of most of the parents in her church, they do not have enough time for their children's development. Most of the children are left alone in their homes and are exposed to all sorts of dangers and it affects them negatively. Most of the Women's Ministry Leaders bemoaned bad influences from the social media like the television, videos and internet due to poor parenting, broken homes and peer pressure).*"

> *In the midst of these challenges, we found out that some of the Assemblies have put in place measures to offset the challenges. For example, Light of the World Assemblies of God as well as Rhema Assemblies of God have some form of educational support scheme to help needy but brilliant children in the church. At Light of the World, the women ministry and some individuals in the church constantly supply the children with nutritional supplements to help offset their nutritional deficits.*

A respondent from the House of Prayer Assemblies of God said:

> *"...at times some of the teachers out of their own pocket feed those children who are hungry and do not have money. She again said children with lower Intelligence Quotient and the physically challenged are given preferential treatment by the teachers and the entire children folk to encourage them".*

On the larger scale, we discovered that some of the local churches do not take it upon themselves to sponsor their children to the various camp meetings organized in the region. The District lacks adequate and dedicated teachers at the local levels due to poor remuneration and motivation. In addition, the whole church in the Ashanti Region has no recreational center for their children and as a result they have to pay huge sum of money to organize programmes for the children. At the local level, the teachers mentioned inadequate teaching and learning materials, as well as lack of proper and spacious meeting places. According to Rosemond Osei, Teacher, Light of the World Assemblies of God:

> "*The space provided for them is not enough and we therefore find it difficult to group the children appropriately". As a result of the inadequate space, some of the children are sometimes compelled to graduate into the adult church in order to create space for the increasing number.*"

As indicated earlier, out of the seven branches visited, only three have permanent structures for their children and even among the three, only one has a spacious facility and the required logistics for the children. All the teachers, with the exception of those from Rhema Assemblies of God Church, Atonsu Monaco, complained of lack of musical instruments for the children and as a result the children run away to the adult church to enjoy themselves when they (the adult church) are singing.

As to the way forward, the Regional Children's Director called for a restructuring of the church to reflect the need of the contemporary time. This restructuring according to Esther Akowuah—Teacher, Light of the World Assemblies of God. Children's Ministry should be child-centered. She called for a commitment on the part of all stakeholders− the leaders, management and parents−to commit resources to help the holistic development of children.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of our field research was to explore whether the research problem stated earlier had any bearing on the findings from the field and also to provide any answers to the thesis questions as far as the concept of the child and child development is concerned. The study was done from the angle of the children's ministry of the Assemblies of God church in the Atonsu district. The results of the study revealed that the Assembly of God's Church and child development are two inseparable entities. The study pointed that the church has a role to play so far as the development of children in the district is concerned. The effort being made by the church in the area of child development is greatly hampered by limited resources and inadequate attention given to the issue by the church.

The Assemblies of God Church as a community of faith, witness, and service has responsibilities toward people of all ages and of all walks of life. But the young members of the Church, facing a changing and troubled period in their human development in which their identity and values are formed, need both special attention by the Church as well as special challenges from the Church.

It is unfortunately true that children in the Assemblies of God have not been spared the litany of problems facing young people in Ghana today. The Church could and should be an important source of support, guidance, inspiration, and meaningful challenge for the children in these changing times. However, there is evidence from the study of general lack of both understanding and commitment to child development. Hence, the next generation of the church and Christianity in general is in danger of being isolated, if not alienated, from the values, influence, and support of the Church and the traditional community, and the future of the Church is at risk. The future of the Church in Ghana and the contributions of its members to the Ghanaian society can be as bright and distinguished as those of its past, but only if leadership from both clergy and lay members of the church commit themselves to addressing the problems of child development identified in this study in a sustained and long term fashion. Denial or neglect of these issues, on the other hand, raises serious doubts about the future vitality and survival of the Assemblies of God Church and Christianity as a whole.

Finally, the church as a dynamic community with considerable human and financial resources can effectively carry out a critically needed ministry to children. A community focused on children's ministry with a sense of urgency and permanent commitment, supported by appropriate structures and programs, and above all supervised and guided by inspired and trained leaders and personnel, will not only bring about essential benefits in the holistic development of the children but will also beckon the Church to a more secure future in the fulfilment of its mission.

RECOMMENDATION

The Assemblies of God Church has a mandate to focus on the priority of children's ministry through the development and implementation of effective programs, coordinated by the Regional children's Department. Therefore, the leadership of the Assemblies of God Church in the district under study and for that matter all churches in Ghana should make it a point to develop and expand qualified Church personnel engaged in child development at all levels. Part-time or full-time child development facilitators and educators and children's ministry directors should be engaged by the church in order to give systematic attention to child guidance and growth. The era of voluntary participation in child development efforts should give way to full time commitment.

Also, professional teachers and child development facilitators must be connected to the appropriate Seminary or Theological institution which should serve as the highest centre for research, publications, and training pertaining to child development and children's ministry. Teachers and child development facilitators should be given adequate training in a seminary-type institution so that they can be up to date as the church has for the ordained ministers.

We also realized that some of the programs designed by the church for the children such as camp meetings and other recreational activities were not directly geared towards the developmental needs of the children. Therefore, we recommend that the church should develop new programs in child development based, on the one hand, on the Bible and, on the other hand, on the reality of children's needs and problems according to specific needs of the children. Such programs must directly involve children themselves to an extent including their representation at committee levels if possible. These programs should also contain major emphases on child development within and without the Church.

In addition, the Ashanti Regional and the National Children's Directorate of the Assemblies of God Church should establish a process of evaluation and lines of accountability involving all personnel and programs at the national and local levels through such means as meetings, reports, and seminars.

Conflict of Interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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