

Ministry on the Frontlines: Reflections on Pastoral Care in Africa

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This essay attempts to reflect on how pastoral care is being practiced on the frontlines in Africa today. The basic question posed is: How is pastoral care in Africa being practiced? Stated differently, What is the common thread that defines pastoral care practice in Africa from both a theoretical reflection perspective and from the perspective of the frontlines of ministry? An attempt to respond to the above questions attracts criticism for a number reasons. These include, firstly, the simplistic assumption of Africa as being homogenous whereas heterogeneity is the reality. Secondly, there is an apparent gulf between academic reflection and employed categories and images (e.g. in the writings of African theologians such as the late Bediako and others) and grassroots congregational ministry. Thirdly, there is diversity in pastoral care ministry practice across denominations, namely the traditional missionary started churches and the emerging African-founded churches with a largely Charismatic and Pentecostal outlook. Fourthly, there is significant diversity in pastoral care approaches among practitioners from different theological persuasions.¹ And fifthly, there is the lack of a narrowed focus on the questions.

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Considering these challenges, it is important to state from the outset that my attempt to respond to the above questions is ambitious. However, my aim is to provide an overview and initiate a discussion of the current challenges in pastoral care in Africa. It furthermore aims to reveal some gaps worth pursuing by scholars in the discipline. In addition, it provides pointers for ministerial practice within the context of pastoral care diversity on the continent. In so doing, this paper opens the lid on some perspectives on how ministry on the frontlines, i.e. describe the way pastoral ministry among faith communities is being practiced.

COMMON ELEMENTS IN AFRICAN PASTORAL CARE

Africa is heterogeneous with diverse groups of people. Despite this diversity, Masamba ma Mpolo (1988) rightly argues that there are clearly discernible elements that are common to the different forms that *Homo africanus* is organized into. These are:

- Sanctity of life: Sanctity of life refers life comes from God and finds its origin in him. Hence, life should be preserved by all means. The life of the individual is abundantly lived when it is shared and hidden in the life of his/her community.
- Relation between illness, Misfortune and sin: Illness and misfortune are associated with personal or group transgressions. The illness and death of an individual is explained in terms of the result of an offence against the ancestors; violation of social taboos; an attack by deities and evil spirits; or the result of witchcraft. Sin is associated with the breaking of prohibitions agreed by the community or inherited from the ancestors. The violation of morals leads to a severing of established relationships between God and his creatures and between the living and the departed ancestors – hence the illness or death.
- Spirits and ancestors in the life of the community: The place occupied by spirits and ancestors in African spirituality should also be noted. African cosmology is believed to contain a constellation of powers which constantly interact with human beings and influence, for good or for bad, the course of people's lives. God as the creator of life and the power which orders the universe is best revealed in and through ancestors, lesser deities and spirits.

- Life experienced as a whole. Life in Africa is viewed (w)holistically. To be whole is to be healthy and free from any sickness or life's challenges of any kind (e.g. healthy children, good marriage, stable job, being at peace with parents, etc.). The wholeness of life entails being free and being at peace both physically and spiritually. When life's challenges arise, people believe in the existence of diverse divinities, witches, wizards, the ancestral spirits and other innumerable spirit-beings that are capable of interfering in the affairs of human beings. Hence, one has to be in complete harmony with spiritual and physical forces.²

The above elements broadly represent a common African framework regarding life and spirituality. For this reason, many African theologians and religion scholars refer to these elements in their work e.g. Mbiti and Bediako. These scholars' discussions are located within Christian and African traditional religious experience. The implication of these elements is that, Western religion at the end of the 19th century and during the entire 20th century where pastoral care largely evolved to become the special occupation of psychotherapists,³ is different to African pastoral care that has always been considered within the context of the churches' pastoral ministerial work. The efforts have centered on how to provide pastoral care that utilizes Christian pastoral caring resources that incorporate African traditional experiences and potentials to ensure pastoral care that is contextually relevant and effective.

NO ORGANIZING CENTER

While the foregoing framework represents the generally predominant view, a notable situation across the African continent is the lack of a concise and defining approach, or at least an organizing center, for pastoral care reflection and practice. Compared to the West, where, for instance, psychotherapy could be identified, in Africa such a general organizing center is absent. Among the scholars who have written about pastoral care in Africa,⁴ including the leading pastoral care scholars indicated above as well as others, the themes are broad and diverse. For instance, a 1988 essay by Masamba ma Mpolo describes spirituality and counselling for liberation, focusing on the context and praxis of African pastoral activities and psychology.⁵ Emmanuel Lartey's essays address the subject of healing in Africa.⁶ Daisy Nwachuku's essays focus on creating communities through pastoral care and

counseling in urban African life as well as on the situation of women in an Africa that is in the process of adjustment and change.⁷ Other themes that have been considered include marital relationships, intercultural exchange, social change, violence in polygamous families, nurturing and building community, human dignity for youth and women, human dignity in general, spirituality, and social-cultural analysis.

The broadness of pastoral care reflection in Africa, which renders this discussion superficial, is also evident in the book edited by Waruta and Kinoti titled *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging Essays in Pastoral Theology*.⁸ The essays include the contributions of Philomena Mwaura, Douglas Waruta, Nasimiyu-Wasike, Jesse Mugambi, Laurenti Magesa, Constantine Mwikamba, Hannah Kinoti, Mary Getui, and Teresia Hinga. These scholars are largely from East Africa, particularly Kenya. The topics considered include ministerial formation, healing, counselling in African families, domestic violence against women, the plight of street children, growing old in Africa, and pastoral care of the clergy. These essays show a similar trend to those in a book edited by Karl Federschmidt, Klaus Temme, and Helmut Weiss titled *Voices from Africa on Pastoral Care*, which is a collection of essays from 1988 to 2008.⁹ The essays are diverse and deal with fragmented topics with no in-depth discussion or reflection on the discipline, at least at the theoretical level.

The work edited by Federschmidt, Temme, and Weiss largely contains essays by scholars from West Africa, with a few voices from South Africa and East Africa. The work edited by Waruta and Kinoti carries essays that are predominantly by Kenyans.¹⁰ Paul Gifford noted that East Africa, particularly Kenya, produces much more theology on the continent than many other African countries.¹¹ The other countries that have also produced significant theological work are Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa. Kenya's high volume of publications is made possible by two publishing companies: Paulines Publications and Acton Publishers. The literature produced, however, is not widely distributed or known outside Africa. The quality of these publications is at a rather low academic level. Gifford rightly observed that these publications consist of "papers for meetings of the Ecumenical Symposium of East African Theologians (ESEAT), the Kenyan branch of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT Kenya), and the local branch of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians." The papers are then collated and published. Paul Bowers made a similar observation, noting that most of the publications are generated through meetings and con-

ferences.¹² These essays are usually written as short conference papers; they often lack depth and tend to only scratch the surface of issues and are generally uncritical.

Although essays contributing to the field of pastoral care in East and West Africa have tended to be generated from conferences, in South Africa much of the reflection on pastoral care is contained in peer-reviewed journals. These essays tend to focus on broad issues as well, as in East and West Africa. Despite this fragmented approach, Daniel Louw can be singled out as the most consistent and prolific practical and pastoral care scholar. He has written extensively on the subject in South Africa, having authored more than ten books and more than one hundred articles on various pastoral care issues with an African flavor. However, his writings do not focus narrowly on African issues but address global pastoral care theoretical and practical issues.¹³

AFRICAN THEOLOGY MOVEMENT

The weak scholarly engagement with pastoral care can generally be traced back to the influence of the African Theology movement. Gifford observed that this situation has caused a deficiency in African theological reflection.¹⁴ Bowers, who has almost forty years of theological education and church engagement in Africa, noted that this critical deficiency in African theological reflection is increasingly being acknowledged by African theological scholars.¹⁵ I view theological reflection as the discipline that robust pastoral care reflection in Africa should arise from, but African theologians have been substantially engaged in the discourse of cultural contextualization and its theological implications.¹⁶ Different from theological reflection in Europe and North America, which includes reflection on prevailing intellectual trends in their contexts and the challenges that these trends represent, no such comparable critical engagement with the intellectual trends of their context exists within the African theological community. This has resulted in intellectual issues such as pastoral care on the continent remaining uncharted in a serious manner.

African theological reflection has remained preoccupied with establishing Africa's distinct identity against the West, which is derived from an independence agenda and ideology.¹⁷ Unfortunately, in this one-sided critical reflection, only the West is criticized and African traditional culture is romanticized. The participants in the African Theology movement over the

last five decades since the 1960s, who include influential voices such as Harry Sawyerr of Sierra Leone, Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, John Mbiti of Kenya, Charles Nyamiti of Tanzania, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako of Ghana, Jesse Mugambi of Kenya, and many others have remained entangled in this cultural contextualization debate. The implication for pastoral care is that critical issues that require in-depth or theoretical reflection have remained either unexplored or have not been considered in a systematic, scholarly manner. The cultural contextualization approach, as an influential movement, is clearly evident in the work of pastoral care scholars such as Mamba Ma Mpolo and Abraham A. Berinyuu.¹⁸

THEOLOGY VS. PRACTICE

Considering the widespread lack of clear focus on African pastoral care, *how is pastoral care being practiced on the frontlines of ministry? How are pastoral theologians practicing ministry?* These questions are critical in delimiting and focusing our discussion for the following reason: The pastoral care approaches adopted by universities and other academic institutions such as seminaries, by church leaders, and by people (pastors) providing pastoral care at the forefront of ministry on a daily basis differ widely. Scholars at universities and academic institutions, whom Bowers called intellectuals,¹⁹ tend to focus on the cultural contextualization debate by looking for categories that are relevant in African culture and that should be incorporated into pastoral care, such as divination.²⁰ The focus of church leaders has been more on the pastoral implications of the discussion. As Bowers stated, church leadership tends to frame its reflection more directly in terms of the pastoral and catechetical needs of the believing Christian community in Africa, especially as it is affected by traditional culture, such as rites of passage, polygamy, liturgical customs, divination, traditional healing, or the role of ancestors.²¹ The people (pastors) providing pastoral care at the forefront of ministry on a daily basis tend to adopt a multiplicity of approaches as they administer pastoral care on the frontlines and in the context of real-life challenges, which can be described proverbially as the place *where the rubber meets the road*. These pastoral care providers' approaches tend to be informed by their denominational background and practices.

My focus in this article, particularly in the next section, is to consider the pastors who provide pastoral care on the frontlines of ministry. Tite Tié-nou rightly suggested that the defining matrix of ministry in Africa, consid-

ering its needs and expectations, its requirements and preoccupations, is the Christian community.²² This is particularly important in Africa because, as Bowers observed, the intellectual preoccupations are at a tangent to what is happening at the practical level in the lives of people on the ground.²³ The African intellectual project does not reflect the needs and practicalities of church and pastoral care in life on the frontlines. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to follow Tiénou's advice to focus on the Christian community when considering pastoral care in Africa.

PASTORAL CARE MINISTRY ON THE FRONTLINES OF PEOPLE'S LIVES

There are two dimensions to pastoral care that are discernible in many parts of Africa. The first dimension relates to literature (publications) reflecting on pastoral care. The second relates to the actual practice of pastoral care ministry. Pastoral care reflection done in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches that were started by missionaries generally focuses on inculturation and correlation with African culture and theology. The Protestant churches include conservative churches and ones with a liberal or liberation orientation. The reflections are published as monographs, academic papers, and journals. Consequently, literature from emerging churches with a strong Pentecostal and Charismatic background largely rely on popular booklets written by their church leaders. The booklets outline the leaders' views and opinions on various pastoral care issues. This published literature can be identified, but actual pastoral care practices are much more difficult to describe. Pastoral caregivers practice this work in different ways. Hence, pastoral care on the frontlines requires detailed consideration.

Pastoral ministry in many parts of Africa is practiced in at least seven distinct ways that arise organically as responses to the context of people's pastoral needs. These approaches are distinct but integrated. They are often practiced eclectically. The application of these approaches is influenced, among other things, by the church's background, the intensity of the problems, the individual's position in his or her family, the distance of the individual from the traditional extended family, and his or her educational level and age. These approaches are as follows:

- The first approach entails a mix of African traditional practices and Christian pastoral care practices. When problems arise, the leaders, who are the *prophets*, perform rituals to exorcise and cast away the misfortune. They perform healing functions using substances such

as water and oil. These prophets operate just like traditional diviners. These practices are prevalent in churches that are commonly called African Independent Churches (AIC),²⁴ white garment churches, and Zionist churches (in South Africa). The pastoral care is concerned with addressing the spiritual causes of the person's misfortune and restoring the person back to full health.

- The second approach is one that draws a dichotomy between Christian values and practical life. This approach is not verbalized but rather acted upon by individuals in church communities. In this approach, which is usually called syncretism, people tend to hold and adhere to Christian values and virtues when there are no problems or threats to their lives. But in times of problems, in addition to prayers and Bible reading, people seek extra help from diviners and magicians. They revert to traditional healing practices. This is done in secret (usually at night) in order to maintain the person's position in the church community. Pastoral caregivers, therefore, focus on encouraging people to maintain their faith in Jesus and trust him as capable of providing solutions to their problems. However, people under threat of spiritual forces find the message of pastoral caregivers unconvincing and impractical in view of the spiritual challenges that they experience. This usually occurs in missionary-founded churches where the issues of spirituality in pastoral care have not been sufficiently addressed.
- The third is an approach that may be used when church community members who remain trusting in the Christian caring message of Jesus without wavering are ridiculed and blamed for their faith by their extended family and community. Pastoral care to these people entails supporting, sustaining, and empowering the church members.
- The fourth approach focuses on the formation of family and community coping support structures. Pressure from the extended family and community often causes strain on the suffering people, as indicated in the second and third approaches. To mitigate these challenges, church community leaders empower communities to establish alternative family support structures to provide an emotional net for people ostracized by relatives due to how they choose to deal with their problems.

- The fifth approach is family group enrichment. Due to the multifaceted challenges that people experience, pastoral caregivers are establishing youth, family, and male and female groups to discuss and explore solutions to the challenges of life. The focus of this approach is to address contemporary challenges experienced on the frontlines of life.
- The sixth approach is exorcism and healing. Health problems and any other life challenges are attributed to curses and evil attacks. Pastoral care entails conducting healing sessions and exorcism.²⁵ The pastors pray over protective items such as water, oils, pieces of cloth, and arm bands to ensure protection at all times. This approach is prevalent among new, emerging Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.
- The seventh approach is position reversal. In times of severe problems, some individuals decide to abandon the Christian faith and its approaches to care and adopt a traditional African approach. Pastoral care to these people entails persuading them to return to the Christian faith and trust Jesus during their struggles.

The above approaches present the general situations that pastoral caregivers encounter in pastoral ministry practice. The type of pastoral care provided is informed by the person's need and context. These pastoral needs are experienced on the various fronts of people's lives. It is important to note, however, that pastoral care in Africa is particularly a church ministry. There is little or no specialization; pastoral care is considered part of church pastoral work, which is different from some areas in the West where ministries such as hospital ministry are considered a specialized ministry. There is limited specialized training in chaplaincy in Africa, resulting in pastors assuming the role of chaplains.

The location of pastoral care within the broader ministry context makes it a theological matter. In Africa, however, this presents a simultaneous advantage and disadvantage. An emphasis on the theology of pastoral care will keep African pastoral care firmly rooted in its Christian foundation and not absorbed by the rising discipline of psychology.²⁶ However, African pastoral care's deep roots and entanglement with other theological disciplines presents it with the challenge of failing to address emerging and contemporary issues. Pastoral care appears to have largely remained preoccupied with the elements that Masamba ma Mpolo rightly observed as characteristic of *Homo africanus* (described earlier).²⁷ These elements are important for

pastoral care as they form the foundation for the African people, but they are deficient in addressing emerging challenges in modern and technologically advanced Africa. Since pastoral care is part of the African theological discourse, it carries with it the weaknesses of the African Theology movement, thereby leaving a pastoral care vacuum. Bowers observed that the African Theology agenda and project has largely remained stuck in African identity issues and has ignored contemporary challenges.²⁸ This has resulted in modern Africa remaining theologically an uncharted territory. Gifford added that this gap has caused many African scholars to fail to critically engage with contemporary challenges such as bad governance from a theological perspective.²⁹ Lartey noted that African-led churches that provide pastoral care to Africans in the diaspora exhibit backward African thinking and much less progressive African thinking than is found in the churches in Africa.³⁰

Gifford advised that promoting “traditional” forms is worthwhile but should not be done uncritically. African traditional norms should not be promoted in a manner that is regressive by encouraging Africa to return to the past.³¹ If African Christianity and indeed pastoral care are to make a contribution to the world of Christianity, they should reconsider and improve their agenda in light of contemporary African challenges. The redesign should include refocusing on the Africa of the twenty-first century, focusing on Africa in the global context, and being critical of African approaches.³² Reflection on pastoral care needs to seriously engage with contemporary issues in a systematic manner. There is some engagement happening, such as in recent articles by Dames and Muhindo, but this needs to be substantially increased.³³ However, a substantial, systematic consideration of pastoral care is still lacking. It is important that those engaged in reflecting on pastoral care in Africa respond to the contextual challenges and critically reflect on the theory as well as African pastoral care’s contributions to global care rather than be too narrowly focused.

NOTES

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4. See the essays in Elsdörfer, *Inhalt*, which were written between 2008 and 2013.
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14. Gifford, "Africa's Inculturation Theology," 30–31.
15. Bowers, "Christian Intellectual Responsibilities," 102–3.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 102.
18. See, for example, Masamba ma Mpolo, "Spirituality and Counselling for Liberation"; Abraham A. Berinyuu, "The Encounter of Western Christianity and Civilization and Islam on Ghanaian Culture: Implications for the Ministry of Pastoral Care and Counselling," *Africa Theological Journal* 17 (1988): 140–49; Abraham A. Berinyuu, "A Trans-cultural Approach to Pastoral Care of the Sick in Ghana," *Africa Theological Journal* 16 (1987): 53–66.

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