


Pastoral care and counselling in current times: Relevance and context of care



Authors:

Glenda A. Dames¹ Gordon E. Dames¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Philosophy,
Practical and Systematic
Theology, Faculty of
Humanities, University of
South Africa, Pretoria,
South Africa

Corresponding author:

Glenda Dames,
gadames0053@gmail.com

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Since the inception of the Pastoral Care Movement, the approach to pastoral care has evolved from the traditional shepherd model to a more clinical, client-centred method. This evolution requires a thorough analysis of recent trends and dynamics in pastoral care, especially in relation to key theological theories and the Church's role in providing support. Today, the landscape of pastoral care covers a range of topics, including ecotheology, global existential crises and the Church's involvement in addressing these issues. Additionally, this examination reveals conclusions about theological shortcomings and inconsistencies in emphasis within pastoral care.

Contribution: This article provides a critical overview of pastoral care in its current form and context, examining its relevance to the existential needs of the postmodern social milieu and its role in the church today. It offers a critical evaluation of pastoral care within contemporary culture.

Keywords: pastoral care; pastoral counselling; contextual theology; pastoral theology; practical theology; church; postmodern culture.

Introduction

This article examines the current state of pastoral care, tracing its evolution from traditional practices to a more professionalised form of care – specifically, the contemporary context of care. A pressing question in today's postmodern society, characterised by increasingly diverse and complex socio-cultural and socio-political contexts, is whether a professional therapeutic approach to care remains relevant and effective in meeting the needs of individuals both within and outside the church. This is the primary focus of the article. Additionally, we will explore alternative approaches to care that may better align with today's social realities.

Pastoral care and pastoral theology

Pastoral care as a discipline of Practical Theology has seen many changes to remain relevant to existential human needs. It has evolved from the traditional *cura animarum* [care of the soul] – the shepherding model to a modern professionalised clinical model of care, closely aligned with psychology. This had been progressively evident following the advent of the Pastoral Care Movement, when Pastoral Care as a previously church-based ministry of the church, saw a shift from the traditional model of care to client-centred therapeutic care with a psychological and professionalised façade. However, several decades since its professionalisation, Pastoral Care seems to have 'lost it way' in terms of its identity, relevance and its distinctive 'pastoral' and theological attributes in the helping professions. It has been critiqued for not remaining true to its own theological identity and aligning too strongly with psychology. It was no longer based on theology or affiliated with religious institutions (Dames 2018).

Pastoral Care identity has been shaped by several factors – many of which are related to the church, theology and societal transitions. The diverse and complex nature of societal change in the post-modern era is reflected by an equally diverse range of needs which challenges pastoral care reserves. LaMothe has identified an extensive range of such needs, rendering the provision of care both complex and challenging (LaMothe 2022:12–13). This compounds the matter of formulating a neatly framed definition of pastoral care and pastoral theology. Many authors have noted the complex nature of pastoral care because of the very extensive range of needs it has to address in the current context.

Notwithstanding this complexity, we would urge for the pre-eminence of a theological basis for such a definition, so that we speak of a distinctively *pastoral* care, as opposed to a universal form of care. We have noted before that such a theological alignment should be to those theologies which are pertinent to, and which undergird pastoral care – namely Practical Theology and

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Pastoral theology (Dames 2018:33–34). Such a theological undergirding provides for Pastoral Care a distinctive *theological* and *Christian* context for care.

In this regard, La Mothe's (2022) perspective is deemed to be very comprehensive in his consideration of all aspects of care. Even though he respects and endorses the classical definition provided by Clebsche and Jaekle, he recognises the need to include a more communal aspect in the definition – which is exactly what the current social context calls for, as the contributions of the authors in this article reflect. Hence, for a Christian perspective and one that is more inclusive of a communal, ecclesial and 'theological' dimension, we refer here to La Mothe's (2022) definition of pastoral care:

Pastoral care is a theological activity of the community of faith, performed by recognized members of the church and directed toward manifesting the Good News in acts of healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, resisting, and sanctifying for the sake of individuals and communities, within and outside the church. (p. 14)

Apart from a definition vested in the community, the author also recognises Pastoral care's alignment with Pastoral Theology (La Mothe 2022:15,16). For this article, we would prefer to align Pastoral Care to *both* Practical and Pastoral Theology, in line with Woodward and Pattison (eds. 2000) who emphasise the interrelatedness of the two theologies, pointing to common threads in both. For example, they are both concerned with practice (of care) in the Christian tradition and care *within* Christian communities (eds. Woodward & Pattison 2000:6). The conceptualisation of Practical Theology has been expounded by Swinton and Mowat (2006) as:

Practical Theology is a critical theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world. (p. 5)

Swinton and Mowat's (2006) conceptualisation not only expands the theological premise for reflection and praxis but integrates both the existential and the transcendental elements of pastoral care – giving credence to the community life (ecclesial) of the church. These are important attributes which are often minimised by an overemphasis on diversity and contextuality (cf. Goto 2018).

A theological basis for pastoral care praxis

From the aforesaid, we note that, pastoral care has progressively developed into a professionalised form of care. The counseling dimension in particular having drifted away from its ecclesial origins. Yet its theological roots remain an underlying premise on which it has been established (cf. Dames 2018; Doehring 2006:6; Sperry 2002).

The dilemma for Pastoral Care which renders it a complex field of theological ministry is that it is a form of care which seeks to address people's existential needs. These needs often

extend beyond theology and require interdisciplinary collaboration with the social sciences to be effective. It is thus an interdisciplinary form of care informed by various sources of knowledge (Doehring 2006:9).

This reliance on the sciences has brought pastoral identity under scrutiny, also regarding its effectiveness in its use of the therapeutic model. There has therefore been a gradual shift from pastoral psychology to a call for the inclusion of theology – namely, pastoral theology (Miller-McLemore 2012:32–33). This call for a shift from the therapeutic, which was perceived as limited, has highlighted the need for a renewed focus on theological identity of pastoral care. However juxtaposed to theology was the added dimension of considering the social and cultural contexts of the persons and groups in need of care (Miller-McLemore 2012:32). However, shifts in the paradigms of care also require a re-evaluation of the impact of such changes. For instance, examining the influence of various social, cultural and religious factors also needs amendments. Elements such as race, ecology, economics and socio-political contexts also play a significant role.

Secularised care and the search for spirituality: The decline of individualised care

Whereas pastoral care, traditionally known as *cura animarum*, was based on the care of souls following the Shepherd model, the onset of the Pastoral Care Movement introduced psychology as a method of pastoral intervention. Holifield has documented this progressive development, which is characterised by a strong reliance on psychological tools and knowledge, with care increasingly focussed on counselling (Holifield 1983; cf. Dames 2018:53–58, 61–65).

Secularisation in care manifested as professionalism and professionalisation – as a means of the adaptation and protection of the practice of care in changing times. Professionalisation of care is care characterised by professional bodies for the regulation of standards for care, training and the protection of professional knowledge and boundaries.

Unfortunately, professionalised care, which is also fee-based care, became an exclusive service which has not been accessible to all – especially the poor and marginalised. Because of the emphasis on therapy and the use of a clinical model, this form of care has failed to view the individual and even groups, within their full socio-cultural and political context (Watkins 1999:41).

One aspect of the critique against professionalised and secularised pastoral care can be traced to the loss of spirituality in Pastoral Care – with the concurrent secularisation of care in the postmodern context. Postmodernity has been a pervasive phenomenon of changed worldviews related to a distancing from meta-narratives and ultimate truths. The impact on religious life and praxis has been equally pervasive and has undermined and relativised religious worldviews and praxis (Cox 1965).

Secularisation in care was an inevitable process, a response by the church and its care functions, to the tensions and conflicts which had become imminent in religious and world regimes (Davie, Heelas & Woodhead 2002:23). However, the loss or neglect of the theological content of care has since impacted on its unique role and contribution has now been well documented (cf. Dames 2018).

However, despite the extensive impact of secularisation, it served as a catalyst to advocate for a re-emphasis on spirituality in pastoral care. In Europe, secularisation brought about a radical change within the traditional paradigms of care and counselling, with a reciprocal call for a return to theology and spirituality. Hence Dutch pastoral theologian Tieleman's (1995) critical reflection on the crisis in pastoral care, strongly advocating for a rediscovery of spirituality in care. This re-emphasis on spirituality implied that care should not be solely vested in psychological functions but on issues of human dignity in the search for meaning and the awareness of the ultimate in daily life (Tieleman 1995:124).

By the end of the 20th century, spirituality featured more prominently in pastoral care and *cura animarum* was increasingly seen as spiritual care and spiritual direction. Leech's contribution to the importance of spirituality for pastoral care strongly reflects this correlation (Leech 1986a). In *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Leech 1986a), he advocated for both a Christian spirituality and transformation including, social transformation – for addressing the vacuum regarding the need for social and spiritual transformation (Leech 1986a:6; cf. Leech 1986b:9). More significantly, he expands this idea to include an exposition on 'transcendence' and the 'mystical' aspect of our being human, contending that all human existence has a spiritual dimension (Leech 1986a:xxvi; cf. Leech 1985:130). This re-emphasis on spirituality indicated a shift away from self-actualisation and the behaviouristic and psychoanalytic theories of humanistic psychology towards the interconnectedness between life and transcendence, human existence and God (Thayer 1985:41–42). There was thus a shift from Western dualism which placed a distinction between spirit and matter – to a spirituality practised as 'life in the Spirit' and discipleship (Sheldrake 1995:514).

In recent years, the critique against the therapeutic model has intensified, as it was viewed as not being pertinent to addressing the existential needs of a post-modern social context. Pastoral theologians such as Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2012) and others such as Watkins (1999), Wimberley (2006) and Greenwood (2002) have called for a more systemic, relational and communal model of care which takes the full human experience into account. There has also been a call for the re-integration of pastoral care into the Church alongside all the other ecclesial functions of the church – essentially propagating for pastoral care to be restored to its theological basis, within the scope of Pastoral and Practical Theology (Ramsay 2004; Scheib 2016). It is a significant shift which places pastoral care and counselling in its proper context of being but 'one aspect' of

Pastoral Care. It also points to an intentional re-claiming of all the ecclesial and theological aspects of pastoral care, which is imperative for restoring the unique role and identity within the helping professions (Dames 2018).

In view of these calls for the re-introduction of Spirituality into Pastoral Care, the challenge for the Christian faith and pastoral care is the reinterpretation and reintroduction of faith in God to secularised people in social contexts which are diverse, complex, politicised, and wary of clericalism and ecclesial institutionalism. It calls for a new revelation of the core attributes of the Christian faith, with an emphasis on authenticity and the true character of Christian spirituality (Dames 2023). For pastoral care, it means new ways of aligning theology and spirituality to care.

Examining 'new' theoretical and theological models for faith praxis

Browning's critical practical model

In the nineties, Browning, prompted by the transition to new worldviews, was already reflecting on new paradigms for practical theology and faith praxis to address the challenges of change. His aim was for religion and theology to remain relevant in a postmodern secular timeframe, where rational thinking was pre-eminent (Browning 1996).

Drawing on the tradition of practical wisdom (phronesis), Browning developed a conceptual framework for theological reflection to develop an understanding of the continued relevance of churches and religious communities (Browning 1996:2). This critical practical theology, which Browning refers to as a 'practical philosophy of religion', applies concepts such as 'practical reason, practical wisdom, practice, praxis, justice, consensus, dialogue, conversation and communication' in the process of critical theological reflection of the world (Browning 1996:2). Browning, through this approach, seeks to counter Western scepticism against 'shared traditions', 'social narratives' and 'communal identities' (Browning 1996:3–4). Importantly, he also seeks to address the challenge of 'discontinuous change' between nationalism and traditionalism (Browning 1996:4; cf. Roxburgh 2005:32).

Browning's paradigm emphasises the importance of oscillating between theory (theoretical thinking) and practice (practical wisdom) (Browning 1996:4; cf. Louw 2010; Osmer 2008:9). Browning argues that even though theology is abstract (because it relates to God's self-disclosure to the Church), it can also be practical if it engages in practical concerns – such as existential matters (Browning 1996:5). This engagement or practice is not abstract, rather it is 'theory laden' (Browning 1996:6). For instance, there is engagement between theory and practice even in religious communities – especially in times of crisis (between 'sacred texts and practices'). This can lead to critical reflection and reconstruction of religious meanings and practices (Browning 1996:6). It is a practice-theory-practice model for theology,

especially relevant in times of crisis; also, for our times of discontinuous change where the process of deconstruction and reconstruction is more frequent and more rapid (Browning 1996:7; Roxburgh 2005).

According to Browning (1996:8), his model could be seen as the antithesis of the Barthian perspective which was centred solely on the 'Word of God revealed in Scripture'. Instead, for current times, Browning favours a fully concrete and practical theology which is strategic and fully practical and can be applied irrespective of the religious activity (Browning 1996:8). In this instance, we are cognisant of pastoral care as an activity of practical theology and how it can be practised in ways which are relevant and functional for current times.

In the case of religious communities, Browning suggests that they be bearers of 'practical rationality' – making theology fully practical in answering fundamental questions of living (Browning 1996:10). Here, he distinguishes between practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the more scientific theory (Browning 1996:10). He argues that even though it may seem contrary to the Christian tradition of faith, he believes that churches are the *embodiment* of practical rationality. Browning also contends that religious symbols and beliefs need not be contradictory to practical rationality, but that the latter is often the expression of underlying religious convictions. Following this, the interplay between the two dynamics is often an interpretive and re-interpretive process between tradition and current experience. He relies on Gadamer's philosophical theoretical framework and Gerkin's hermeneutical perspective as a theoretical basis for this approach (Browning 1996).

For pastoral care, the application of Browning's critical and correlational hermeneutical model for practical theology could be appropriated for current times – especially because it is informed by the work of pastoral theologian Gerkin, as cited by Browning (1996). This is especially true because Gerkin's framework is based on dialogue between the individual's life story and the Christian narrative. It is focussed mainly on counselling as the therapeutic relationship which, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, provides a 'transitional space' which facilitates growth and change, based on God's redemptive love which is witnessed by the person seeking care (Gerkin in Browning 1996:248). Gerkin's later work is even more appropriate for current times. It is a narrative hermeneutical practical theology of care which considers the total social context of the individual. Here the focus is more pertinently 'social transformation' – a focus that most current pastoral theologians have propagated (Gerkin in Browning 1996:249).

Browning (1996) acknowledges however that, in relation to Gerkin's paradigm, his focus on faith confession is quite cursory, but argues that faith does precede critical reflection and remains unapologetic about the fact that his emphasis is a critical one. Hence Browning's model is a 'critical correlation, or critical hermeneutic' method – whereas Gerkin's method is primarily a critical reflection on the praxis of faith (Browning

1996:249). For the current pluralistic context, Browning proposes this critical reflection so that the church can have a greater impact on this more complex context. Hence, a 'critical hermeneutical approach' for practical theology is therefore proposed.

In conclusion, even though Browning has been instrumental in developing theoretical paradigms for a more balanced and practical reflection of the social dilemmas of complex times, his incorporation of social (philosophical) paradigms is veering on the path of being overly normative at the cost of theological pre-eminence. We tend to concur with Pattison (2000:39) who early on warned regarding giving preference to (moral), normative discourses over theological principles such as love and discipline in pastoral care praxis. In a strong critique of Browning's emphasis on rationality, Klaasen (2014) reminds us of the importance of practice and experience in the Christian life – which cannot be reduced to theory and so negate the importance of lived spirituality. For pastoral care praxis, this cautionary note on the over-emphasis on the social sciences and rationality in pastoral theology with the consequence of the negation of theology has long been debated and raised by theologians such as Browning himself! (Oden in Browning in Dames 2018:58).

Nevertheless, it cannot be refuted that Browning's contributions have been helpful in providing theoretical bridges between theology and the sciences in addressing complex modern and post-modern challenges. Yet even 'he' is mindful of not succumbing to being too closely aligned to the 'cognate secular disciplines' and their norms for the sake of transformation (Browning 1996:278). He acknowledges that the Christian (*theological*) perspective is distinctive in that God is always 'finally the agent of transformation' and that all other forms or agents of transformation are merely metaphors of God's 'deeper transformative love' (Browning 1996:279).

Louw's focus on *habitus* and pneumatology

In a similar vein to Browning's (1996) practical theological theory formation, Louw (2010) seeks to address the current needs through a more concrete application of faith in praxis. Louw (2010) expands on Browning's theory formation by emphasising the role of *habitus* in practical theological praxis. He also emphasises the importance of an anthropological perspective for pastoral care but seeks to combine theology with a scientific theoretical formulation to make theology more relevant and practical. This is done by juxtaposing the development of a theoretical framework with the importance of Christian Spirituality and the significance of the human soul. Louw (2010:69–70) acknowledges that such an endeavour creates a tension between science and the spiritual – that is, knowledge of mind and 'knowledge of the heart', including the influence of psychology and the dangers of psychological reductionism.

Louw's (2010:71–72) exposition provides a more pertinently *theological* lens for praxis. Like Gerkin, he envisions theology as an encounter with, and thus a 'praxis of God' – drawing theology closer to the human experience and human existential struggles. His ideas intersect with Browning's (1996) conceptualisation of practical reason(ing) – that is, frameworks for life. He does, however, expand on the transcendental element, building on Mc Gauthey's call for a relational theology (as cited in Louw 2010).

A further likeness to Browning is Louw's (2010) Christian reflection on Practical Theology and practical actions are the containers for practical wisdom (phronesis) – combined with a reflection of the expression of the will – that is, knowledge of God and the expression thereof in human actions (Wimberley 2006:72). In this sense, the theme of humans as bearers of or witnesses to the kingdom of God is confirmed. It is essentially the faith praxis of the church which Louw (2010:73–75) calls a 'hermeneutic and communicative praxis of faith' – which also finds expression in the ecclesial functions of the church, among which Pastoral Care is included. This praxis of theology summarises the habitus or theology of the Church (Louw 2010:77). The human in relation to God in this context constitutes the soul. For Pastoral Care, this qualification is key to the context of care. It is an integrative hermeneutic approach which includes the spiritual dimension of being human. This approach is both client-centred and Christological as it depicts the crucifixion – Christ's suffering and identification with human needs (Louw 2010:81).

In practical terms, for Pastoral Care, this means that a pastoral carer is a spiritual guide who takes existential realities into account. By including the Christological perspective (the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ) in pastoral care, this paradigm presents a re-interpretation of the notion of power and pre-supposes transformation and empowerment of people, giving them a new identity which transforms them (Louw 2010:83). It propagates a 'courage of being' towards a new attitude of resourcefulness and resilience. Louw (2010:84) thus includes the dimensions of existential theology and a theology of affirmation in this theological framework for care. It is in essence about being a 'new being in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit – that is, fortigenesis, a courage based in God' (Louw 2010:85).

This theme of the power of the Spirit is further expanded upon in his article 'Pastoral Caregiving as life science' (Louw 2017), where he explores faith care as life care (or habitus) where he emphasises life in the spirit – as a pneumatological approach. Here Louw (2017:2) advocates for a re-emphasis on the original meaning and intention of *cura animarum* [cure of souls]. This perspective of soul care envisions wholeness as healing – which includes the physical and spiritual healing of all existential life issues. Healing is therefore proposed as a holistic approach to caregiving. Salvation in this context is spiritual healing of all aspects of life (Louw 2017:3). From a pneumatological perspective, it is life in the Holy Spirit –

exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit (virtues) (Louw 2017:3). Related to the soul, it is a way of being in the world, which is informed not only by virtues but actions. The human soul is a composite of life, ethos and habitus. It is a way of being – a disposition. The soul is being human before God, and in turn, in relationship with others (Louw 2017:3). There is an interplay between the soul and habitus. The latter refers to a 'qualitative mode of being and a responsiveness to the demands of life' (Louw 2017:3). It is a way of being in life – a disposition and has implications on human rights, justice and dignity, which are all inherent to soulfulness.

The theological theory formation contributions of these practical theologians aid us in providing conceptual tools for theological reflection and praxis in pastoral care and in the ecclesial functions of the church. In considering some proposed models for care, these paradigms will prove useful as a theological preface for analysing some new applications of pastoral theology for pastoral care praxis. Both Louw (2010, 2017) and Browning (1996) are sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge the dangers of reductionism of the Christian faith/tradition to the social sciences – in this case, psychology and philosophy. We would contend strongly that this is a real danger, as has been noted by theologians in our previous discussion. The diminishing and cursory reference to what should be the central role of the Word and the role of the Holy Spirit in faith praxis and reflection is especially concerning and should be further highlighted in pastoral theology and pastoral care praxis. We have mentioned elsewhere that Patterson has had no qualms about advocating for the life-giving and transformative role of the Holy Spirit in the restoration of theology in pastoral care identity (Dames 2018). Similarly, Louw seeks to include a pneumatological approach to pastoral care, but this requires more pre-eminence if the dominance of the influence of the social sciences is to be overturned. Louw's (2010, 2017) emphasis on the inclusion of Christology is valuable for the re-emphasis of Christian Spirituality in faith praxis. In the '*New approaches in pastoral care: Contextual applications for pastoral care*', we note how this is explored in a more pronounced ecclesial context by Scheib (2016) in her reference to the practical functioning of the Church community.

New approaches in pastoral care: Contextual applications for pastoral care

Contextuality in care

In more recent times, the emphasis has been predominantly on the need for contextuality within theological reflection and praxis. Bevans (2005) has made valuable contributions to the importance of contextuality in faith praxis and faith reflection (theologising), noting the importance of considering both internal and external factors in such endeavours. External factors relate to culture and history, while internal factors pertain to the fundamental beliefs and traditions of the church (Bevans 2005:9–12). It must be added,

however, that even the latter paradigm of contextuality has also come under much scrutiny lately with cautions about theorising *about* and *objectifying* persons in need of care (cf. Goto 2018).

Yet it remains relevant as contextuality emphasises the full lived experience of the person in need of care, while also ensuring the inclusion of theology as one of its primary sources of knowledge.

Here, for instance, we consider Doehring's (2006) contribution. In aligning care to theology, Doehring uses the paradigm of Embedded and Deliberative Theology – acknowledging the complexity of being human *and* the complexity of existential issues. This approach is especially relevant in a diverse and complex post-modern context (Doehring 2006:111–112). It considers all 'embodied' aspects of being human into account – such as history, politics and culture (Davaney in Doehring 2006:117–118; cf. Bevans 2005:9). Davaney seeks to co-construct a theology which takes the complexity and ambiguity of life into account to make meaning in suffering (in Doehring 2006:118; cf. Louw 2000).

Political agency in care

In a similar vein, Wimberley (2006:11), using theological anthropology for Pastoral Care, seeks to facilitate personal agency and efficacy in the care process. Wimberley's approach takes cognisance of the context of modernity which had undermined relational institutions in society. The fundamental role of Pastoral Care in this context is seen as facilitating advocacy for liberation, personal efficacy and political agency – to ensure the allocation of scarce resources and access to limited resources. Political advocacy is sought to address the stigmatisation of people and the hegemony of legitimising power imbalances (Wimberley 2006:11–20).

In countries where there has been a history of slavery and racial oppression, Pastoral Care's fundamental role in such societies, as proposed by Wimberley, is liberation, personal efficacy and political agency. Care in the form of counselling would therefore be organised around these fundamental goals, addressing negative internalised structures, strengthening mediating structures and raising public awareness (Wimberley 2006:13). This type of pastoral care is highly contextualised and is based on an understanding of the people being served in terms of their history, social portrayal and the problems they face – especially if they have a history of oppression. Pastoral Care is therefore closely aligned to a political process (Wimberley 2006:20). It is a process of deconstructing internalised racism, editing negative internalised stories by seeking to apply theological anthropology for identity through discovering identity in Christ/God and 'real truths and values' (Wimberley 2006:25). Discourses of truth and social justice are placed in the context of God's truth. It is a political participation of seeking God's will on earth (Wimberley 2006:27; cf. Leech 1987).

For countries such as the United States and South Africa where there are huge power imbalances, this is the framework which Pastoral Care should adopt. It is a perspective in Pastoral Care which is in stark contrast to the individualised therapeutic approach which does not address issues of inequality and injustice prevalent in certain societies and racial groups.

Survival and liberation in care

A similar perspective for oppressed and marginalised groups is held by Watkins (1999). Her emphasis in pastoral care is also on survival and liberation for the oppressed. It proposes a theological framework for the experience and struggles of African Americans. Watkins (1999) contends that the resources for pastoral care and theology should seek to promote the *survival* and *liberation* of African American women. Her focus is intentionally antithetical to predominantly 'white' and male literature, which was predominantly from a male, individualistic perspective (Watkins 1999:3). Instead, Watkins (1999:6) proposes communal strategies in the pastoral care approach regarding Black women. This approach is based on Alice Walker's (*in* Watkins 1993:3) *Womanist* perspective on pastoral care, which is geared towards the survival and liberation of African Americans as a race.

The focus on communality rather than individuality means that it seeks the expansion of ministry beyond the traditional focus of healing, sustaining and guiding – to nurturing, empowering, liberating and reconciling (Watkins 1999:9). Watkins has thus appropriated a paradigm shift from traditional care to care based on the experience and cultural context of the care-seeker. This approach is premised on the belief that theological questions should be formulated within the cultural experience of the person seeking care, rather than being situated in the care-giver's experience (Watkins 1999:11). Contextuality is thus a key feature of this new conceptualisation of pastoral care and pastoral theology. This approach uses 'cognate' resources indigenous to the African American context to address the specific needs of poor Black women. Hence the use of sources from other disciplines such as Systematic Black Liberation Theology, Womanist theology and Black Psychology, among others (Watkins 1999:14). In South Africa which has a similar history of the oppression of Blacks and minority groups, this model of care can be adapted using local culture and historical experiences as a basis for contextual care – to seek meaning and justice in oppressive life situations.

We can learn from the American experiences and their use and adaptation of theology for a redefinition of identity and framing of the gospel within the local context. For instance, Black Liberation Theology like Cone's, cited in (Watkins 1999) has helped to define the role of Pastoral Theology to people in unjust or oppressive life situations. As Cone in Watkins (1999) clearly stated:

It is the task of the Christian theologian to do theology, in light of the concreteness of human oppression as expressed in colour, and to interpret for the oppressed the meaning of God's liberation in their community. (p. 45)

Black experience thus defines theology to Black people, considering all of life's existential context, such as history, culture, revelation, scripture and tradition (Watkins 1999:45).

A postcolonial perspective on pastoral care

Resistance and transformation in pastoral care

The academic contributions on slavery and oppression in America and other parts of the world bring to bear the 'twin' dynamic of colonialism which is prevalent in the history of many countries across the globe. Despite its profusion, this matter has only in recent times gained serious attention. In pastoral care, this phenomenon has also come under scrutiny as it relates to the ways care is practised.

For Melinda McGarrah Sharpe (2020), a key concept in tackling care within the context of colonialism is *resistance*, which she claims is essentially a *human agency* to achieve change. Alternatively, it can mean resistance or *reluctance* to needed change (McGarrah Sharpe 2020:4). In the context of post-colonialism, resisting injustice also implies advocating for change. For Pastoral Care, this presents a new way of caring from the traditional aspects of care. Yet McGarrah Sharpe (2020) argues that it has always been inherent to the very nature of care – that is, to advocate for the needs of the marginalised and the oppressed. Whether this challenge has always been met or accepted remains a debate. Sharpe further contends that resistance is inherent to the traditional aspects of healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, nurturing, liberating and empowering and that this type of pastoral care is in fact Transformational Pastoral Care. It seeks to transform by confronting practises that 'limit empathy' in seeking the collective well-being of all (McGarrah Sharpe 2020:21).

To achieve Transformational Pastoral Care through resistance in a post-colonial context, McGarrah Sharpe (2020) proposes five practices: (1) Unlocking Disbeliefs; (2) Remembering Pasts; (3) Re-storying impassible futures; (4) Amplifying Phoenix Poets and (5) Crossing Borders with Healthy Boundaries. These practices are all aimed at overcoming or enforcing resistance.

Although McGarrah Sharpe (2020) does not explicitly name the underlying philosophy of this model for care, the concepts and phrases bear a strong resemblance to the Narrative philosophy which is more openly proposed by Wimberley (2006). Her proposed methods also bear strong similarities to the works of the authors discussed. Watkins (1999) for instance strongly advocated the use of Black cultural media such as writings and poetry, music, etc. – to strive for resistance. Also, McGarrah Sharpe's (2020) model does not engage with the complexities of oppression and marginalisation as was more clearly apparent in the works of Watkins (1999) and Wimberley (2006).

A narrative ecclesial theological model

A more current approach by Scheib (2016) also reflects an underlying Narrative philosophy, with a theological emphasis on the ecclesial dimension of care. Scheib proposes a pastoral care model for a narrative, ecclesial-theological approach – situated within the Christian tradition. It is a hermeneutic approach to care which uses stories in meaning-making and affirming identity (Scheib 2016:3–4). This narrative Pastoral care is ecclesial and theological and is seen as an intersection of God's story with human stories – placed within the context of community and culture (Scheib 2016:4). It is ecclesial in the sense that it is placed within the context of the church where a sense of purpose, identity and motivation (mission) is instilled. It is here where the community is formed through a 'life of love' through God's love in Christ and by the power of his Holy Spirit. The role of the Church is to proclaim, interpret and live out God's love. It is a theological practice as it is vested in the biblical, historical narrative of God's love (Scheib 2016:5). According to Scheib, the role of the Church is thus the place where love is practised and to foster growth in love, self and God (Scheib 2016:16). Pastoral Care is viewed as an ecclesial practice which requires an articulation of what is meant by 'Church' (Scheib 2016:17). This is the theological (ecclesial) nature of the church. The Church should embody a *koinonia* ecclesiology which is centred on love – with an emphasis on communal spiritual care and formation, rather than individual, privatised religion and care (Scheib 2016:18).

This Narrative Ecclesial Theological model is thus a relational model emphasising the importance of intersubjective relationships by drawing on both theology and psychology. It draws from theology and the social sciences. From a theological perspective, it is based on the story of the Church – the doctrine of Grace and the Christian faith and also the story of salvation and justification, regeneration, and sanctification by grace (Scheib 2016:18–19).

Scheib (2016) brings us closer to a theological reflection on Pastoral Care and the role of the Church – with care as a specific aspect of theological praxis and reflection. It provides a theological/ecclesial paradigm for defining the nature of being a church and the practice of care. It can be applied in diverse contexts – even where the history and nature of individual churches are deemed to be complex.

Ecotheology and pastoral care

In the introduction, we note the extensive range of Pastoral Care in current times of change. Today this change is not only within the socio-political milieu but is also evident in the eco-systems of the world. In his extensive exposition of the range of care today, La Mothe (2022:1) calls us to reflect on the 'emergency' of extending pastoral care to include care of the earth and its ecosystems. Dames (2024) expands on this theme, calling for a multi-disciplinary and theological approach to address the crisis faced by both humans and nature.

To present a theological approach to this existential crisis, Dames (2024) applies the works of Harvie's (2019) public theology and Van Huyssteen's (2010) transversal rationality. He also proposes a theological ontology of care based on the work of Bonhoeffer and Moschella and Butler. Other seminal contributions proposed for care of the earth include Moltmann's eco-practical theology, Rasmussen's theory of the earth as community and Koning's text on 'Jesus die laaste', as cited in Dames (2024:2). Dames thus proposes a synchronising of theologies to address the world's eco-crisis from a theological perspective – these include practical theology, public eco-theology and a public practical theology of life-care (2024:2–3). The scope of pastoral care ought to expand to provide care to the whole of life.

For a practical theological response to the earth's existential crisis, the theology of Heitink (1979) is applied to reflect on creation and ecology within the framework of Christology and pneumatology as a Christo-praxis (cf. Botman 2000). From a pastoral theology perspective, Hietink's (1979:78–81) bipolar model for theological reflection is proposed to address the tension and challenges between faith and existential challenges such as the eco-crisis (Dames 2024:2; Van Huyssteen 2011).

To synthesise different theological perspectives relevant to addressing climate change and the climate crisis, public eco-theology based on Harvie's (2019) public theology is applied. Harvie (2019:504) suggests interdisciplinary collaboration between public theology and the natural sciences. However, the focus should no longer be anthropocentric, but from a theological perspective, it should be eschatologically informed. Thus, a theological reconceptualisation is proposed which transcends traditional religious concepts. This new paradigm calls for an 'embodied' pastoral engagement with the earth (Dames 2024:3).

To further address the tension between a phenomenological and a Christological view of the eco-crisis, Van Huyssteen's concept of transversal rationality is applied – to 'engender a connected flesh ontology within the living biosphere' (in Dames 2024). This underscores Harvie's (2019) notion of 'embodied self'. Harvie's public theology thus proposes a new eco-practical theology for praxis in pastoral care in addressing the climate crisis and its repercussions on human wellness (Dames 2024:4). In practical terms, the implications of climate change are oppressive to many communities across the globe. For pastoral care, intervention seeking justice, transformation and restoration for the oppressed is a core element of providing care in the face of such anthropocentric dominance. Based on Botman (2002), a 'new kind of Christian hope' is envisaged for such marginalised and oppressed communities (Dames 2024:4). This brings to bear the role of the Church as a 'community of hope' in symbolising and acting (resisting) against dominant forces of oppression. This is in line with the prophetic vision of the Church in accordance with the Church's mission on earth. Hence the prophetic ministry and pastoral corporate care are clearly apparent in the Black Church which has a painful

history of slavery and oppression (Dames 2024:5). Pastoral care and counselling today face renewed challenges in addressing various crises in the world.

Global existential crises and pastoral care

Reimer (2024) depicts the crisis of our world as the soul of the church's mission. Following Reimer, the crisis in the world connotes the soul of pastoral care and counselling. We are in a deep existential crisis:

Die Welt, in der wir leben, befindet sich in einer großen Krise. Politische, religiöse und wirtschaftliche Rivalitäten führen zu Kriegen, massiven Spannungen und zur Flucht von Menschen, die auf der Suche nach einem besseren und sicheren Lebensraum aus ihren Heimatländern fliehen. Laut UNHCR sind aktuell 68.5 Millionen Menschen gezwungen, ihre Herkunftsländer zu verlassen (Reimer 2024:8).

Human existence today is embedded in living experiences of fear and panic associated with a deep sense of despair (Moltmann 2019). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), food and water security, massive immigration trends and violent modern wars, to name a few, add to a growing need for survival (Amusan & Agunyai 2021; Reimer 2021). Basic human needs have become more pertinent than the need for meaning in life. Botman's (1996) notion of metaphorical locking devices aptly defines human capturing by these living realities. Humanity is in dire need of liberating metaphorical devices (Botman & Petersen 1996), a 'culture of recovery' for human care and counselling to enhance mental health and well-being (De Backer 2021). The mental and physical profile of humanity has been fractured and is in need of adaptive diaconal and pastoral care and counselling (De Backer 2021:3; Reimer 2023). The pastoral-diaconal task of the church is to seek concrete freedom among the nations of the world, and people in society to stem the threat of isolation and the growing tendencies of human autonomy. The need for human solidarity, as in the past, is more critical today if we are to foster a new sense of freedom with the self, others and ecology (Reimer 2023). Pastoral care and counselling should enact a public and prophetic presence in the broader society and world. We need pastoral care and counselling to enhance and enact a concerted concrete praxis of freedom as a praxis of cultural recovery fostering liberation of the human soul, spirit, body and existence for human and ecological wholeness (Reimer 2024:114ff.).

The role of the Church in pastoral care

In light of the wide range of needs that the church and pastoral call pastoral care must address, the task at hand appears daunting. This highlights the role of the church and its relationship to pastoral care as an essential ecclesial function in attending to those in need, underscoring the growing call for the restoration of pastoral care within an ecclesial and pastoral theological framework. How might such a relationship be envisioned?

In considering pastoral care as one of the ecclesial functions of the church, it is important to place such a reflection within the context of the decline and marginalisation of the authority of the church in postmodern times. Juxtaposed to this decline was the separation of pastoral care as ecclesial praxis from the functions of the church. It appears that the church had also been caught in the ambivalence brought on by the transition between modernity and postmodernity, which has been characterised by fluidity and discontinuous change (Roxburgh 2005:29).

The loss of identity and confusion regarding the church's role and authority have been extensively documented (Oden in Dames 2018). To salvage some relevance in the current postmodern context, the church has resorted to several desperate measures to adapt (Roxburgh 2005:49). Unfortunately, these measures have often been informed by market-driven and consumer-orientated values. Alternatively, it has compromised the theological centrality and biblical perspective of what the church essentially should epitomise. As Greenwood (2002:9) correctly notes, the Church's quest for survival should not entail a reductionist approach to ecclesial life which is not inclusive of significant Church metaphors, such as 'servant, sign of God's reign and hospitable community'. Another significant oversight by traditional churches has been the exclusion of the vast masses who are not active church members. These are people whose existential needs and struggles have been largely ignored by traditional churches. King (in Greenwood 2002:10) points to theological paradigms in the church which have become irrelevant in addressing the needs of current culture. This calls for re-evaluation and introspection by the church to reflect on how it can serve the needs of the people as Christ came to serve (Greenwood 2002:11).

In considering the church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dames, from an African context, reflects on serious shortcomings in the role of the church as a community of care (Dames 2022:52). In accordance with Dickie (2021), he contends that the church has lost its mission to offer hope in 'the realities of pain' (in Dames 2022:52). Some of the most serious defects include churches captured by social hegemony, including the abuse of power as manifests in corruption, maleficent political alignments and the development of prophetic institutions outside of established churches (Dube in Dames 2022:56).

To counter these shortcomings, the church is called upon to become a spiritual resource in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Magezi in Dames 2022:53). The church is also called upon to address experiences of existential angst through an eschatological praxeology of hope (Kruger in Dames 2022:53). A similar theory is proposed by Johnson and Goronga for a fine atonement to the Spirit in discerning the needs of the ecclesial community (in Dames 2022:53). To ameliorate the lack of scarce resources for times of crises and serious need, the church is called upon to work in multi-disciplinary collaboration with the helping professions and

to engage creatively with local communities (Dames 2022:54). To counter corruption and false prophecy, scholars are called upon to challenge colonialism and problematic discourses, by committing to decolonisation and social justice through their contributions and academic discourses (Dube in Dames 2022:56,57).

The Church today, particularly in the West, is called to re-imagine creatively how it can adapt its theological metaphors to reach the broken and the oppressed in the post-modern context. Greenwood (2002:13) calls for the Church to move from an institution to an 'intimate community' which serves 'all God's world'. Roxburgh (2005) calls on the church in its ecclesial praxes to understand the dynamics of changing socio-cultural contexts, which he refers to as 'discontinuous change and transition'. Churches should examine these processes and paradigms to address the challenges of discontinuous change and transition. It is incumbent on church leaders to learn to cultivate new frameworks and skills for addressing discontinuous change (Roxburgh 2005:49–51). By reimagining the Christian life in a world of discontinuous change and shifting old frameworks to be relevant in current times, the church and its praxes can become more relevant to the needs of people struggling with the challenges of fluidity and discontinuous change (Roxburgh 2005:53). Church leaders have a vital role to play in this regard through anticipating change, creating new paradigms and revising old institutional cultures. The role of the church includes interpreting and facilitating loss and adjustment to new social milieus. They should consider reframing the original 'story' of the church in new structures while sustaining and reappropriating the underlying Christian narrative. This includes developing a new language and new set of roles for doing and being church (Roxburgh 2005:55). Roxburgh's perspective correlates with Browning's views on the role of critical hermeneutic reflection and revision of traditions and faith documents by the church in times of change and crises (Browning 1996:7). By applying his theory of a critical practical theological reflection, Browning has illustrated the new ways in which congregations have adapted to address the pastoral care needs of their faith communities in relevant and concrete ways (cf. Browning 1996:15, 261–265). There is thus a growing consensus that faith praxis cannot remain static or abstract but should engage with changing contexts and the challenges which accompany them (Van Huyssteen 2011). However, we concur with Greenwood (2002) and Scheib (2016) on maintaining the centrality of the message of the gospel namely love of God and love and service of neighbour. These are central biblical truths which cannot be compromised or neutralised by giving pre-eminence to theological theorising instead of service and building community (Greenwood 2002:13; Scheib 2016:18–19).

Conclusion

A critical reflection on pastoral care

This article has attempted to highlight some of the developments in both theory and praxis, respectively – seeking

to address the challenges faced by pastoral care during the many manifestations of transitional change (Roxburgh 2005). In their attempt to address these challenges, theologians have appropriated many forms of rational thought – notably from philosophy, psychology and the social sciences in general. However, there has been a call for a return to its spiritual and theological roots. Yet the influence of philosophy continues to linger and will probably persist, with the very dominant influence of Gadamer (in Browning 1996; cf. ed. Dostal 2002) and post-structuralist thought apparent in the contributions of Browning (1996), Louw (2017) and others. For instance, narrative philosophies are evident in the works of both Scheib (2016) and McGarrah Sharpe (2020). These are unique applications of rational and post-structural philosophies to theology. One would, however, from a Christian and theological perspective, call for a more prominent focus on the attributes of Christian spirituality in faith praxis – in this instance in Pastoral Care. Scheib's (2016) contribution seeks to do this in a more notable manner, with her emphasis on the role of the Church and its illumination of the word of God in faith praxis and community. Wimberley (2006) and Greenwood (2002) also seek to remain faithful to the Word of God as a guideline for faith praxis in addressing issues of injustice and equity as real existential challenges for marginalised communities.

This discussion essentially provides us with guidelines for reframing church praxis, including pastoral care and its relevance as an ecclesial function to the church. As noted by Scheib (2016:17), Pastoral Care as an ecclesial practice requires an articulation of what is meant by the Church.

The authors also challenge us to a re-imagining of the identity and role of the church and pastoral care as one of its functions, in current times. From above mentioned models, some insightful perspectives for a more contextual application of theology in pastoral care are envisaged. The notion of pastoral care, reinstated in its ecclesial character as one of the functions of the church, is especially relevant in lieu of the call for a return to a pastoral theology for caregiving. Also, given the complex existential challenges of our times, the church is called upon to play a very practical role in discipleship and servitude through its ecclesial function of care. In this respect, we agree with Greenwood (2002) that the church is called through its care function, to serve as Christ came to serve.

On the practical notion of application, the models provided for pastoral care by Wimberley (2006), Watkins (1999) and Scheib (2016) seem feasible in current complex times – especially for oppressed and marginalised groups. There is, however, the very real challenge of the imbalance of political resources and power, as pointed out by Wimberley (2006) and Watkins (1999); also, the real challenge of resistance as articulated by McGarrah Sharpe (2020). How are these challenges overcome? Furthermore, how does being cognisant of Christian spirituality and theology address the ominous reality of

power imbalances and hegemony in consumer-driven, predominantly capitalist societies?

There are economic and philosophical perspectives to these challenges. However, from a Christian perspective, we note Greenwood's (2002) critique of the church and his call to return to the true nature of being Church as modelled by Christ himself. This is a biblical perspective of a call to discipleship and servitude. However, how is this possible without Christ himself?

In considering a Christian Spirituality for Care, we are reminded of the key tenets of Christianity. For the Church after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, these include, the resurrection power of Christ, his Word and his Holy Spirit – as outlined by Louw's (2017) Christological and Pneumatological models of care.

Herein lies the power of Christ, with which he empowers the Church to complete his work and mission on earth. Pastoral care as an ecclesial function of the church, is called to be rooted in these Christian attributes, reflecting Christian spirituality in its approach to care. It is a call to bear witness to the Kingdom of God and its attributes, as Christ did (Leech 1986).

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Authors' contributions

G.A.D. conceived the main theme and formulated the conceptual framework for the article. She contributed to the discussion and analysis of the main themes and concepts for the article, collecting relevant research material for discussion and analysis.

G.E.D. verified the analytical methodology and encouraged G.A.D. to investigate current trends in Pastoral Care which had not yet been addressed in the article. Hence, he contributed to the sections on Eco-theology and Pastoral Care, global existential crises and Pastoral Care and the role of the church in Pastoral Care. Closely link to these new trends were the commiserate roles of the Church to address unique needs which had not been apparent in earlier times. G.E.D. contributed to addressing these gaps in the discussion by further expanding on current relevance and roles of the church. G.E.D. supervised the integration of this additional data and revised the reference list accordingly. Both G.A.D. and G.E.D. contributed to the final completion of the manuscript.

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