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Public pastoral care approach in addressing tensions in marriages within Southern African churches and communities

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Public pastoral care, as practised by churches and communities, can play a crucial role in helping African couples navigate the tensions that arise between African marriage traditions and Western cultural influences. For such care to be effective, it must be contextualised within the lived realities and public spaces of African societies. This article proposes a model of public pastoral care that is both ecclesial and communal in character, designed to support African marriages as they negotiate these cultural tensions. Drawing on the intersection between African marriage practices and the tensions currently affecting them, the article addresses the following questions: How can public pastoral care be conceptualised within African contexts? In what ways can it engage African public life? What are the major tensions influencing African marriages within these publics? And how can a contextualised framework of public pastoral care function as an intervention for couples experiencing such tensions? In response, the article first conceptualises public pastoral care within the African context, then explores its practice within African public, followed by an analysis of marital tensions, and finally presents a contextual pastoral framework aimed at strengthening marriages amid competing cultural expectations.

Contribution: This article contributes by proposing a contextual model of public pastoral care that enables African couples to manage cultural tensions within marriage, thereby strengthening families and fostering healthier communities.

Keywords: African marriages; African and Western marriage tension; marriage in Africa; public pastoral care; tension in African marriages; African churches and marriages; African communities; public pastoral care and African marriages.

Introduction

African marriages today face significant tensions arising from the encounter between traditional African cultural values and Western cultural influences (Madukwe & Madukwe 2010; Magezi 2018, 2019a; Makumbini 2024). Commenting on the varied outcomes of this tension, Makumbini (2024) observes:

> The tension experienced by couples and families between African tradition on marriage and Western influence can have adverse outcomes. Examples of the negative outcomes include a high rate of divorce, broken relationships between parents and their children, gender-based violence, and so forth. (p. 33)

These tensions are extensively documented and discussed in the pastoral care literature (Magezi 2018; Makumbini 2024). The challenges they present are not limited to couples outside the church but are also evident among those within Christian communities, thereby underscoring the urgent need for meaningful pastoral responses both within and beyond ecclesial settings. This reality therefore calls for an exploration of the role pastoral care can play within broader social and community spaces as *public pastoral care*.

The critical question, therefore, is the following: How can modern African couples cope with the tensions of tradition that have become a lived reality within their marriages? This article argues that public pastoral care, when practised collaboratively by both churches and communities, provides a crucial locus of intervention for addressing marital struggles within social and community contexts. For such care to be effective, however, it must be contextualised within African public spaces and lived realities rather than imposed from external frameworks.

In engaging this question, the article draws on the notion of *publics* as vital spaces of dialogue and intervention in African societies. Beyond the commonly recognised publics such as the academy, the church, legal institutions, and the broader society, there also exist less formal yet equally influential traditional forums, which Magezi (2022) refers to as 'publics within publics'. These concealed communal spaces – where conversations, negotiations, and socialisation processes take place – are particularly significant in shaping marriage practices and expectations in African contexts.

Understanding and engaging these publics is therefore indispensable for developing a pastoral care model that resonates with African couples navigating cultural contestations. Such contestations often arise from the clash between traditional African customs and modern or Western cultural values – for example, differing interpretations of *lobola* [bride price] and its significance; the tension between polygamous traditions and the church's emphasis on monogamy; conflicts over gender roles and women's autonomy; or disputes concerning extended family authority versus the nuclear family model. These issues expose the ongoing cultural negotiations couples must undertake as they seek to live faithfully within both African communal norms and Western-influenced expectations of marriage.

This article proceeds in four steps. Firstly, it conceptualises public pastoral care within African contexts, clarifying its ecclesial and communal dimensions. Secondly, it examines how public pastoral care can be meaningfully practised within African publics, both formal and informal. Thirdly, it analyses the key tensions affecting African marriages in light of these cultural and social dynamics. Finally, it proposes a contextualised pastoral framework aimed at strengthening marriages and equipping couples to cope with the challenges posed by competing cultural expectations.

The tensions evident in African marriages demonstrate that pastoral responses cannot remain confined to private or strictly ecclesial settings. What is required is an approach that meaningfully engages both the church and the wider community. For this reason, the article begins by conceptualising public pastoral care within African contexts. This conceptual grounding provides the basis for exploring its practice within African publics, analysing the tensions that affect marriages, and proposing a contextualised framework to assist couples in navigating these challenges.

Conceptualising public pastoral care

The understanding of public pastoral care begins with clarifying what is meant by *public theology*. Public theology is a theological approach that engages with both ecclesial and non-ecclesial concerns. Its significance lies in its capacity to move beyond challenges internal to the Christian tradition, addressing wider social, political, and economic realities. Mannion (2009:122) observes that public theology is concerned with 'ecclesiological questions that refer to the role and relevance of the church, both to

the "secular" and "pluralist" societies'. He (Mannion 2009) further describes it as an 'umbrella concept' encompassing diverse methods, challenges, and problems, viewing it as the following:

> [A] shorthand for church in the world, embracing the contributions of the different churches and theology to the wider social, political, economic and cultural life of the communities where Christianity is found. (p. 122)

Similarly, Kim (2017:40) defines public theology as a 'critical, reflective and reasoned engagement of theology in society to bring the Kingdom of God, which is for the sake of the poor and marginalised'. Supporting this view, Magezi (2022:5) contends that public theology is 'an attempt to correct irrelevant, distant and aloof theology by considering people's daily realities. Public theology interrogates the role of theology in society'.

Public theology may therefore be understood as a dynamic and contextual enterprise that seeks to shape and influence both the church and the broader secular world. Yet, this raises an important question: What does the term 'public' signify within public theology?

The meaning of public within public theology

Within public theology, the notion of 'public' refers to the space where conversations and engagements take place (Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024). This implies that 'public' extends beyond the boundaries of the church to encompass wider arenas of discourse. Morton (2004:29) distinguishes between the concepts of '*public*' and '*community*'.

Morton (2004) defines the public as:

> A space or distance in the sense of difference and either disagreement or absence of agreement. It is indeed a forum or agora, a space which allows and indeed encourages encounter with that which is different […]. (p. 29)

He (Morton 2004:29) further explains that the public emphasises what is not common or shared among people.

Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on difference, Morton (2004) also acknowledges that certain commonalities exist within the public by observing the following:

> Of course, a public would not be a public unless its members had something in common. At the very least, a public has a common language and form of discourse, without which there could be no exchange in the forum, no dialogue, no conversation. Its existence also presupposes some measure of common experience and common practice and possibly also common belief and common purpose. But alongside this is a great area, in which there is nothing in common. What is shared in a public is space more than substance; there is some togetherness but with large spaces in it; its weave is open. (p. 29)

Magezi (2022:5) reiterates this by rejecting the simplistic notion that 'public' is merely the opposite of 'private'.

Rather, within public theology, the 'public' should be understood as a conversational space that accommodates both common and uncommon engagements. However, to grasp fully the contours of public theology, it is not enough to define the meaning of 'public' alone. Public theology is deeply rooted in, and shaped by, the broader discipline of practical theology – from which it arises and to which it remains accountable. An exploration of practical theology is therefore essential for understanding the methodological and theological foundations that sustain public theology.

Practical theology and pastoral care

Practical theology focuses on people's everyday problems and concerns. This is significant because it represents a theology that begins with people's lived situations and contexts before seeking to provide meaningful responses to their challenges. One of the leading practical theologians, Browning (1991), identifies the core of practical theology as the movement:

> [...] from practice to theory and back to practice [...] or more accurately, it goes from present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices. (p. 7)

However, this line of 'practice-theory-practice' should not be understood as a simple linear process (Browning 1991; Cahalan & Mikoski 2014). Rather, as Magezi (2022:4) observes, 'Practical theologians are bi-directional', highlighting the reality that all practices are inherently 'theory-laden' (Graham 2017:4).

This approach reflects what many scholars describe as *theology from below* rather than *theology from above*. Whereas theology from above begins with abstract doctrinal formulations or divine revelation and then seeks to apply these to human experience, theology from below starts with the lived experiences of people as the foundation for theological reflection. It listens attentively to the cries, hopes, and struggles of communities and interprets them in light of faith. In this way, practical theology affirms that God's presence and revelation are discerned within human realities rather than imposed upon them.

The distinction between reductionist and inclusive theories becomes crucial at this point. Reductionist approaches risk narrowing theology to individual or purely spiritual concerns, often overlooking the socio-cultural, political, and communal dimensions of life. In contrast, inclusive theories of practical theology recognise that faith and life are inseparable; they integrate the spiritual, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of human existence. Such inclusivity enables theology to respond holistically to the complexities of people's lived realities, making practical theology both transformative and contextually grounded.

It should also be noted that defining practical theology is complex because of the diversity of perspectives within the field (Ganzevoort 2009; Hermans & Schweitzer 2014:1).

Ganzevoort (2009) illustrates this diversity by describing practical theology as a 'fork in the road', where differences emerge in relation to its object, method, researcher, and audience. Nevertheless, he affirms the *'hermeneutics of lived* religion' as the shared foundation within the discipline.

Osmer (2008:4) outlines four core tasks of practical theological interpretation, namely:

- Descriptive-empirical task: What is going on?
- The interpretive task: Why is this going on?
- The normative task: What ought to be going on?
- The pragmatic task: How might we respond?

These interpretive questions are rooted in the 'everyday experiences and problems of ordinary people' (Osmer 2008). Both Osmer and other scholars emphasise the centrality of human experience and context in the application of practical theology. Graham (2017:4) affirms this by stating, 'If this is the case, then to be a practical theological researcher is to enquire into these embodied expressions of situated knowledge. This implies taking context seriously [...]' In line with this, Osmer's fourth question underscores practical theology's concern with developing strategies of response. Browning (1991:36) describes the aim of such strategies as guiding action 'toward social and individual transformation'. Thus, practical theology is best understood as an interpretive and transformative discipline that seeks to engage people's lived realities through critical reflection, dialogue, and action.

It is imperative to recognise that public theology does not replace practical theology; rather, practical theology finds one of its expressions in public theology (Graham 2008; Kim 2011; Smit 2017). This relationship has been clarified by various scholars seeking to define practical theology. Dreyer (2004:919) distinguishes between practical and public theology by noting that not all practical theology is public theology. By this, she means that practical theology is not always directed towards a '*non*-ecclesial' audience. While the primary task of public theology is to make theology public through various models, such as the foundational and action models proposed by Jacobsen (2012:7), practical theology intentionally and explicitly embeds the development of models and intervention strategies (Magezi 2019b).

The emphasis of practical theology lies in addressing everyday human problems and concerns, with the aim of fostering dialogue between theology and culture (Magezi 2020:67). This aligns with Ganzevoort's description (2009) of practical theology as '*the hermeneutics of lived* religion', while public theology, as Meylahn (2015:1) asserts, 'engages the public texts within their contexts'. Meylahn (2015:1) further contends that practical theology must be undertaken from a Christological perspective, insofar as the revelation of God in Christ necessarily engages public discourses. Such an approach gives rise to what he terms '*public practical theology*', which extends practical theology beyond the boundaries of the church into the public sphere. Dreyer (2004:919) likewise highlights this need, arguing that practical theology should intentionally include a public dimension.

Building on this, Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:218) emphasise that public practical theology must ensure that the public is explicitly recognised as one of its audiences, thereby incorporating public issues and concerns into its theological reflection. Magezi and Manzanga (2019:6) similarly affirm that 'public practical theology is, therefore, a practical theology approach where the focus is explicitly on public issues'. Against this backdrop, this article adopts a practical theological approach that engages the everyday tensions arising from the intersection of Western and African traditions in contemporary African marriages.

Within practical theology lies *pastoral care*. Traditionally known as *cura animarum* [cure of souls] (McLure 2012:270), pastoral care refers to the 'thorough care of people in their existential situations' (Magezi 2016:1). Although the terms '*pastoral care*' and '*pastoral counselling*' are often used interchangeably, Magezi (2007:655–656) identifies an important distinction between them. According to Magezi (2016:1), pastoral care encompasses 'broad caring activities', whereas pastoral counselling specifically denotes 'pastoral caring in the form of dialogue and communication to alleviate distress within the context of pastoral ministry'. This distinction underscores the broader scope of pastoral care, which adopts a holistic approach that includes 'mutual healing and growth within a congregation and its community through its lifecycle' (Magezi 2016:1).

The convergence of practical theology, public theology, and pastoral care occurs when pastoral theology adopts a public dimension and develops into *public pastoral care*. This shift is significant because it reframes pastoral theology from being primarily concerned with individual care to addressing broader social challenges. Magezi (2020:67) observes that pastoral care is generally regarded as a sub-discipline of practical theology. However, pastoral care assumes a public character when it takes on 'an explicit public dimension' (Magezi 2020:67). Expounding on this intersection, Magezi (2020:63) explains that public pastoral care 'is a ministry approach at an interdisciplinary theological interface. It draws largely from public and practical theology in conversation with other theological disciplines'.

This understanding resonates with Leslie (2008:82), who notes that pastoral work is increasingly moving 'into the public arena'. Similarly, Miller-McLemore (2018:312) describes public pastoral theology as 'a renewed public theology that would speak beyond parochial religious communities to critical social issues and the wider common good'. Such a perspective challenges the narrow conception of pastoral care as limited to supporting individuals in moments of personal crisis. Instead, it calls for pastoral care to engage with 'larger social-ethical questions' (Miller-McLemore 2018:12). For Miller-McLemore (2018:12), the need for public pastoral care lies in ensuring that practical theology meaningfully addresses public problems that have pastoral implications.

Because pastoral care, like practical and public theology, revolves around the concerns and challenges of people's lived realities, a natural convergence emerges among the three. Magezi (2020) aptly observes:

> The convergence of public theology and practical theology is evident in some methods, such as integrationist and dialogical approaches that are followed in public theology. Furthermore, some public theology typologies, such as incarnational, interdisciplinary, dialogical and performance, have similarities with practical theology. Pastoral care, as a practical theology discipline, is anchored in such dialectic and spiral approaches. (p. 68)

Therefore, the convergence point between practical theology, public theology, and pastoral care lies in their shared engagement with the public and their focus on the problems and concerns of people's lived realities. Accordingly, Magezi (2020) defines *public pastoral care* as:

> Public pastoral care is (1) caring for people from a Christian spiritual perspective whereby (2) the care is provided to people in different public spaces and contexts (3) to address holistic issues affecting people such as spiritual, social, emotional, cultural, economic, political and others (4) to enable them to meaningfully cope with life. (p. 69)

Considering this understanding, it becomes essential to explore how public pastoral care is expressed within the African context, where social, cultural, and communal realities uniquely shape both the challenges people encounter and the ways in which pastoral care can be effectively practised.

Public pastoral care within an African setting

Public pastoral care in Africa requires an approach that is contextually relevant to Africa and Africans (Nanthambwe 2025). This necessity arises from Africa's distinctive understanding of humanhood. Magezi (2022:8) illustrates this through the principle of *ubuntu* [I am because we are] or [a person is a person through other persons]. This principle highlights the communal orientation of African society, which stands in contrast to Western individualism (Brunsdon 2020:117; Louw 1997:392). Within this worldview, an individual's identity and existence are defined by their relationships within the community. Consequently, any pastoral care actions or interventions in Africa must take this communal understanding of humanhood seriously (Magezi 2022:9). This leads Magezi (2022) to conclude that:

> [...] public theology is contextual, which informs public pastoral care as a human caring approach that is conducted in the African context. In the design of the caregiving approach, public pastoral care enterprise is fuzzy and confusing, and yet, it is distinguishable as a caring approach whose target audience is non-ecclesial but the wider public. Notably, public pastoral care performs a unique caregiving role by pastoral caregiver journeying (outreach) from the traditional ecclesial setting to the public spaces, where diverse people are located. This pastoral care effort is aimed to address the holistic human being to enhance quality humanhood. (p. 10)

To practise public pastoral care effectively in African contexts, the target publics must first be identified and understood within the 'pluralistic contexts that people exist' (Magezi 2022:1). The motivation for contextualising public pastoral care in Africa is grounded in the value of humanhood as created in the image of God. Magezi (2022:2) illustrates this through the church's engagement in African struggles, including apartheid and challenges in the health sector. Africans also continue to face various social ills, such as tensions between different traditions within marriage. This raises the crucial question: How can public pastoral care be effectively carried out in Africa?

Magezi (2022:2) emphasises that contextualisation is essential, meaning 'to understand the nature and dynamics of the African public issues and the publics that a pastor should confront and engage'. Similarly, Louw (1997:392) advocates for an African-oriented pastoral care, noting that such an approach ensures the 'contextual and cultural relevance of God's faithfulness and message of the Gospel'. A contextualised approach thus enhances the effectiveness of public pastoral care in addressing the lived concerns and existential realities of Africans.

Several publics exist within African contexts, and it is essential to explore these, as other, less recognised publics are often embedded within them. Morton (2004:30) identifies three publics – the church, the academy, and society – describing them as 'dialogic forums, settings of advocacy and attentiveness, spaces within which there is distance, difference and possibility of disagreement'. Day and Kim (2017:12) further observe that these forums are 'pervaded by questioning, doubting and challenging, as well as asserting, confirming and agreeing'. Unlike communities, publics function as dialogic spaces of engagement. Similarly, Tracy (1981:8–9) identifies three theological publics – society, the church, and the academy – while Stackhouse (1997:166) expands these to four: religious, political, academic, and economic. Benne (1995) includes law as another public, and Smit (2013:9) identifies four in the South African context: political, economic, civil society and public opinion. These publics are not fixed but are 'in constant motion' (Day & Kim 2017:12), reflecting the dynamic nature of society itself.

Traditional forums represent unrecognised African publics that remain vital for understanding people's lived realities. Here, 'traditional' does not imply 'primitive'; rather, it refers to 'historical indigenous cultural patterns and ways of living whereupon communities were governed before Western democracy' (Magezi 2022:11). In Zimbabwe, for instance, traditional community forums are overseen by chiefs and local authorities (Government of Zimbabwe 2019:6), and the issues addressed there are closely linked to civil society. Similarly, in South Africa, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) serves as a traditional leadership body that engages with public issues affecting communities (CONTRALESA n.d.). Its purpose is to strengthen traditional governance systems, promote dialogue between state institutions and local communities,

and enhance public life by addressing socio-cultural and developmental concerns within the framework of customary leadership.

Among the Shona people, the traditional forum, known as the 'Dare', plays a key role. Masitera (2019) highlights its importance in local governance and communal decision-making:

> *Dare* is the backbone and wellspring of the Shona social and political life. This means that through the *Dare*, social organisation, laws, morality and resolving of day-to-day conflicts are done […] the *Dare* was/is also very useful in advancing justice within the Shona way of living. (pp. 293–294)

Magezi (2022:13) observes that these African forums function as spaces for both 'problem resolution and social mobilisation'. Like any public space, however, traditional forums are not without flaws. They can occasionally produce harmful outcomes that necessitate intervention by national authorities. For example, a South African Xhosa King was arrested after murdering and kidnapping members of a family who had refused to appear before the traditional forum (Magezi 2022:13). Such negative occurrences reflect the inherent characteristics of any public space, where disagreement and differing perspectives are inevitable (Morton 2004:29).

Despite these shortcomings, traditional forums as African public spaces remain valuable, offering opportunities to address issues that are contextually relevant. As Magezi (2022:14) notes, these forums 'provide people with a sense of respect and dignity, as they are grounded on people's cultures, customs and norms'. Accordingly, traditional forums prioritise the culture and norms of the community, making them an ideal platform for contextualised public pastoral care that effectively responds to the lived realities of African people.

These forums are deeply rooted in traditional cultural values, many of which do not originate from Christianity. This is significant because it renders them particularly relevant to Africans whose identities and social practices are shaped by these cultural traditions. Nevertheless, public pastoral care within such African public forums remains possible, provided that its role and scope are taken seriously.

Magezi (2022:16–18) advances four propositions that enable the practice of public pastoral care in this context. Firstly, public pastoral care represents the Christian movement of incarnation – from private and distant spaces, such as church settings, into the public arena where people of diverse faiths, values, norms, and worldviews are found. Secondly, it involves journeying from private Christian spaces into the lived realities of people. Thirdly, public pastoral care carries a substantive and functional message addressed to the publics. Fourthly, it embodies hope and healing within contexts marked by anxiety, uncertainty, political betrayal, moral failure, the misuse of resources intended for the poor, and widespread despair.

These four propositions challenge Christianity to demonstrate its relevance within African publics, such as traditional forums, by ensuring that pastoral care is 'contextually relevant and effective' (Magezi 2016:3). Their strength lies in promoting a paradigm shift in public pastoral care – a call also echoed by Louw (1997).

Louw (1997:393) argues that such a shift requires, firstly, the adoption of a *metatheory* that reflects, understands, and interprets the African understanding of life; and secondly, the development of a pastoral care model that is more contextual, community-based, and existentially oriented. The importance of these insights lies in the recognition that an effective public pastoral care approach must be rooted in a deep understanding of the African context, as the challenges faced by Africans are inherently embedded within their cultural frameworks (Louw 1997:395).

Having established the significance of public pastoral care within African contexts and the roles of both recognised and traditional publics, attention can now turn to specific areas where such care is most needed. A pressing example concerns the tensions within African marriages, which are shaped by the interplay of cultural traditions, social expectations, and contemporary influences. Examining marital tensions within African publics provides a concrete context in which to explore how public pastoral care can meaningfully engage with and address complex social and relational challenges.

Marriage tensions within African publics

African publics and spaces are often sites of complex social challenges, including marital tensions that arise at the intersection of African traditions and Western influences. These tensions can be examined within the various publics outlined in the previous section, '*Publics within African settings*'. Several such publics have been identified: the church, academy, and society (Tracy 1981); the academic, economic, religious, and political sectors (Stackhouse 1997); law (Benne 1995); and the political, economic, civil society, and public opinion spheres (Smit 2013).

Magezi (2022:11) draws particular attention to African publics, with an emphasis on traditional forums where dialogue and debate take place. While the publics listed above are widely recognised, embedded within them are less visible African spaces – village assemblies, community councils, and other communal forums, – which together constitute the 'public *within* publics'. These spaces are often overlooked, yet they are crucial for understanding the dynamics of African communities. Their significance is reinforced by the strong sense of interconnectedness among African community members, as described by Madukwe and Madukwe (2010):

> There is care for one by all. There is the bearing of one another's burden, and everyone is his brother's keeper. There is a mutual assistance for one another. The haves help those who do not have, so that no one perishes because of wants, while his next-door neighbour lives in affluence. There is sharing of virtually everything. For instance, in a typical African setting, no one goes hungry, while the neighbour can help. In fact, one can easily walk into the following compound and demand for food, and this would be happily offered, even when the members of that compound are not at present eating. When a visitor enters such a compound and meets the family in question taking their meals, he would quickly wash his hands and join in the meal. During farming season, there is mutual assistance for one another, whether in terms of getting, for example, yam seedlings for cultivation, depending on agreement reached by the parties, or communal labour like clearing of bush for farming, cultivation, harvesting and other things. Apart from these, where a member of the village is bereaved, others are always there to comfort the person, contribute money to help take care of burial expenses, support in domestic work and childcare. (p. 268)

Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) illustrate that African life is fundamentally communal, characterised by constant interaction, sharing, and dialogue within social spaces. This creates a conversational public sphere in which debate, agreement, and disagreement naturally occur, forming what may be described as a '*public within a* public'. Recognising these often-hidden publics is therefore essential for the effective practice of public pastoral care.

Within both the recognised and unrecognised publics, tensions surrounding marriage inevitably arise. Accordingly, this article situates various marital tensions experienced between the African church and wider communities within selected African publics, as illustrated in the diagram below:

First among these are the African publics. Traditional forums, as conversational spaces, reveal several tensions surrounding African marriages at the intersection of indigenous tradition and Western influence. A common source of conflict is the clash between customary norms and perceived Christian values. Dube (2017) highlights the duplication of marriage ceremonies among the Ndau. The customary practice of *lobola* – in which a groom pays a bride price before receiving his wife – was regarded by missionaries as 'barbaric', leading them to require a white wedding for full church membership (Dube 2017:1). This has created confusion among African Christians about when a couple should be considered truly married (Ngundu 2011:36).
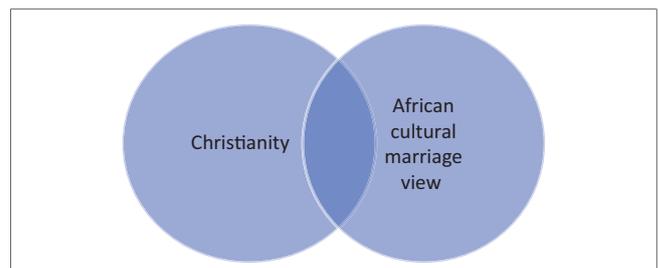
Source: Makumbini, P.M., 2024, 'Coping with the tension between traditional and the Western influence on marriage on African marriages: A study in public pastoral care', PhD thesis, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, p. 190

FIGURE 1: Different marriage tensions between the African church and communities within selected African publics.

African publics, including traditional forums and other conversational spaces, often display divided opinions that generate tension. Christian parents typically encourage their children to have a church wedding following *lobola*, as cohabiting after a customary marriage is regarded as sinful (Ngundu 2011:36). In contrast, non-Christian or non-mission-aligned parents may consider the customary marriage sufficient for giving their daughter away. Ngundu (2011) documents these conflicting expectations, highlighting the persistent tensions within African marriage practices:

> At marriage, every African Christian couple, especially in mission-founded churches, is confronted with three worlds: the world of the traditional culture to which most parents of marrying-age children belong; the world of the civil or legal system under which the couple, like other citizens, live; and the world of the predominantly Westernised culture that prevails in the church […] the question is: Which of these three worlds has a right to declare an African Christian couple married? […] such ambiguity has resulted in legal, social and moral problems for nearly all African Christian couples. (pp. 35–36)

This dilemma generates tensions in African marriages at multiple levels. At the family level, parents from mission-founded churches may reject a son-in-law who does not observe a church wedding or cannot afford one (Posel, Rudwick & Casale 2011:4). At the religious level, the church may withhold full membership from couples who have not had a church wedding (Dube 2017:67). At the cultural level, traditional forums may recognise a customary marriage despite opposition from missionary-founded churches. At the marital level, couples themselves may disagree on which marriage process to follow, thereby creating further strain. Collectively, these dynamics illustrate the persistent tension between the church and African communities.

Secondly, Tracy (1981:8) identifies *society* as a public influenced by theological perspectives on social issues. African society, as a conversational space, also experiences tension at the intersection of indigenous traditions and Western influences on marriage. Within this public, societal expectations emphasise communal living, where the extended family takes precedence over the nuclear family structure introduced by Western influence (Idang 2015:108; Madukwe & Madukwe 2010:268). In most African contexts, the extended family refers to a kinship system that goes beyond the husband, wife, and children to include parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and even members of the wider clan. This structure functions as a social and moral unit in which decisions affecting individuals – such as marriage arrangements, family disputes, or economic responsibilities – are made collectively rather than independently. Individual choices are therefore evaluated in relation to the welfare and honour of the wider family network.

Magezi (2022:9) notes, 'Benevolence and acts of good and bad are determined by the family and community'. In contrast, Western influence promotes individualism, which undermines the African extended family system, as Arowolo (2010) observes, 'nobody wants to be anybody's brother's keeper'.

This tension manifests between couples, family members, and the wider community. Porter (2019:n.p.) records a case in which a wife prioritised the needs of her extended family over those of her nuclear family, creating conflict with her husband yet earning social approval from the community. While some modern African couples have adopted individualistic practices, African society generally disapproves of individualism because of its negative impact on extended family relationships, community cohesion, and marital stability – often resulting in divorce or unhappiness within the marriage (Porter 2019:n.p.).

Thirdly, Tracy (1981:8) identifies the church as a significant public for Africans. Within this public, tensions arise from the clash between indigenous norms and perceived Christian values – most notably in the ongoing debate between polygamy and monogamy. Baloyi (2013:164) observes that polygamy is accepted in 'almost all' African societies, where polygamous men have historically enjoyed high social status due to their ability to support multiple wives (Mbiti 1991:139). Polygamy has also been valued as a means of having many children or addressing infertility (Baloyi 2013:164). Kyomo and Selvan (2004:35) affirm the continued relevance of polygamy, noting that it 'has been a widely discussed topic in African theology since the 1960s and is a burning issue even today'.

The primary source of tension within the church stems from divisions among Christian denominations, including missionary-initiated churches, African independent churches, and Pentecostal churches. Research indicates that missionary-founded churches typically condemn polygamy and insist upon monogamy. While the social and cultural dimensions of polygamy are often acknowledged, Waruta (2000) highlights the tensions created by missionaries' prohibition of the practice:

> Earlier missionaries felt the need to confront polygamy at the point of conversion. In short, a man who wanted to be accepted as a church member was required to bring one wife into the church (where a formal church marriage ceremony would take place) after abandoning all the other wives […]. (p. 108)

Mugambi (1989:96) observes that prohibiting polygamy did not eliminate its prevalence but instead created confusion, as some men resorted to divorcing their wives – a solution that was often more damaging. This tension remains common within the church today and continues to raise a pressing question: *Can polygamous men be full members of the church?*

Many African-initiated churches have attempted to accommodate polygamy, reasoning that 'official polygamy was not a great problem, but that of unofficial polygamy' (Baloyi 2013:174). This enduring tension illustrates the persistent challenge of reconciling indigenous marital practices with ecclesial expectations within the African public.

Fourthly is the academy, as noted by Tracy (1981:8). Madukwe and Madukwe (2010:270) emphasise that sexual relations are a fundamental aspect of marriage. Western influence, however, has introduced the legalisation of same-sex relationships and,

over the last decade, same-sex marriages in several African countries. Importantly, these developments were not imposed on Africans but were embraced by certain governments and individuals, as seen in South Africa. This acceptance is now reflected in some educational institutions, where instruction on same-sex relationships aligns with laws on human rights and equality (Madukwe & Madukwe 2010:270).

Tension arises when such teaching occurs without parental consent. For example, in Zimbabwe, some parents have rejected their son's same-sex partner, resulting in conflict because the son – having been informed by school instruction– believes he has a legal right to choose his partner. This exemplifies the ongoing tensions within the academic public, including schools and universities, as significant arenas of social discourse on marriage and morality.

Fifthly, Benne (1995) identifies *law* as public. A clear example of marital tension in this sphere emerges from the clash between traditional norms and modern legal frameworks, particularly regarding women's rights. In African tradition, the husband is regarded as the head of the household, responsible for leading, protecting, and providing for the family, while the wife is expected to submit (Madukwe & Madukwe 2010:270). However, from a biblical perspective, submission (*hypotassō*) does not imply inferiority or domination but rather mutual respect and self-giving love (Eph 5:21–25).

Western-influenced legal reforms, however, have challenged this structure. As Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) observe:

> [T]he divine order of the marriage institution, where the man is the head of the family, has been overturned by Western women who, for decades, have been agitating for women's liberalisation. Consequently, a lot of marriages end up in divorce. (p. 270)

In Zimbabwe, the law enforces gender equality, with Section 17 of the Constitution (Government of Zimbabwe 2023) declaring that:

> [T]he state must promote the full gender balance in Zimbabwean society, and in particular – the state must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men. (p. 20)

This legal principle directly challenges traditional marital hierarchies and often generates tension, sometimes leading to divorce when husbands feel disrespected as their wives exercise these legal rights (Madukwe & Madukwe 2010:271).

Having examined the nature and sources of marital tensions within African publics, the discussion now turns to public pastoral care interventions that can address these tensions and promote wholeness within African marriages.

Public pastoral care interventions to address tensions in African marriages

Public pastoral care, as *cura animarum*, seeks to promote the wholeness of people. Its significance lies in its central aim: to bring healing to individuals in their diverse life situations. Magezi (2016:5–6) identifies several approaches through which pastoral ministry is practised across Africa in response to people's pastoral needs.

These include addressing the spiritual causes of misfortune in people's lives with the goal of restoration; guiding individuals to maintain their faith and trust in God; supporting, sustaining, and empowering people; enabling communities to establish alternative family support structures; addressing contemporary challenges encountered on the frontline of life; providing exorcism and healing; and encouraging those engaged in syncretic practices to return to the Christian faith.

However, Magezi (2016:6) questions the relevance of these approaches in addressing contemporary challenges within African contexts. Gifford (2008:31–35) likewise notes that African pastoral care often fails to respond effectively to the pressing issues confronting African communities, which poses a significant challenge. Magezi (2016:6) proposes a solution that aligns closely with the focus of this article, namely the provision of public pastoral care that assists couples in navigating the tensions between tradition and Western influence. As Magezi (2016) explains:

> This gap challenges pastoral care to shift toward public theology that essentially is the emerging trend in pastoral care. There is growing interest in public theology as a significant trend in the discipline of pastoral care as theologians in pastoral care widen the lens of care to incorporate a critique of relevant cultural norms and practices (Koppel 2015). This entails shifting from care in faith communities to a concern about cultural disorder, injustice and oppression. (p. 6)

How can this be achieved? How can public pastoral care (*cura animarum*) be applied to ensure the wholeness of African couples experiencing tensions between tradition and contemporary influences in their marriages? Insights from several scholars will be used to address these questions.

Firstly, the church has a vital role to play in addressing these tensions through its pastors. Nanthambwe and Magezi (2024:9) emphasise the critical role of the church in doing public theology and the high regard accorded to pastors within the African context. This means that the church and its leaders have access to various publics, for example the traditional forums, which serve as social arenas conducive to dialogue.

Tensions in African marriages, often arising from conflicting traditions in contexts such as Zimbabwe, are typically discussed in these traditional forums and within the church or with pastors. According to Nanthambwe and Magezi (2024:9–10), pastors can draw on public theology to engage these issues effectively. This can be achieved by engaging custodians of traditional culture within traditional forums through non-confrontational and life-affirming conversations. In Zimbabwe, Makumbini (2024:196) presents a scenario in which pastors were trusted figures, often invited to offer

their perspectives on marriage matters brought before the traditional forum.

Secondly, the church should actively advocate the message of 'humanness' across all public spaces, including those where marriage issues are discussed (World Council of Churches 2006). This entails teaching that every individual – whether husband, wife, or extended family member – is created in the image of God, and therefore worthy of mutual respect, dignity, and understanding within marital relationships. Such teaching helps to address tensions arising at the intersection of African traditions and Western influences by fostering ethical and relational conduct among spouses and families.

The biblical foundation for this advocacy is evident in Paul's exhortation to Timothy that prayers should be made for 'all people', reflecting God's will for the salvation of every individual (1 Tm 2:1–4). The expression 'all people' includes those who were once outsiders to the covenant, such as the Gentiles, thereby demonstrating the inclusive nature of God's grace in Christ (1 Tm 2:7). Applied to the context of marriage, this principle enables the church to promote mutual respect between spouses, encourage reconciliation in times of conflict, and model attitudes that value both traditional and contemporary perspectives. In doing so, the church contributes to reducing tensions within African marriages.

Thirdly, the church should fearlessly confront social ills and injustices within African public spaces (Jere 2018). Jere (2018:1) asserts that the church, as a subsystem of society, has a responsibility to act as a bridge in addressing various public issues, including marital conflicts. This does not imply that the church must determine or control cultural norms, but rather that it should participate in public dialogue as a moral and pastoral voice concerned with the well-being of individuals and communities.

Culture and the church each possess their own integrity, yet they are deeply interrelated: culture shapes people's lived realities, while the church provides theological and ethical insights that can help to reform life-denying cultural practices. In this sense, the church's role is not to stand above culture but to journey within it – to discern, affirm, and, where necessary, transform cultural patterns in ways that promote human dignity and relational harmony. Such engagement enables pastoral care to contribute constructively to cultural and social renewal rather than impose faith-based dominance. Similarly, Nanthambwe (2024a) and Louw (1997) emphasise that pastors and the church can work alongside other societal institutions to address community challenges, thereby extending the impact of pastoral care beyond the individual to the wider public.

Fourthly, churches should practise a pastoral care that is thoroughly contextualised (Nanthambwe 2024b; 2025). Contextualised African pastoral care involves engaging with African spirituality, understood as a relational and holistic spirituality that responds to humanity's struggles for a better life, justice, and the greater unity of all people (Louw 1997:401; Nanthambwe 2024b:6). Such care requires a deep understanding of common cultural traits, philosophical paradigms, and prevailing belief systems that shape people's worldviews, as these factors inform the development of effective pastoral interventions (Louw 1997:401).

Contextualisation enables pastoral care to respond not only to the traditional concerns of *homo africanus* – such as issues of life sanctity, misfortune, ancestral influence, and spiritual matters – but also to contemporary challenges arising within modern and technologically advancing African societies (Magezi 2016:6). By integrating these dimensions, pastoral care can address the full spectrum of human concerns, making it both relevant and effective.

In the context of marriage, a contextualised public pastoral care ensures wholeness for African couples experiencing tensions between traditional practices and Western influences. This approach enables pastors and church leaders to navigate cultural sensitivities, mediate conflicts, and offer guidance that honours both traditional values and contemporary realities, thereby fostering reconciliation, mutual respect, and stability within marital relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated that public pastoral care, when contextualised to African realities, can provide meaningful support to couples navigating the tensions between indigenous marriage traditions and Western influences. By situating pastoral care within both ecclesial and communal publics, the church and communities can engage effectively with the lived experiences of African couples.

The discussion has shown that addressing marital tension requires a nuanced understanding of the diverse publics in which these couples live and interact – including traditional, religious, societal, legal, and academic spaces. A contextualised public pastoral care framework, attentive to cultural values, relational dynamics, and contemporary challenges, offers a practical and holistic approach to fostering marital wholeness. This highlights the potential of public pastoral interventions to promote reconciliation, mutual respect, and sustainable marital relationships within Africa's pluralistic cultural landscape.

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Authors' contributions

Primrose Makumbini, Vhumani Magezi, Patrick Nanthambwe are the contributors to this research article. All the authors contributed equally.

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