



**THE PASTORAL CARE CHALLENGES POSED BY COVID-19 AMONG THE CHURCHES IN KENYA**

**Rev. Dr Mary Kathambi Kinoti, PhD**

Kenya Methodist University

***Abstract***

Pastoral care is similar to conducting societal service in the church. It entails visiting the ill, assisting the impoverished, counselling services, embracing the lonesome, providing for the destitute, and assisting individuals with their difficulties. Pastors tend for individuals societal, interpersonal, physical, emotional and occasionally spiritual needs, whilst preachers preach. Pastor means shepherded in the latin language, pastoral ministry is therefore the shepherding of God's people. It is a managerial metaphor that uses the picture of a shepherd to express the tasks and duties of individuals who lead God's people. It is a concept that originates with God, God is the Shepherd and he leads his sheep wherever he pleases. Psalm 23 is arguably the most renowned depiction of this concept. Pastors ought to visit their congregations in their homes and engage them in church events to successfully offer pastoral care to them; yet, owing to Covid 19 pandemic limitations, some pastoral care activities are very difficult to carry out. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to assess the pastoral care problems posed by the Covid 19 pandemic in Kenyan churches.

**Keywords;** *Pastoral care, Church, Covid 19, Challenges, Kenya*

COVID-19 has complicated almost every element of church activities. Not unexpectedly, one of the most upsetting parts of the pandemic for churches is that one of their most vital tasks in pastoral care is being affected (Afolaranmi, 2020). With the addition of social distance, it is almost impossible for pastors to meaningfully reach individuals in their congregation. It's natural for pastors to become overwhelmed by the stress of what's going on in their ministry during the pandemic. However, it is critical to recall how far each of the congregation members has come as they continue to develop in their faith and the church. Although this COVID-19 pandemic may avert pastors from physically interacting with their congregation, that doesn't mean they can't keep in touch with them whenever the need emerges because physical meetings aren't an option, this poses a challenge in conducting pastoral visits, therefore, affecting the pastoral ministry.

As the gospel expands and churches increase in size, pastors are appointed to manage the congregations, it is important therefore to evaluate the theological perspective and importance of pastoral care to understand the dire effects that Covid 19 restrictions have on it. The book of Acts describes the origins of Christian pastoral care, Apostle Paul pastored the church in Ephesus for three years, and he utilized the metaphor of the shepherd or pastor to encourage the Ephesian leaders to maintain his ministry (Acts 20:28–32). God values the church because it was bought by the blood of Jesus, it is his property and pastoral care for God's chosen congregation is critical. Understanding this, Paul exhorted the Ephesian leaders to preach God's message of salvation to see the church mature, hold strong over deceptive doctrine, and persevere into perpetuity, this, therefore, served as their pastoral care. Paul had dedicated himself to this task, and now he calls on the church leaders to do the same (Thurneysen, 2010).

Individuals are continually being trained and chosen to manage and care for these congregations as the gospel spreads and churches are established in Kenya. The writings of Paul to Timothy and Titus were very instructive in comprehending pastoral ministry. They are frequently referred to as pastoral letters. Paul was looking ahead, grooming leaders and directing their responsibilities, emphasizing life and doctrine, personality and teaching. He was trying to keep the gospel at the centre of the church's existence. It is worthwhile to study these three letters thoroughly to grasp pastoral objectives. Pastoral care was also encouraged in the churches by the Apostle Peter, he was interested in the pastor or shepherd's services and encouraged his fellow leaders to let the gospel define their approach to service (Thurneysen, 2010). Pastors must be eager, giving, and enthusiastic workers as they perform a pastoral ministry among the sheep, all while anticipating the coming of the Head Shepherd, the genuine Head Pastor, Jesus Christ.

The shepherd metaphor was often used to describe Israel's rulers in the scripture. They were tasked to preach and live out God's word amongst the people to guide, teach, nourish, console, and safeguard them, however, on this aspect they failed miserably. Instead of protecting the sheep who are God's people, the Israel rulers mistreated, feasted and slaughtered them. God considered the authorities responsible for those wrongdoings and proclaimed that he would remove those tyrannical shepherds and move to preserve and care for his flock (Ezekiel 34:7–11). God expressly vowed to bring a particular shepherd who would be the Savior from the David lineage, ruling over and caring for His People, a promise which was fulfilled in the New Testament by the birth of Jesus Christ (Ezekiel 34:23–24).

Jesus carried out God's promises provided by Ezekiel, He is the Christ, the Good Shepherd who would bring the sheep back to safety (John 10:14–16). He would rescue not just the wayward sheep of Israel, but also individuals from all nationalities and unify them under him. The remarkable thing about this Shepherd is that, rather than slaying the sheep, as Israel's leaders had done, he permitted himself to be slain instead. To extend the allegory; the shepherd is transformed into the sacrificial lamb. God's purpose for rescuing and providing for his sheep goes beyond Jesus to everyone else who will govern under his rule. Jesus as a shepherd is still the paradigm to emulate. God is the greatest shepherd or pastor who guarantees to guide individuals into the eternal afterlife with him; Jesus is God's designated shepherd/pastor who gave his life to bring people into a relationship with God; shepherds or pastors lead their congregants by gospel-shaped education and designing the implementation of God's word of salvation in their lives. As a result, the purpose of pastoral care is to shepherd God's people into eternity with God via the message of God's grace (Ganiel, 2020).

Many churches emphasize small groups as a key component of their pastoral mission. They rely on these groups to help them establish relationships, equip individuals for a ministry, assist those in distress, foster personal evangelism, and give a particular and personal prayer for their members. This is proving problematic for certain leaders especially during the Covid 19 pandemic, especially if they thought that they were only signing up to teach a Bible study, but now they've been called to be pastors or shepherds of their congregations. The goal of small groups Bible study is not only to improve people's knowledge of the Bible. Instead, it is so that people might grow in their understanding and love of God. In the real meaning of the term, bible study groups are pastoral care groups (McClure, 2012). They are places in the church's life where individuals can be urged to run the course, endure through difficulties, preserve their belief, transform their minds and hearts, and support one another to keep their eyes on Jesus until the day we see him again. For this to be possible there is a need for the groups to be in constant contact and be involved in various church social events, however, since the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic there have been restrictions that prevent such social gatherings which poses a challenge in the pastoral ministry.

Pastoral care is desperately required by people, particularly during times of distress. Pastoral care constraints in Covid 19 pandemic are very severe and need attention (Ganiel, 2020). Pastoral care is frequently no longer available in the traditional way, due to those constraints, sporadic meetings are seldom held. Pastoral workers are occasionally barred from entering facilities such as hospitals or nursing homes as a result of the pandemic, therefore, pastoral professionals need to seek new ways to create pastoral care relationships, particularly in the realm of internet technology. Theologically, the link between active interaction and silent sorrow in the circumstance must also be considered. In the long term, pastoral care must be expanded in terms of modern communication capabilities so that pastoral care can react to crisis circumstances in a helpful form and alternatives to co-present encounters are accessible (Thurneysen, 2010). The benefits and drawbacks of the use of such modes of communication in pastoral care must be weighed evenly.

The critical role of pastoral care in helping socially inept, unwell, or marginalized populations during the Corona crisis has been proven and continues to be significant in the framework of clinical pastoral care and hospice or spiritual care (Swift, 2020). However, except for online pastoral care, pastoral care possibilities have decreased in the framework of pastoral ministry. Due to the pandemic restrictions of pastors, social activities have been greatly restricted (Roser, 2020); community pastors lost physical touch and increased their reliance on the internet, as there is no physical platform for pastoral engagement other than online pastoral care. The spiritual elements of pastoral care, in particular and physical concerns, are frequently overlooked while using the internet in the pastoral ministry (Frick, 2020; Swift, 2020). In the period of physical separation, promising techniques includes maintaining touch with the congregants using digital forms such as video-conferencing. The pastoral opportunities provided by social media are far from being completely utilized.

Particularly spontaneous, improvised, and freshly developed forms of diverse pastoral ways can now be found, assessed, created, and extended to provide new interaction opportunities for present and future developments and crises. Those who would otherwise go unheard, unsupported, and unaccompanied as a result of lack of pastoral care, might therefore be heard and encouraged (Armbruster & Klotzbücher 2020). There is an immediate necessity for a detailed understanding of new aspects of pastoral interaction and their growth, because such forms of communication are already crucial in the context of the church, pastoral care, and counselling, and will become even more so in the future, even beyond the crisis. Previous research on pastoral care during the Corona crisis demonstrates the importance of pastoral care in times of disaster. Contacts to online pastoral care increased by 20% at the start of the social constraints. General worry, family violence, loneliness, and suicidal ideation were significantly more relevant than money concerns or infection fear (Armbruster & Klotzbücher 2020).

That factual research dedicated to church-related practices focuses largely on life inside the church in all of its variety, which has also evolved in the digital domain as a result of the crisis. Digital church services, engagement possibilities, and diaconal services are of special relevance here (Byrne, 2020). Pastoral care is not discussed at all or very briefly, notwithstanding its importance to society as a whole. According to the investigations that have been undertaken thus far, digitization has not only been warmly welcomed in the church but is also being expanded continuously and effectively. However, the research listed on this ministry focuses mostly on forms of preaching, such as forms of worship on YouTube or altered church activities. Pastoral care, on the other hand, is an offer of care that extends beyond the inner area, with an emphasis on preaching the Christian message, to individuals in crisis or dealing with life and faith issues in the most varied circumstances, independent of religion or society. Pastoral care can help avert psychological illnesses in the setting of digital communication networks, particularly from a community viewpoint (Patton 2005; Haußmann, 2020). This is mostly accomplished through social support, which is a preventive element for mental wellbeing during and after the crisis (Hart, 2020; Jakob & Weyel, 2020).

Many people's mental state is being impacted by the epidemic and its related phenomena, such as departure restrictions. Anxiety, sadness, and stress are becoming more common all around the world (Salar, 2020). Social isolation, as well as spousal violence and worries about the future, have risen (Hall, 2020; Usher, 2020). Such circumstances frequently call for spiritual care and therapy, which is why, during the peak of the recession, this assistance is frequently requested by phone (Armbruster & Klotzbücher 2020). This emphasizes the broader societal importance of pastoral care and counselling. The crisis and its repercussions have raised awareness of the fragility of human people in their relationships, as well as the difficulties they confront in dealing with one another, particularly owing to social constraints. Human cohabitation is based on social interactions, and communication is important. Because of the constraints, communication has migrated to the digital domain. This has brought to light the potential of social media while also making individuals more aware of their possibilities and constraints.

It became obvious that there is a significant lack of digital communication forms in the domain of pastoral care and counselling. On one hand, this relates to the view of what currently occurs as pastoral engagement via social networks and how such channels are used for pastoral care requirements presently (Reimann 2020). Low-threshold sources of contact from daily conversational settings, in particular, can begin counselling and pastoral care and promote the quest for assistance. On the other hand, there is an immediate necessity to increase the capabilities of guarded digital places, which are required for talks within the context of pastoral

confidentiality and must thus be made available to individuals in crisis circumstances in particular. So far, particularly in the setting of the crisis, many positive encounters have been created in pastoral care by telephone or in church counselling centres, such as pastoral care through email and chat (Armbruster & Klotzbücher 2020).

In conclusion, the Covid 19 pandemic has impacted various church activities greatly, from restrictions of the number of congregants to attend services to a total lockdown of churches. Of most of the church ministries, it is apparent that the pastoral ministry has been the most affected, this is because there has been an influx in the number of people that require spiritual guidance due to the stress resulting from the pandemic. However, due to the pandemic restrictions, pastoral care has been extremely hard to achieve hence the need for the use of technological means of communication for pastors to offer guidance to their congregations. This is not only a short term solution but also a solution that should be considered in the long term.

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