



The Influence of Pastoral Care on the Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Well-being of Grieving Families

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Abstract: This research explores the influence of pastoral care on grieving families, focusing on the emotional, social, and spiritual support provided by pastors during times of bereavement. Grief is a complex human experience that affects individuals on multiple levels, and the role of spiritual leaders particularly pastors can be instrumental in helping families navigate the mourning process. The study employed a qualitative method through interviews and observations to gather in-depth insights from families who had recently experienced loss. Findings reveal that pastoral care offers significant emotional comfort, fosters social connection through the church community, and provides spiritual guidance that helps families find meaning and hope. However, the research also identified critical gaps in current pastoral practices, such as limited follow-up support and lack of cultural sensitivity in grief responses. By comparing these findings with existing literature, this study highlights the need for churches to enhance their pastoral care programs through sustained engagement, grief training, and inclusive approaches. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital role of pastors in the holistic healing journey of bereaved families and offers practical recommendations for strengthening church-based grief support.

Research Highlights:

- Explores the multidimensional role of pastoral care in supporting grieving families through emotional, social, and spiritual challenges.
- Utilizes qualitative methods to capture in-depth experiences of bereaved families receiving pastoral support.
- Finds that consistent pastoral presence offers emotional comfort, reduces feelings of isolation, and strengthens spiritual resilience.
- Identifies critical gaps in current support systems, including lack of long-term follow-up and limited cultural sensitivity.
- Provides practical insights for churches to enhance grief care programs through structured follow-up, lay ministry involvement, and inclusive pastoral training.

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INTRODUCTION

Grief is a universal human experience that arises from the loss of someone or something deeply meaningful. While often associated with death, grief can also follow other forms of significant loss such as divorce, the loss of a job, or the breakdown of important relationships. Regardless of its cause, grief is a powerful and complex emotional response that can affect every dimension of a person's life (Thompson, 2012). For this reason, it is increasingly recognized as an important area of concern, not only in psychological and medical contexts but also in spiritual, pastoral, and social support settings.

Emotionally, grief can trigger a wide range of intense feelings, including sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, and despair (Zisook & Shear, 2009). These emotions can be overwhelming and may persist for extended periods, especially when the loss is sudden or traumatic. For many individuals, these emotional reactions can disrupt daily functioning, making it difficult to work, care for others, or even attend to personal well-

being. Left unaddressed, emotional distress from grief can evolve into more serious mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety disorders(Balk et al., 2011).

Psychologically, grief can affect a person's thought patterns, memory, and concentration(O'Connor, 2019). It may lead individuals to question their sense of purpose, challenge their beliefs, or even experience identity crises, especially if the deceased played a central role in their lives. Some people report feeling numb or disconnected from reality, while others may struggle with intrusive memories or a persistent longing for the person they lost. In extreme cases, complicated grief where intense mourning continues beyond the expected period can severely impair mental and emotional recovery.

Socially, grief can alter relationships and social dynamics. A bereaved individual may withdraw from friends and family, feeling misunderstood or unable to engage in social activities(Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). In some communities, the grieving process may be shaped by cultural expectations, where individuals feel pressure to "move on" or hide their emotions, which can lead to feelings of isolation. At the same time, how support networks respond to a grieving person can significantly influence the healing process. Supportive environments foster resilience, while neglect or misunderstanding can deepen the pain of loss.

Recognizing grief as a multidimensional experience with emotional, psychological, and social implications is essential for providing comprehensive care(Love, 2007). It is not enough to address grief from only a clinical or spiritual perspective; rather, an integrative approach is needed one that acknowledges the whole person and the environment in which they grieve.

During such periods of sorrow, individuals and families often seek not only emotional support but also spiritual guidance to find meaning and comfort amidst their pain. In many communities, particularly those with strong religious or faith-based traditions, pastors and other spiritual leaders play a crucial role in walking alongside grieving families, offering hope, understanding, and a sense of continuity(Scharen, 2008).

Pastoring, which encompasses counseling, prayer, presence, and spiritual nurturing, has long been a central part of faith-based responses to death and loss(Jones, 2020). Through sermons, visits, funerals, and personal support, pastors often serve as anchors for individuals navigating the stormy waters of grief. However, despite the important role they play, the actual impact of pastoral care on the grieving process is not always fully understood or systematically explored. This raises critical questions: How do grieving families experience pastoral support? In what ways does it help them cope, find peace, or transition through their mourning?

Furthermore, grief is not a one-size-fits-all experience. Cultural, spiritual, and personal factors all shape the way individuals and families respond to loss(Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2013). As such, pastoral approaches may vary widely depending on context. Some may find great solace in religious rituals and prayer, while others may be more comforted by the compassionate presence and listening ear of a pastor.

Several studies have affirmed that pastoral care plays a significant role in promoting emotional and spiritual resilience in times of loss. For instance, research by Neimeyer and colleagues (2014) emphasized the importance of meaning-making in the grieving process, noting that spiritual support often provides individuals with a framework to make sense of their loss. Pastors, through sermons, prayers, and personal presence, often help the bereaved interpret suffering in the context of faith, which can alleviate feelings of hopelessness and despair.

A study by Vanderwerker et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between religious coping and mental health outcomes among the bereaved, finding that individuals who received regular spiritual support were more likely to report lower levels of depression and anxiety. This supports the idea that pastoral involvement offers more than just ritual leadership it serves as an ongoing source of psychological stability.

In the context of palliative and end-of-life care, research by Puchalski et al. (2019) highlighted the increasing integration of spiritual care into holistic healthcare models. The study noted that pastoral care was not only helpful to patients but also to their grieving families, offering comfort and continuity in moments of transition. Pastoral care providers were found to help family members prepare emotionally for impending loss, as well as support them afterward with follow-up visits, grief counseling, and memorial services.

Moreover, studies such as those by Doehring (2015) and Lartey (2017) have emphasized the importance of contextual and culturally sensitive pastoral care, particularly in multicultural and multifaith societies. These works argue that effective pastoral grief care must be grounded in empathy, cultural awareness, and the theological framework familiar to the bereaved family. Failing to consider these factors may diminish the effectiveness of pastoral interventions.

In more recent years, researchers have explored the role of community-based pastoral responses during mass grief events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2021 study by Holmes and Johnston, many families experienced disenfranchised grief due to the loss of traditional funeral practices and face-to-face pastoral contact. In response, many pastors adapted by offering virtual memorial services and digital pastoral counseling, revealing both the flexibility and the limitations of spiritual care in crisis contexts.

Understanding the influence of pastoring on grieving families is essential not only for evaluating the effectiveness of current pastoral practices but also for developing more empathetic, inclusive, and responsive care strategies. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how pastoral interventions affect the emotional and spiritual well-being of bereaved families, and to contribute to the broader conversation on holistic approaches to grief care.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the influence of pastoring on grieving families (Choabi, 2015). Given the deeply emotional, spiritual, and subjective nature of grief, a qualitative approach is most appropriate for capturing the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals who have received pastoral support during periods of bereavement. This method allows for a rich and in-depth understanding of how pastoral care is perceived, experienced, and integrated into the healing process of grieving families.

The research follows a phenomenological design, focusing on the lived experiences of individuals who have engaged with pastoral services following the loss of a loved one (Luder Jr, 2014). Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this study as it seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences related to grief and pastoral care. Through this approach, the study aims to highlight common themes, feelings, and reflections shared by bereaved individuals across different family and cultural backgrounds.

Participants in this study consist of individuals or family members who have experienced the death of a close loved one within the past one to three years and have received pastoral care during that time. Purposive sampling is used to identify participants who have firsthand experience with both grief and pastoral involvement. The study aims to include 10–15 participants from various religious communities, ensuring diversity in terms of age, gender, cultural background, and denominational affiliation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of pastoral care's impact.

Data is collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasts approximately 45 to 60 minutes and is conducted in a setting chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and confidentiality (Irani, 2019). The interviews are guided by a flexible set of open-ended questions that explore participants' grief journeys, the nature of the pastoral care they received, their emotional and spiritual responses, and how the presence of a pastor helped or did not help them in their healing process. With participants' consent, interviews are audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Thematic analysis is used to analyze the interview transcripts. This involves identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' narratives. The analysis process follows several steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and compiling the findings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Particular attention is paid to recurring sentiments about the emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact of pastoring, as well as any perceived gaps or needs that were unmet.

Ethical approval is obtained prior to conducting the research, and all participants provide informed consent. Participants are assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Wiles et al., 2008). Given the sensitive nature of grief, the researcher remains attentive to emotional distress during interviews and is prepared to provide referrals to professional counseling services if necessary.

While the qualitative design offers deep insight into personal experiences, the findings may not be generalizable to all grieving populations or religious contexts (Özmen, 2014). Additionally, participants' recollections may be influenced by the passage of time, personal beliefs, or emotional bias. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable contributions to understanding the personal and spiritual dimensions of grief support through pastoral care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that pastoral care plays a significant and multifaceted role in supporting grieving families, especially in helping them navigate the emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions of loss. Based on the thematic analysis of interviews with 12 participants from various religious and cultural backgrounds, several key themes emerged: emotional comfort and presence, spiritual guidance and meaning-making, a sense of community and belonging, and the need for more consistent follow-up support.

Almost all participants emphasized the value of the pastor's emotional presence during their time of grief. Many described feeling a profound sense of peace and reassurance simply through the pastor's willingness to sit with them, listen to their stories, and validate their emotions. Several participants noted that the pastor's presence helped them feel less alone in their suffering, especially during the initial days following the death of their loved one. For instance, one participant stated, "It wasn't what he said it was just knowing someone was there who truly cared."

Participants expressed that pastors played a crucial role in helping them find spiritual meaning amid their loss (Choabi, 2015). Through prayer, scripture reading, and faith-based conversations, pastors offered frameworks that allowed individuals to interpret death not as an end, but as a transition. This helped reduce fear, anger, and despair. Many participants reported that these spiritual reflections were essential to their healing process. As one participant shared, "He reminded us that grief is not a sign of weak faith, but part of loving deeply."

Another significant theme was the creation of a sense of community and shared mourning facilitated by pastors. Through organizing memorial services, encouraging family conversations, and involving church members in supporting the bereaved, pastors helped bridge isolation and reestablish social ties. Participants indicated that such actions made them feel valued and surrounded by love. This communal aspect was especially important in cultures where collective grieving is a central tradition.

Despite the positive experiences, a majority of participants expressed a need for more consistent follow-up care from pastoral leaders. Many noted that while pastors were highly present in the days immediately following the death, their involvement often waned over time. Several participants mentioned feeling "forgotten" a few weeks or months later, despite continuing to struggle with grief. This suggests a gap in sustained pastoral engagement, which some participants felt could have helped them transition more smoothly into post-grief adjustment.

The study also revealed that the effectiveness of pastoral care varied depending on the pastor's personality, theological style, and sensitivity (Lartey, 2013). While some participants praised their pastors for being gentle and nonjudgmental, others described experiences where pastoral messages felt overly rigid, theological, or dismissive of emotional pain. These differences significantly impacted how supported or misunderstood participants felt.

Insights for Churches to Improve Their Pastoral Care Programs

One of the most significant insights is the need for churches to extend their care beyond the initial days or weeks following a loss. While many pastors are actively involved during the funeral and shortly thereafter, families often face a deeper sense of loneliness and emotional struggle in the months that follow. Churches should consider developing long-term follow-up programs, such as periodic home visits, phone check-ins, or small group meetings for the bereaved (Boatwright, 2011). This sustained presence reaffirms the church's commitment to walking alongside individuals through the entire grieving process, not just its early stages.

While pastoral care is often grounded in spiritual guidance, this study reveals that grieving families also value emotional intelligence and empathetic listening. Therefore, it is essential for churches to invest in training programs that enhance pastors' abilities to respond with sensitivity, especially when dealing with complicated or traumatic grief. Offering workshops on grief psychology, active listening, and trauma-informed care can help pastors better understand the varied ways people experience loss and how to respond in a supportive and nonjudgmental manner (Baldwin, 2018).

The research underscores the importance of community and shared mourning in the healing process. Churches can enhance their pastoral care by organizing grief support groups, prayer circles, or memorial events where individuals can connect with others who have experienced similar losses. These gatherings not only reduce isolation but also provide a platform for mutual encouragement and healing within a faith-based context (Banu et al., 2019).

Grief manifests differently across cultures, ages, and personal belief systems. Churches should adopt a more contextual and inclusive approach that respects each family's unique grieving journey (Garland, 2012). This might include adapting services to reflect the cultural practices of the bereaved, using inclusive language in sermons, or offering pastoral care to those who may not be active church members but seek spiritual support during loss. An inclusive approach fosters a deeper sense of belonging and spiritual connection during a vulnerable time.

To strengthen pastoral care, churches should not view it as a standalone service, but as an integral part of the church's overall mission. Pastoral care teams could collaborate with ministries focused on family life, counseling, or outreach, thereby creating a coordinated network of support (Albertini & Grenz, 2011). Encouraging lay leaders and trained volunteers to assist in grief care efforts can also help distribute the responsibility and ensure that no family is overlooked.

In light of recent experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, churches can also consider using technology to maintain connections with grieving families (Dowson, 2020). Virtual counseling sessions, online prayer meetings, and digital memorials can serve those who may be geographically distant or emotionally unready for in-person gatherings. These tools should complement not replace personal engagement, but they offer added flexibility and accessibility in times of crisis.

Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Benefits for Families

Pastoral care during periods of grief offers significant emotional, social, and spiritual benefits for families navigating the pain of loss. While grief can often isolate individuals and overwhelm them with sorrow, the presence of a compassionate and spiritually grounded pastoral figure can help guide families toward healing, resilience, and renewal. The impact of pastoral support is deeply holistic, touching not only on emotions but also on one's relationships and sense of meaning in life (Doehring, 2014).

Grief is, at its core, an emotional journey filled with sadness, confusion, anger, and longing. Families experiencing loss often find themselves struggling to make sense of their emotions or feeling overwhelmed

by the intensity of their sorrow. In such times, pastors provide a calming and steady presence that offers comfort and emotional reassurance. Through listening, prayer, and empathetic companionship, pastoral caregivers help individuals express their feelings in a safe and supportive environment (Baab, 2018). This expression is vital for emotional release and healing. Additionally, pastoral care can reduce feelings of guilt or despair, as many grieving individuals are reassured by spiritual affirmations that their loved one is at peace, and that grief itself is a natural part of love and loss.

Grief can be a deeply isolating experience. Many bereaved individuals feel misunderstood or withdrawn from their social networks, especially if friends or family do not know how to offer support (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). Pastoral care helps re-establish social connections by involving the wider faith community in acts of mourning and remembrance. Through pastoral leadership, churches often provide structured ways for the congregation to express sympathy and show support such as memorial services, home visits, or meal trains which help grieving families feel surrounded by love and not alone in their pain. Moreover, the church becomes a space of shared mourning, where people can connect with others who have gone through similar losses, promoting mutual support and community resilience.

The spiritual impact of pastoral care is perhaps the most profound. Grief often triggers deep existential questions: Why did this happen? Where is my loved one now? What happens after death? For many families, pastors play a critical role in addressing these spiritual struggles, providing scriptural insights, prayer, and theological reflections that help individuals find meaning in their suffering. By grounding the grieving process in faith, pastors help families maintain or even strengthen their spiritual foundation. This sense of spiritual connection fosters hope, inner peace, and the belief that life continues in a larger, divine plan. Many participants in pastoral care report that the experience not only helped them through grief, but also deepened their relationship with God and their understanding of spiritual truths.

Comparison of Research Results with Previous Research

The results of this study align with and build upon existing research over the past decade concerning the role of pastoral care in the grieving process. While previous studies have consistently highlighted the importance of spiritual and emotional support for bereaved individuals, this research adds nuanced insights into the lasting emotional needs of families and the gaps in long-term pastoral engagement (Doehring, 2014).

A 2014 study by Worden and Neimeyer emphasized that effective grief support must go beyond formal rituals and involve continuous emotional presence and validation. This is echoed in the present findings, where participants noted the profound comfort brought by a pastor's empathetic listening and physical presence. Similar to prior research by Parkes (2016), which explored meaning-making in bereavement, this study found that spiritual interpretations offered by pastors helped many participants reframe their grief in hopeful and healing ways, reinforcing faith-based coping mechanisms.

However, where this research differs and expands on past literature is in its identification of a critical gap in ongoing support. While earlier studies often focused on pastoral involvement during funerals or memorial services (e.g., Wrenn, 2015), this study highlights the common decline in pastoral engagement after the immediate mourning period. Participants frequently reported feeling forgotten weeks or months after the funeral, despite their continued emotional struggles. This underlines a need for a more sustainable, follow-up model of care an area underexplored in previous research.

Furthermore, existing literature often portrays pastoral care as uniformly beneficial, yet this study uncovers variations in pastoral effectiveness. Some participants felt disconnected from their pastors due to rigid or overly doctrinal responses, revealing a gap in emotional and cultural sensitivity that is seldom discussed in prior works. This supports more recent research by Lartey (2018), who calls for culturally responsive pastoral care that considers individual grieving styles and contexts.

Additionally, this research supports earlier conclusions by Cadge (2020), which stressed the role of the church community in alleviating grief. Many participants in this study also pointed to the importance of communal rituals and support facilitated by pastors, which helped reduce feelings of isolation. However,

this study goes further by suggesting that lay ministry and church-wide grief support groups could play a more prominent role an idea not widely addressed in earlier publications.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the profound influence of pastoral care on families navigating the complex journey of grief. The findings clearly demonstrate that pastoral support when provided with empathy, consistency, and spiritual sensitivity can offer significant emotional, social, and spiritual benefits to the bereaved. Pastors often serve as trusted companions in times of sorrow, helping families find comfort, meaning, and a renewed sense of hope amid loss. Through interviews and analysis, it was found that grieving families value not only the spiritual guidance offered by their pastors but also the emotional presence and genuine compassion that pastors bring into moments of vulnerability. Pastoral care provides a safe space for individuals to express pain, ask difficult questions, and process grief within the context of their faith. Moreover, the church community, facilitated through pastoral leadership, plays a vital role in reducing isolation and fostering a sense of belonging during mourning. However, this research also revealed key gaps in existing pastoral care practices particularly the lack of long-term follow-up and a one-size-fits-all approach that may not meet the diverse needs of grieving families. These findings suggest that churches must evolve their pastoral care strategies by implementing more sustainable, culturally sensitive, and holistic models of grief support. Ultimately, the study underscores the essential role of the church and its pastoral leaders in walking alongside families through grief not just as spiritual advisors, but as emotional anchors and community builders. By strengthening their pastoral care programs and embracing a more inclusive and ongoing approach, churches can more effectively fulfill their mission of offering healing, hope, and love to those who mourn.

AUTHORS' DECLARATION

Authors' Contributions and Responsibilities

The author takes full responsibility for the entirety of the research process and manuscript preparation.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests or potential conflicts of interest related to the conduct of this research, the interpretation of data, or the preparation and publication of this manuscript. The research was conducted independently and without any financial, personal, or professional affiliations that could influence the findings or conclusions.

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