



# Africanizing Pastoral Psychology for Contextual Practical Ministry: A Holistic Approach

Joshua Djabanor<sup>1</sup>  & Samuel Ayete-Nyampong<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Kwahu Presbytery.

<sup>2</sup> Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Accra-Ghana.

## ABSTRACT

Pastoral psychology is an interdisciplinary field of study that attempts to bridge Christian theological principles and traditional psychology theories, focusing on how psychological principles and practices can be applied in pastoral care ministry for human flourishing. Unlike how other branches of Christian Theology have been contextualized to resonate with the African perspectives, Pastoral Psychology has gained little attention in that regard. The purpose of this study is to explore how an Afrocentric pastoral psychology can provide a holistic and contextually relevant framework for practical ministry that integrates indigenous cultural wisdom, theological insight, and psychological principles to enhance pastoral care in African contexts. This study employs a conceptual-theological methodology using narrative review and interdisciplinary synthesis to integrate theological, psychological, and African cultural perspectives in developing a holistic framework for contextual pastoral ministry. It was observed in the study that the psychological and theological frameworks underlying traditional pastoral psychology frequently reflect Western epistemologies that are often individualistic, rationalistic, and secular, contrasting with the communal, spiritual, and relational nature of African spirituality. This article argues that the Eurocentric models of pastoral psychology often fail to resonate with the dimensions of African life, which are central to pastoral care on the African continent. This study provides a platform for scholarly engagements, and recommends a decolonized epistemological and paradigm shift, to affirm African worldviews and relational cosmologies, moving beyond Eurocentric dichotomies that artificially dislocate the spiritual and psychological realms, offering a transformative vision of ministry that is theoretically grounded, culturally sensitive, contextually relevant and theologically appropriate.

### Correspondence

Joshua Djabanor

Email:

[djabanor29@gmail.com](mailto:djabanor29@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Pastoral psychology is an interdisciplinary field of study that attempts to bridge Christian theological principles and traditional psychology theories, focusing on how psychological principles and practices can help in the vocation and practices of pastoral care ministry for human flourishing. Traditionally rooted in Euro-American contexts, pastoral psychology has contributed significantly to the development of clinical pastoral education, therapeutic ministry, and pastoral counseling. However, its transplantation into African settings has often been marked by cultural dissonance and theological

misalignment. The psychological and theological frameworks underlying traditional pastoral psychology frequently reflect Western epistemologies that are individualistic, rationalistic, and often secular, contrasting with the communal, spiritual, and relational nature of African worldviews. Unlike how other branches of Christian Theology have gained much scholarly attention worldwide, Pastoral Psychology has gained little attention in addressing human existential needs, especially in the African context. The prime objective of Pastoral psychology is to appreciate and address the psychological and spiritual well-being of individuals, couples, families, and communities, often drawing on both psychological theories and theological perspectives. Gary Collins hinted that pastoral theologians use various techniques such as counseling and spiritual guidance to help individuals navigate life's challenges and foster healing, restoration, growth and meaning making in their faith and well-being.<sup>1</sup> This caring act is what Clebsch and Jeackle termed as pastoral care. In the *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective: An Essay with Exhibitions*, Clebsch and Jeackle defined pastoral care as the helping act done by a representative Christian person, directed towards healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling a troubled person whose trouble arises in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.<sup>2</sup> This helping act can be achieved through empathic understanding of the client in the context and developing a strategic care plan to meet his existential needs through holistic care.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, theologians have 'spiritualized' some mental health conditions, while psychiatrists have also 'pathologized' spiritual conditions. However, the psychiatric nurse and a seasoned practical theologian, John Swinton, tried to bridge this gap by linking spirituality with mental health. In his study on "Spirituality and Mental Health: Rediscovering the forgotten", Swinton established the interconnectedness of spirituality and mental health and that the two are indispensable to each other.<sup>4</sup> Human lives, experiences and thoughts are influenced by both spirituality and psychology. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the individual's thought patterns and spiritual background helps to plan for holistic care. Swinton, in his recent study, strongly advocated for a critical dialogical integration between the two disciplines (practical theology and mental health) for effective human benefit in vicarious trauma, moral distress and neurodivergent situations.<sup>5</sup> It is critically vital to practice pastoral care with a more holistic approach and a nuanced engagement with contemporary practical psychology by challenging simplistic dualisms, emphasizing an embodied and contextual praxis for the well-being of humanity. Pastoral psychology, situated at the intersection of theology and psychological care, has long sought to provide frameworks for understanding human suffering, meaning-making, healing, Christian conversion, and faith development. Theologically, pastoral psychology often engages with concepts of sin, grace, forgiveness, and hope, interpreting them considering human development, suffering, restoration and liberation.

Africanizing pastoral psychology involves understanding and applying psychological principles within the African religio-cultural and epistemological context to aid human flourishing. This includes recognizing how diverse cultures, beliefs, and experiences shape Africans' understanding of problems, their seeking of help, and the meaning they find in life. It also means adapting counseling approaches, therapeutic plans and theories that are relevant and effective for people from African backgrounds, as well as considering the role of faith and spirituality in their lives. This article aims to contextualize pastoral psychology in the Afrocentric context and establish its applications in relevant practical Christian ministry.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a **conceptual-theological methodology** that engages in a rigorous and reflective examination of theological, psychological, and African cultural perspectives to construct a holistic

<sup>1</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: Word Publishing, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> William A. Clebsch, "The Earliest Translations of Luther into English," *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 1 (January 23, 1963): 75–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000021830>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Amarkwei and Joshua Djabanor, "Towards a New Pastoral Care Model for Youth Retention in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana: A Case Study of the Brong-Ahafo Presbytery," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 10, no. 13 (2024).

<sup>4</sup> John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a "forgotten" Dimension*, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> John Swinton, "Theology and Mental Health: New Perspectives and Dialogues," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 29, no. 2 (2025): 123–30.

framework for Africanized pastoral psychology. Through a narrative review, it critically analyzed and synthesized existing literature, theories, and models across the disciplines of pastoral theology and traditional psychology to identify contextual gaps and opportunities for integration. The study further employed an interdisciplinary synthesis, drawing from theology, psychology and African philosophy to explore how these fields intersect in shaping pastoral identity, care, and practice within African contexts. This approach facilitated a constructive dialogue between faith and culture, allowing for the development of a contextually grounded model that resonates with African spiritual, emotional, and communal realities. Ultimately, this methodology seeks to advance a more authentic, holistic, and contextually relevant paradigm for practical ministry and pastoral care in Africa.

### **Historical Development of Pastoral Psychology**

The disciplines of theology and psychology were seen to be rivals until Anton Boisen's catatonic schizophrenia, when pastoral psychology became a relevant academic discipline. The early history of the pastoral psychology movement in America can be traced from the two "founding fathers," Elwood Worcester (1860-1940) and Anton T. Boisen (1876-1965).<sup>6</sup> Pastoral psychology emerged in the first quarter of the 20th century as theological seminaries and churches began to recognize the value of psychological insight in ministerial contexts. Influential figures such as Anton Boisen, Seward Hiltner, and Paul Tillich championed the clinical pastoral education (CPE) movement, integrating psychodynamic theory with theological reflection. Their work laid the groundwork for training clergy in the skills of empathetic listening, psychological diagnosis, and crisis intervention, such as trauma management skills.

Worcester, a popular Episcopal priest and scholar in psychology, established a novel and innovative psychotherapy clinic at Emmanuel congregation, a Church in Boston, in 1906. The function of the clinic was to blend psychology principles with spiritual resources such as scriptural meditation and prayer to care for congregants with mental health challenges. This service, involving medical doctors and psychologically trained clergy, gained nationwide publicity as their interventions brought quick recovery to their clients. In the 1920s, Anton Boisen, who was a psychiatric patient of Elwood Worcester, recovered from psychosis to found the Clinical Pastoral Training Movement and to become a popular researcher in the psychology of religion. Boisen demonstrated a unique approach to the relation between mental disorder and personal guilt, which foreshadowed the "moral psychotherapy".<sup>7</sup> The Clinical Training Movement at the Emmanuel congregation contributed to the promulgation of mental health concepts through churches and temples. Pastoral psychologists also gave a voice to religious concerns in the larger world of therapeutic psychology. The field of pastoral psychology gradually begun to find its way into seminary curricula until Carl Rogers, a second-year seminary student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, took pastoral psychology to a more academic and conceptualized level by developing a theoretical framework for it.<sup>8</sup> Today, pastoral psychology stands as a branch of practical theology that lies between the interface of theology and psychology with diverse relevance in pastoral ministry.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Pastoral Psychology**

Psychologists, over the years, have propounded various theories that provide an in-depth study of the human person and thought-behaviour patterns. Pastoral psychology relies heavily on most of these theoretical frameworks in its practices. A thorough understanding of these theories is fundamental to the practice of pastoral psychology. A few of these theories are discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup> Henry N Smith, "A Typology of Christian Responses to Chinese Ancestor Worship," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 4 (1989): 628-47.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher E. De Bono, "An Exploration and Adaptation of Anton T. Boisen's Notion of the Psychiatric Chaplain in Responding to Current Issues in Clinical Chaplaincy" (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Foresteen Forbes, *Anton Boisen, Pioneer on the Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience: A Critical Review of the Literature* (Azusa Pacific University, 2004).

### ***Psychoanalytic Theory***

Freudian psychoanalytic theory can be viewed as a family theory as it considers how the individual develops over time within the context of a family. This theory proposes that human behavior is predominantly the function of reactions to internal stimuli, instincts, urges and thoughts.<sup>9</sup> These behavioral patterns, whether desirable or undesirable, develop and grow over time in a given environmental context that interacts with the individual. In this theory, Sigmund Freud suggested that the unconscious mind controls conscious behaviour. Freud noted that the human mind has different layers, like the conscious mind, preconscious mind, and unconscious mind. The ego, superego, and id are the apparatuses of the mind and function in the person. The unconscious mind is a repository from which one's personality has emerged. Psychoanalysis is employed by most modern psychologists in clinical diagnosis and the treatment of behavioral disorders. Some contemporary pastoral psychologists employ psychoanalysis together with spiritual guidance for pastoral psychotherapeutic interventions in clients exhibiting defense mechanisms, repression, transference and countertransference, emotional distortions, personality and behavioral disorders.<sup>10</sup> This regimen is believed to enhance neuroplasticity and mental recovery, especially in trauma care.

### ***Humanistic Theory***

In the words of Vogan, unlike psychoanalysis, which focuses on unconscious drives and past traumas, humanistic psychology emphasizes conscious experience and present potential.<sup>11</sup> It underscores and explores the intrinsic goodness of people, opportunities for growth and flourishing, and capacity for self-actualization. It focuses on personal responsibility towards accomplishment, present experiences, and inborn propensities for growth, rather than deterministic forces or past experiences. Like positive psychology, the humanistic theory dwells on the qualities of optimal wellbeing of an individual and the use of creative potential to benefit others, as well as the relational conditions that promote those qualities as the outcomes of healthy development.<sup>12</sup> This theory employs congruence, empathy, genuineness, and the inherent worth of clients, core values in both therapeutic and pastoral care. In pastoral psychology, humanistic theory is applied in conjunction with spiritual care and counseling aiming to facilitate human growth and flourishing, hope, meaning-making, and wellbeing through relational and person-centered counseling.

### ***Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (CBT)***

Chang-Kyoo explained that Cognitive-behavioral theory (CBT) is a combination of the two individual psychological concepts that give it its characteristic name (cognitive therapy and behavioral therapy).<sup>13</sup> Cognitive therapy is based on the presumption that psychological disorders are the result of maladaptive thoughts. Thus, to resolve such disorders, cognitive therapy focuses on cognitive restructuring through challenging thought patterns that form their basis. Behavioral therapy, on the other hand, emphasizes that behaviors are acquired through experiential learning. By that belief, behavioral distortions can be corrected by learning helpful behaviors that neutralizes the undesirable behaviour or unlearn dysfunctional ones.

Cognitive-behavioral theory (CBT) is a psychotherapeutic modality that is entrenched in the central belief that a person's thoughts and perceptions play a vital role in the development and maintenance of emotional and behavioral responses to life situations. Antonio González-Prendes and Stella Resko are of the opinion that in CBT models, cognitive processes, in the form of meanings, judgments, appraisals, and assumptions associated with specific life events, are the primary determinants of one's feelings and actions in response to life events and thus either facilitate or hinder

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<sup>9</sup> Neelkanthan Shreyas et al., "Matters of the Mind: A Look Into the Life of Sigmund Freud," *Cureus* 16, no. 10 (2024).

<sup>10</sup> Alexa E. Albert and Anthony L. Back, "Psychoanalytically Informed MDMA-Assisted Therapy for Pathological Narcissism: A Novel Theoretical Approach," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 16 (2025): 1529427.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Vogan, "A Phenomenological/Hermeneutic Exploration of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Practice" (Point Park University, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Vogan, "A Phenomenological/Hermeneutic Exploration of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Practice."

<sup>13</sup> L. E. E. Chang-Kyoo, "A Pastoral Theological Reflection on Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Its Clinical Implications," *장신논단* 46, no. 3 (2014): 165-90.

the process of adaptation.<sup>14</sup> Thus, past experiences and events that create memory can make or unmake an individual in the future. CBT is useful in pastoral psychology for pastoral counseling interventions addressing anxiety, depression, trauma, and maladaptive thought patterns, especially using religious (Christian) cognitive imagery.

### **PERMA Model**

The American psychologist Martin Seligman developed the Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments (PERMA) model of positive psychotherapy and well-being. In the spirit of the PERMA model, these elements can facilitate human flourishing, greater happiness and life fulfillment. A study elsewhere reported that the use of the PERMA model as a multidimensional model of positive psychology has the ability to reduce burnout and improve well-being.<sup>15</sup> This means that the model not only provides preventive actions but also has a therapeutic effect on burnout. Therefore, clergy and pastoral care apply the PERMA model to reduce and treat ministerial burnout.

### **Systems Theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory posits that an individual's development is influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems, ranging from the immediate surroundings (e.g., family) to broad societal structures.<sup>16</sup> Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, believes that human development is influenced by four different concentric ecological systems, namely the micro-, the meso-, the exo and the macrosystems respectively. In his presentation, Bronfenbrenner made three assumptions: that humans are active players, exerting influence on their environment; the environment is compelling humans to adapt to its conditions and restrictions; and the environment is understood to consist of different size entities that are placed one inside another.<sup>17</sup> From the first two assumptions, Bronfenbrenner implies that humans are affecting and being affected by their immediate external environment (such as family, school, workplace, church etc.) to shape their behaviours, worldview and perceptions. In pastoral psychology, system theory offers insights into family dynamics, congregational culture (doctrine and liturgies), and the broader sociocultural contexts in which individuals experience spiritual and psychological distress. Applying system theory in a congregational context helps the clergy understand and stratify the church into generations based on need variation and pastor them according to their existential needs. It also helps to identify possible successes and potential sources of conflict in the church.

### **Theodicy in African Cosmology: A Contextual Reality**

The macrosystems of Bronfenbrenner's system theory play a crucial role in understanding how African cosmology and spirituality influence the life of the human person. As stated above, the system theory holds the philosophical assumption that the external environment exerts its influence on the human person.<sup>18</sup> In affirming this point of view, Onwuatuegwu noted that ideas, values, conceptions of time and the notion of cause and effect are all culturally constructed from their epistemological context.<sup>19</sup> This influence shapes and reshapes human worldviews, perceptions and knowledge. Africans hold the belief that the natural environment is a sacred home that is charged with cosmic powers. Unlike Western thoughts that generally ignore the spiritual dimensions of phenomena and focus on the visible, measurable physical reality, the African indigenous beliefs are contrary.

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<sup>14</sup> A. Antonio, Gonzalez-Prendes, Stella Resko, and Caitlin M. Cassady, "Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy," in *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Trauma Theory, Research, and Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 20–66.

<sup>15</sup> Shahrzad Bazargan-Hejazi et al., "Contribution of a Positive Psychology-Based Conceptual Framework in Reducing Physician Burnout and Improving Well-Being: A Systematic Review," *BMC Medical Education* 21, no. 1 (2021): 593.

<sup>16</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, "The Origins of Alienation," *Scientific American* 231, no. 2 (1974): 53–61.

<sup>17</sup> Bronfenbrenner, "The Origins of Alienation." 56.

<sup>18</sup> Kiatezua Lubanzadio Luyaluka, "Religion and Science Conversion Possibility: Towards the Formulation of a Systematic Theodicy of African Traditional Religion and Its Reinterpretation of Empirical Cosmology," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 7, no. 7 (2014): 108–39.

<sup>19</sup> Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu, "An Ontological Inquiry into the Interplay between Igbo-African Culture and the Emergence of Technological Phenomena," *Journal of Universal Community Empowerment Provision* 5, no. 1 (2025): 41–49.

In traditional African cosmological thought, supernatural causalities play a vital role in explaining physical phenomena. African ontology does not take the spiritual world and the forces that play a role in it for granted. In fact, for the Africans, there is a supernatural explanation for the occurrence. Tweneboah confirmed this by stating that Ghanaian communities firmly adhere to the philosophy that several deities live in and around human communities, and these deities are consistently regulating and determining what should happen at every given time.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the African belief system, everything that happens in the physical world has a corresponding spiritual causality. Consequently, there is a popular saying among the Akans of Ghana that *biribi nsi kwa*, meaning ‘nothing happens by chance’. Afriyie, in one of her recent studies in Ghana, posited that in the traditional African cosmological thought, there are ‘good’ deities and ‘bad’ deities all coexisting with humans in the same environment. She added that there is a claim that all good things that happen in African communities, such as good harvests, wealth, good health, or safe birth, are attributable to ‘good’ deities or as a result of a reward from the spiritual world for doing what is right. Contrary to this, any misfortune, such as chronic illness, poor harvest, severe drought, flood, accident, or even complicated birth, is a punishment for doing what is wrong or the handiwork of bad deities.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, any person who faces a challenge in a traditional African community is seen either as a sinner being punished by cosmic powers or such a person is oppressed by evil spirits. It is worth noting that, though some of these beliefs are fairy tales and perceptions, the majority of them are truly lived experiences of the individuals. The strong belief that the cosmos is full of spiritual beings greatly impacts the Christian spirituality and psychology of many Africans.

Systematic theologians believe that one of the most difficult subjects in Christian Theology is demonology, the study of demons or evil spirits. Numerous Biblical passages, such as Ephesians 6:12, Matthew 12:43-45, Acts 19:13-16, and Deuteronomy 32:17-18, point to the reality of the existence of these cosmic powers and schemes. Thus, the African worldview about the existence and manipulative powers of these deities is not a fiction but a reality. Resane mentioned that Africa is the land of the spirits, and that historical testimonies from the pioneer European missionaries confirm that mission work in Africa had been confronted with demonic or cosmic powers.<sup>22</sup> Currently, traditional religions are thriving, especially in countries like Ghana, Benin and Nigeria, because ritual sacrifices are being performed to deities, and worst of all, many Africans, both young and old, rich and poor, traditional and political leaders, seek power and protection from the cosmic powers in times of crises. There are countless stories of mystical powers out there, of unseen forces in every village and city throughout Africa.<sup>23</sup> It is, however, unfortunate that some African Christians join the crowd in such for help from these cosmic powers in the shins and rivers because they think that their practical theologians have not been able to demonstrate the practical powers of the practical God in their practical situations. Pastoral training and formation hardly make reference to demonic realities.

The African continent bears both minor wrinkles and deep scars from colonialism, slavery, socio-political disruptions, civil wars, diseases, eco-violence and endemic poverty.<sup>24</sup> Amidst these realities, questions surrounding the presence of evil and suffering keep surfacing: Why do good people suffer? Where is God in our trauma? **These** questions are at the heart of theodicy; the theological attempt to reconcile belief in a just, all-powerful God with the reality of suffering and evil. In African epistemology, where spiritual, communal, and ancestral dimensions shape the understanding of life, theodicy from the African context must be well understood in order to properly contextualize trauma theology. To minister meaningfully as a pastoral psychologist to the African Christian, the pastoral

<sup>20</sup> Seth Tweneboah, “The Sacred Nature of the Akan Chief and Its Implications for Tradition, Modernity and Religious Human Rights in Ghana,” 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Ernestina Afriyie, “A Christian Expression of African Spirituality: The Case Study of Three African Initiated Churches in Ghana,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 6 (2023): 221–37.

<sup>22</sup> Kelebogile Thomas Resane, “Resurgence of African Spiritualities in the New Prophetic Churches,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 2 (2024).

<sup>23</sup> Afriyie, “A Christian Expression of African Spirituality: The Case Study of Three African Initiated Churches in Ghana.” 225.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Eze and Alexander Siegmund, “Identifying Disaster Risk Factors and Hotspots in Africa from Spatiotemporal Decadal Analyses Using INFORM Data for Risk Reduction and Sustainable Development,” *Sustainable Development* 32, no. 4 (2024): 4020–41.

theologian must develop a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive **Afrocentric** theology that resonates with African worldviews.

Afrocentric pastoral psychology must also be trauma-informed, acknowledging the intergenerational impacts of racism and historical trauma. This involves integrating cultural expressions of healing, such as music therapy, ritual, and narrative therapy, with psychological tools that affirm resilience and post-traumatic growth. African pastoral theologians ought to be aware of these rudiments and provide spiritual supports that meet the spiritual needs of their congregants. Thus, for the practical theologian to critically engage with issues confronting the African Christian means that he/she must be in dialogue with the field of trauma theology, pastoral psychology and cultural anthropology at least, to some extent, even if simply to understand some of the worldviews, existential needs, and lived experience.

### **The Epistemology–Cosmology–Theodicy Triad: An African Perspective**

In African contexts, pastoral psychology cannot be faithfully practiced in the absence of a deep engagement with the triadic interplay of epistemology, cosmology, and theodicy. Ezebuilo is of the view that these three dimensions form the foundational pillars of the African worldview and theological anthropology, influencing how individuals perceive suffering, healing, and divine presence.<sup>25</sup> A contextual pastoral psychology that seeks to address emotional and spiritual distress in African communities must therefore be rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual cosmologies, and culturally resonant understandings of divine justice and suffering.

Epistemology in African traditions emphasizes a relational, experiential, and communal mode of knowing. According to Kwame Gyekye, a Ghanaian scholar, knowledge is not limited to rational cognition but includes embodied practices, oral wisdom, ancestral memory, dreams, symbols, and ritual experience.<sup>26</sup> In pastoral settings, this epistemology invites caregivers to listen not only to verbal expression but also to non-verbal cues, stories, songs, and signs embedded in daily life. It affirms the legitimacy of spiritual knowledge alongside psychological insight. For pastoral psychology, this means engaging healing as an integrative process involving both spiritual discernment and emotional attunement.

Cosmology in the African context is inherently spiritually interconnected. The universe is seen as a living network of relationships between the divine, the ancestors, the living community, and the natural world. Disruption in any part of this web, such as broken relationships, moral failure, or environmental desecration, can lead to psychological and spiritual distress.<sup>27</sup> Effective pastoral care must therefore recognize that healing is not solely intrapsychic but relational and communal. Practices such as reconciliation, prayer, and storytelling become not merely cultural artifacts, but therapeutic tools in restoring balance within the self and the community.

Theodicy, the attempt to make sense of suffering in relation to divine justice, is a particularly sensitive domain in pastoral psychology. In African cosmologies, suffering is often interpreted through spiritual, moral, and communal frameworks. It may be seen as the result of broken taboos, ancestral displeasure, or social disharmony.<sup>28</sup> However, African Christian pastoral theology has increasingly embraced a theology of divine solidarity, where God is seen as suffering with the oppressed and offering hope through communal resilience.<sup>29</sup> Thus, theodicy is less about abstract explanation and more about restoring meaning, trust, and hope through relational and ritual processes.

Together, the epistemology–cosmology–theodicy triad offers a culturally grounded framework for pastoral psychology in Africa. It challenges Eurocentric models by emphasizing collective identity, spiritual agency, and contextual meaning-making. A pastoral psychology informed by this triad is not

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<sup>25</sup> Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo, "On the Interconnectedness of African Cosmology: A Study of Some Metaphysical Elements in Igbo-African Worldview," *Nigerian Journal Of Philosophical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Temple University Press, 1995).22.

<sup>27</sup> Gyekye, *An essay on African philosophical thought*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Eze and Siegmund, "Identifying Disaster Risk Factors and Hotspots in Africa from Spatiotemporal Decadal Analyses Using INFORM Data for Risk Reduction and Sustainable Development."

<sup>29</sup> Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Divine Epidemiologists: Christianity, Faith, and Public Health in Africa, 1918–2021," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 4 (2021): 330–45.

only psychologically relevant but theologically faithful to the lived religious experience of African communities. This triad holds vital conceptual and contextual relevance for African pastoral psychology by offering a holistic, culturally rooted framework for understanding human suffering, healing, and spiritual care. It integrates indigenous ways of knowing and understanding, relational worldviews, and theodical reflections grounded in communal experience. Practically, it equips pastoral caregivers to address trauma and distress through rituals, narratives, and spiritual practices that resonate with African cosmologies, fostering healing that is both theologically meaningful and culturally responsive.

### **Decolonizing Pastoral Psychology: Towards an Afrocentric Contextualization**

Decolonizing pastoral psychology entails a critical interrogation and transformation of dominant Western psychological and theological paradigms that have historically shaped the theory and practice of pastoral care. Within African contexts, this process calls for a deliberate shift toward an Afrocentric contextualization, one that reclaims indigenous epistemologies, spiritualities, and communal values in the caregiving process.<sup>30</sup>

Western pastoral psychology, shaped by individualism, rationalism, and clinical neutrality, often fails to resonate with African worldviews that emphasize relational identity, spiritual causality, and communal healing. The colonial imposition of Euro-American models has led to the marginalization of African expressions of care, such as storytelling, ritual, ancestral veneration, and collective lament. Decolonization, therefore, is not merely an academic critique; it is a reconstructive project that seeks to indigenize pastoral psychology without compromising theological integrity or ethical standards.

An Afrocentric approach locates healing within the rhythms of African life, community, spirituality, and oral tradition, where psychological distress is interpreted not only as intrapsychic conflict but also as a relational and spiritual imbalance. Practices such as intercessory prayer, communal worship, and symbolic rituals become central to care, as they resonate deeply with African cosmologies and social realities. Moreover, decolonization challenges the pathologization of African spirituality and legitimizes its therapeutic potential. Decolonizing pastoral psychology also involves epistemological justice, the recognition that African indigenous knowledge systems are valid sources of insight for psychological and theological reflection.<sup>31</sup> This requires developing contextual frameworks, African-authored curricula, and participatory methodologies that empower both caregivers and communities. Decolonizing pastoral psychology through Afrocentric contextualization is a necessary step toward a truly liberative, holistic, and culturally meaningful practice of care in Africa. It affirms that healing must emerge not from imposed systems but from within the soul of African realities.

### **Afrocentric Paradigm to Pastoral Psychology**

Africa has been under colonialism for too long. It appears that, though all African countries have gained independence, they seem to have entered a neocolonial era where most of the countries' activities and practices are still under colonial grip. Ranging from parliamentary procedures, the criminal justice system, communication, health, education, to even Christianity is still under colonial influence. Though the earliest scholars in Afrocentrism initiated the quest for liberation, the colonial influence seems to prevail to some extent. For instance, Molefi Kete Asante, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century initiated the theoretical development of Afrocentricity. In the theoretical constructs, namely Afrocentric metatheory, Africology, Africinity, and Afrocentricity, all sort to communicate the African ideology in relation to societal norms and analytically focuses on the frame of mind, scope of context, structure of code, and message delivery devoid of any Eurocentric influence.<sup>32</sup> These theoretical developments gave rise to the formation of African theologies and African Christianity.

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<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Esther Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, "Africology, Afrocentricity, and What Remains to Be Done," *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 3 (2020): 48–57.

Despite the fact that some great theological scholars like John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Mercy Amba Oduoye, Kwesi Dickson, and Asamoah-Gyadu, among others, have taken African Theology and African Christianity to a world-class scholarship level, there are still lapses in many areas. For instance, since the emergence of pastoral psychology in practical theological scholarship, its theoretical underpinnings have been influenced by Eurocentric contextual praxis.

In a more recent time, just as theology has been decolonized into the African context, psychology has also been contextualized in Africa. African Psychology, according to Nwoye, is a dynamic manifestation of the unifying African principles, values and tradition, the self-conscious centering of psychological analysis and applications in African reality, culture, and epistemology.<sup>33</sup> Nwoye continue to argue that African Psychology is not only a theoretical construct but also a clinical intervention towards exploring and understanding human predicament from the African socioeconomic, cultural and psycho-spiritual perspective, and bringing healing and flourishing to the distressed in society, investing such clients with important ideas and perspectives for returning order and meaning to their lives.<sup>34</sup> With this development, pastoral psychology can now be decolonized and Africanized for the benefit of the people of Africa.

The Afrocentric paradigm in pastoral psychology underscores the relevance of prioritizing African perspectives, lived experiences, and cultural phenomena in fostering spiritual and psychological well-being within African communities. This paradigm differs from the Eurocentric approach as it dwells on African epistemologies, values and indigenous knowledge as primary lenses for analyzing issues, and recognizes the substantial impact of historical, sociocultural and religious factors on mental and spiritual health. Afrocentrism is not merely about ethnic pride but a methodological approach to decolonizing knowledge and restorative African intervention in the construction of meaning and hope.

### **Contextual Applications of Pastoral Psychology for Practical Ministry in Africa**

Pastoral psychology in the Afrocentric context employs sound Christian theology and culturally sensitive psychological praxis theories to improve not only pastoral care but also practical ministry in general within faith-based societies. It equips practical theologians with both theological and psychological understanding of the African worldviews, crises and lived experiences, which help address the spiritual, emotional and mental needs of congregations, fostering deeper relationships and more effective ministry. This integration allows for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to pastoral care, addressing spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being. Below are practical ways in which pastoral psychology can be applied in practical ministry.

#### ***Pastoral Psychology in Christian Counseling and Trauma Intervention***

Pastoral ministers often serve as first responders to crises such as bereavement, addiction, and marital conflict. In the African context, where trauma is widespread, counseling and trauma-responsive care are indispensable. Training in pastoral psychology equips ministers with listening skills, assessment tools, and ethical referral protocols. For African youth, Amarkwei and Djabanor highlight the need for culturally sensitive counseling that addresses aspirations, identity, and emotional development.<sup>35</sup> Pastoral psychology proves essential in adolescent care by offering psychospiritual support to challenges like anxiety, grief, and depression. Craps notes that trauma is culturally shaped, and each culture experiences and responds to trauma differently. This insight challenges universal assumptions about trauma recovery. In this light, Trauma Theology becomes vital for the African church. As the field matures, it integrates trauma theory with hermeneutics and doctrine, moving toward practical application. O'Donnell and Cross assert that a trauma-informed church fosters trauma-informed pastoral care, grounded in theology that is accessible, compassionate, and reflective.<sup>36</sup> Such care must

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine Nwoye, "What Is African Psychology the Psychology Of?," *Theory & Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2015): 96–116.

<sup>34</sup> Nwoye, "What Is African Psychology the Psychology Of?" 98.

<sup>35</sup> Amarkwei and Djabanor, "Towards a New Pastoral Care Model for Youth Retention in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana: A Case Study of the Brong-Ahafo Presbytery."

<sup>36</sup> Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross, *Bearing Witness: Intersectional Perspectives on Trauma Theology* (SCM Press, 2022).

address trauma survivors' realities and lead congregations to reimagine beliefs in response to those experiences.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Psychotherapy***

Pastoral psychotherapy is a specialized form of counseling that integrates psychological theory with theological reflection, rooted in the tradition of pastoral care. Based on the foundations of pastoral psychology, it draws from theology, clinical psychology, and spiritual care to address emotional and spiritual suffering. It views the human person as psychologically complex and spiritually responsive, a being made in the **imago Dei** and oriented toward meaning, relationship, and transcendence. Unlike secular psychotherapies, pastoral psychotherapy engages themes like guilt, forgiveness, vocation, suffering, and divine-human relationship, embedding healing within a theological narrative. In African contexts, where spirituality and communal identity are central, pastoral psychotherapy must transcend Western paradigms by incorporating Afrocentric values, indigenous cosmologies, and collective healing practices.

Lartey believes that effective pastoral psychotherapy in Africa should engage local idioms of distress and use culturally resonant tools such as storytelling, ritual, and symbolic healing.<sup>37</sup> The pastoral psychotherapist, as both clinician and spiritual guide, creates sacred space where scripture, prayer, and psychological insight coexist, requiring ethical discernment, especially when functioning in ecclesial roles. Contextualizing pastoral psychotherapy within African spiritual and cultural realities transforms pastoral psychology into a powerful tool for holistic healing. It critiques and reformulates inherited models to address trauma and affirm grace, identity, and community in the sacred context of African life.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Spiritual Direction and Discernment***

Pastoral psychology enriches spiritual direction by offering psychological insight into human growth, inner conflict, and spiritual experience. Rooted in **cura animarum** (care of souls), spiritual direction helps individuals deepen their relationship with God and discern divine will. Psychological tools help clarify whether struggles stem from spiritual desolation, psychological trauma, or developmental blockages. For example, unresolved parental wounds may distort one's image of God, impacting discernment and spiritual growth.<sup>38</sup> Discernment involves deep interior listening, shaped by affective movements such as peace, anxiety, and desolation, dynamics that are both spiritual and psychological. Ignatian spirituality emphasizes such affective experiences as potential channels of divine communication.

In African contexts, spiritual direction must engage ancestral consciousness, dreams, and symbolic imagination. A contextualized pastoral psychology helps distinguish culturally embedded spiritual expressions from pathology, affirming African epistemologies of the sacred. This integrative approach unites psychology and African spirituality to foster identity, emotional healing, and authentic spiritual maturity.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Preaching and Catechism***

Pastoral psychology enhances preaching and catechism by addressing the emotional, cognitive, and relational needs of diverse congregations. Preaching is not merely doctrinal instruction but a pastoral act that speaks to people's anxieties, traumas, and hopes. Drawing on psychological insights, ministers can craft sermons that validate emotions and promote healing, especially when addressing grief, guilt, or shame.

In catechism, particularly with youth, developmental psychology informs age-appropriate teaching strategies. Insights from Piaget, Erikson, and Fowler enable catechists to adapt religious instruction to the learners' cognitive and emotional capacities, promoting understanding over fear-based compliance. Pastoral psychology also emphasizes the relational dynamics of preaching and teaching. The empathy, authenticity, and spiritual maturity of the preacher or catechist deeply influence

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<sup>37</sup> Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*.19.

<sup>38</sup> Opoku Onyinah, "African Christianity in the Twenty-First Century," *Word and World* 27, no. 3 (2007): 305.

how messages are received. In African contexts, where storytelling, metaphor, and symbolism are central, emotionally expressive and culturally resonant communication is essential. By integrating psychological and theological insights, pastoral psychology helps preaching and catechism become journeys of faith, healing, and self-discovery. It fosters collective healing from colonial trauma, affirms African identity, and nurtures holistic spiritual growth.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Congregational Management and Leadership***

Pastoral psychology provides essential tools for effective church leadership by addressing the emotional, relational, and spiritual dynamics within congregations. While theological training often emphasizes vision, preaching, and administration, pastoral psychology focuses on the inner life of leaders, emotional intelligence, and healthy group dynamics.<sup>39</sup> Emotionally intelligent leaders—those with self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills—can foster trust, manage stress, and build emotionally safe church environments.

In African congregations, where cultural diversity, intergenerational tensions, and socio-economic disparities shape ministry, such insights are especially vital.<sup>40</sup> Pastoral psychology also helps leaders navigate transference and projection, psychological processes in which congregants attribute unresolved personal issues to clergy, enabling ministers to establish healthy boundaries and authentic relationships.

It encourages participatory leadership rooted in collaboration and mutual care, resonating with the African philosophy of **Ubuntu**, “I am because we are”. In times of conflict or transition, psychologically informed leaders can guide congregations with empathy, spiritual wisdom, and strategic communication. Ultimately, pastoral psychology nurtures leadership that is emotionally intelligent, spiritually grounded, and culturally responsive—fostering healing, transformation, and communal resilience.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Prophecy, Deliverance and Liberation***

The interface between pastoral psychology and the charismatic expressions of prophecy, deliverance, and liberation is gaining increasing scholarly and pastoral attention, particularly within African Christianity.<sup>41</sup> These spiritual practices, central to many African Independent and Pentecostal churches, are often viewed as purely spiritual phenomena. However, **pastoral psychology** provides an essential framework for understanding their psychological dimensions, discerning authenticity, and ensuring ethical, therapeutic, and theologically sound practice.

In prophetic ministry, where individuals claim divine insight into personal or communal issues, pastoral psychology encourages discernment of underlying psychodynamic processes. For example, unresolved trauma, grief, or unmet emotional needs may be projected into prophetic experiences or interpreted as spiritual revelations. While not denying the reality of the Spirit’s activity, pastoral psychology warns against spiritualizing psychological dysfunction or using prophetic authority to control or manipulate. Prophets, therefore, must be equipped not only with theological training but also with psychological insight to minister responsibly and pastorally.

Deliverance ministry, often focused on exorcism or breaking spiritual bondage, is particularly widespread in African contexts where spiritual causality is deeply embedded in cosmology. Many cases presented for deliverance may involve dissociative symptoms, anxiety disorders, or post-traumatic stress. Pastoral psychology provides a diagnostic lens to differentiate between spiritual oppression and mental illness, ensuring that individuals receive appropriate care, whether spiritual, psychological, or both.<sup>42</sup> Integration of pastoral psychology guards against the pathologizing of normal distress or the stigmatization of mental illness as demonic.

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Asante-Danquah, “Pursuing Discipleship for Church Growth: A Practical Theological Study About the Relational Dynamics of Pastoral Leadership in Three Circuits of the Accra Diocese of the Methodist Church Ghana” (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*.21.

<sup>41</sup> Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices*.56.

<sup>42</sup> Cephas N Omenyo and Abamfo O Atiemo, “Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Prophetism in Ghana,” *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1, no. 1 (2006): 55–68.

The liberation dimension of charismatic ministry, focused on emancipation from socio-economic, spiritual, and psychological bondage, resonates deeply with pastoral psychology's emphasis on human dignity, agency, and healing. Rooted in theologies of liberation and African communitarian ethics, liberation in this context addresses both internalized oppression and systemic injustice.<sup>43</sup> Pastoral psychology helps articulate how chronic poverty, colonial trauma, or gender-based violence may produce emotional and spiritual wounds, which require both prophetic denunciation and therapeutic intervention.

Pastoral psychology also offers tools for evaluating transference, charisma, and group dynamics often present in prophetic and deliverance settings. In high-emotion environments, followers may surrender critical thinking or project divine status onto leaders. Here, pastoral psychology offers protective insights into power dynamics, ethical boundaries, and the dangers of spiritual abuse. In African churches especially, it affirms that the Spirit's work is holistic, healing both soul and psyche, liberating both spiritually and psychologically, and restoring dignity to individuals and communities.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Christian Liturgical Praxis***

Liturgical praxis in African Christianity is a dynamic convergence of theology, culture, psychology, and spirituality. Liturgical practice in African Christianity is vibrant, embodied, and communal.<sup>44</sup> Far from being a mere repetition of sacred rites, African Christian liturgy is a space where worship becomes psychological therapy, culture is reinterpreted, and human suffering is addressed in spiritual terms. Pastoral psychology, focused on human behavior, emotion, healing, and relational dynamics, finds profound expression within this liturgical context.

Pastoral psychology enriches Christian liturgical praxis by highlighting the emotional, psychological, and communal dimensions of worship. Liturgy is not merely a formal ritual but a therapeutic space where individuals encounter God, express grief, joy, repentance, and hope. Psychological insights help liturgists understand how symbols, sacraments, and ritual language affect participants' inner lives and foster healing. For example, confession and absolution can alleviate guilt, while communal lament rituals can facilitate trauma recovery. In African contexts, liturgical praxis must integrate local cultural expressions, music, dance, and oral tradition, so that worship becomes both spiritually and psychologically transformative. Through this integration, pastoral psychology ensures that liturgy serves as a sacred space of both spiritual formation and emotional restoration.

Liturgical praxis, as used here, refers to the reflective and transformative actions of worship that engage theology, emotion, and cultural meaning. This article examines the ways in which pastoral psychological functions are performed through African liturgical expressions such as singing, prayer, testimony, dance, anointing, and communal rituals.

#### ***Praise and Worship: Emotional Catharsis and Resilience***

Praise and worship in Christian settings function as powerful tools for emotional catharsis and psychological resilience. Through music, prayer, and embodied expression, individuals release suppressed emotions such as grief, fear, or joy, fostering emotional regulation and spiritual renewal. In African contexts, participatory worship provides communal support and reinforces collective identity, enhancing resilience amid hardship. Thus, praise and worship serve not only liturgical functions but also therapeutic roles in promoting healing, hope, and psychological well-being.

African praise and worship is marked by dance, clapping, spontaneous singing, and ululation. These expressions release emotions, relieve stress, and foster joy. Pastoral psychology affirms this as emotional catharsis and group cohesion, helping individuals cope with grief, oppression, or trauma.

#### ***Testimonies: Narrative Therapy and Empowerment***

Testimonies in Christian communities function as a form of narrative therapy, allowing individuals to reframe painful experiences within redemptive theological narratives. Sharing testimonies promotes emotional healing, strengthens self-worth, and fosters communal empathy. In African contexts, testimonies affirm resilience amid adversity, restore dignity, and reinforce divine agency in daily life.

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<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Elochuckwu Eugene Uzukwu, "Liturgical Theology—African Perspective," in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020), 480–502.

They empower individuals by transforming them from passive sufferers to active witnesses of God's intervention, thus fostering both personal healing and collective spiritual formation. Public testimonies are central to Afrocentric liturgy. Sharing stories of healing, deliverance, or provision allows individuals to reinterpret their experiences through the lens of faith. This serves as narrative therapy, reinforcing meaning-making and hope.

### ***Prayers of Intercession: Communal Support and Containment***

Prayers of intercession serve as a pastoral-psychological mechanism for communal support and emotional containment. By voicing the needs of others, individuals externalize distress and share burdens within a spiritually safe space. In African contexts, where collective identity is central, intercession reinforces solidarity and mutual care. Psychologically, it provides containment for overwhelming emotions such as grief or fear, transforming them through spiritual advocacy and communal empathy. Thus, intercessory prayer fosters resilience, emotional regulation, and a sense of divine and communal presence.

Prayer in African liturgy often includes naming specific emotional or social challenges (e.g., illness, unemployment, spiritual attacks). The community prays together, creating a sense of solidarity and containment for the sufferer. This aligns with pastoral containment theory, which emphasizes collective support during psychological distress.

### ***Sacraments and Rituals: Symbolic Healing***

Sacraments and rituals in Christian tradition, such as baptism, Eucharist, and anointing—serve as powerful means of symbolic healing, offering participants more tangible expressions of divine grace, forgiveness, and renewal. From a pastoral psychological perspective, these rituals facilitate emotional integration, mark transitions, and provide a structured space for processing grief, trauma, or spiritual longing. In African contexts, rituals resonate deeply with indigenous symbolic systems, bridging cultural identity and Christian faith. When meaningfully enacted, sacraments become therapeutic acts that promote inner reconciliation, communal belonging, and spiritual resilience.

Baptism, Eucharist, anointing, and foot washing take on deep emotional and cultural significance. For example, anointing with oil is not only theological; it symbolizes empowerment, healing, and spiritual cleansing. These rituals can function as symbolic acts of restoration and emotional reintegration.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Self-Care***

Self-care in pastoral psychology is a holistic practice encompassing emotional, spiritual, physical, and communal well-being. In African pastoral ministry, where leaders often serve as counselors, intercessors, and cultural figures, the demands can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and spiritual exhaustion. Yet, self-care is frequently misunderstood as selfish or unspiritual. Pastoral psychology reframes self-care as a sacred responsibility essential for sustainable ministry. It emphasizes emotional regulation, spiritual nourishment, boundary-setting, and restorative practices such as retreats, therapy, and peer support. Ministers who neglect their well-being usually risk role confusion and emotional depletion.

In Afrocentric contexts, self-care must be culturally and communally grounded. Rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—self-care is not an escape from community but a contribution to it.<sup>45</sup> A healthy leader fosters a healthy congregation. Afrocentric pastoral psychology affirms that tending to one's own needs is a theological act, recognizing that the caregiver, too, is a beloved child of God—worthy of rest, healing, and joy.

### ***Pastoral Psychology in Social Justice***

Pastoral psychology plays a vital role in advancing social justice by addressing the psychological and spiritual impacts of systemic oppression, trauma, and marginalization. It expands care beyond individual pathology to include structural causes of suffering such as racism, poverty, gender

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<sup>45</sup> John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990).

inequality, and colonial violence, affirming that healing involves both personal insight and collective liberation. In African contexts, where communities confront postcolonial trauma and economic disparity, pastoral psychology must align with liberation theology to affirm dignity, resilience, and agency.

### **Ethical Issues in Afrocentric Pastoral Psychology**

Afrocentric pastoral psychology must also uphold ethical standards rooted in African values and global best practices. Ethical care requires cultural competence, boundary clarity, and gender sensitivity. Ministers must avoid spiritual manipulation, respect indigenous beliefs, and discern spiritual issues from psychological ones to prevent harm.<sup>46</sup> Gender justice demands challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for inclusive care. Ongoing training, supervision, and theological reflection are essential for accountable, context-sensitive practice. The following are critical ethical considerations that must be keenly adhered to in the practice of pastoral psychology:

#### ***Dual Relationships and Boundaries***

Pastoral psychologists often serve in multiple roles, as spiritual leaders, counselors, and community figures. These overlapping relationships can lead to boundary violations, whether intentional or inadvertent. Maintaining professional boundaries is essential to avoid exploitation, dependency, or confusion, especially in faith communities where the pastor may hold significant authority and influence.

#### ***Confidentiality and Privacy***

Respect for confidentiality is foundational in both psychology and pastoral care. However, in pastoral contexts, the lines can blur due to communal expectations, theological obligations (e.g., confession), or shared knowledge within small congregations. Practitioners must navigate confidentiality with care, balancing legal requirements, theological convictions, and ethical duties to protect client privacy.

#### ***Competency and Scope of Practice***

Ethical practice demands that pastoral psychologists remain within the limits of their training and competence. Engaging in mental health diagnosis, trauma care, or psychotherapy without appropriate licensure or training can cause harm. Likewise, reliance solely on spiritual or theological interpretations without psychological insight can result in misdiagnosis or spiritual bypassing.

#### ***Informed Consent and Autonomy***

Clients must be fully informed about the nature of the care being offered, including whether it is pastoral, psychological, or integrative. This includes disclosing the practitioner's qualifications, theological stance, and any potential limitations of faith-based approaches.<sup>47</sup> Respect for client autonomy requires avoiding coercive spiritual advice or imposing religious beliefs in ways that compromise psychological well-being.

#### ***Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity***

Pastoral psychologists working in diverse contexts, especially within African or Indigenous communities, must be culturally competent. Ethical practice involves respecting local cosmologies, communal values, and traditional healing practices. Applying Western psychological models without contextual adaptation may inadvertently pathologize cultural expressions or spiritual experiences.

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<sup>46</sup> Grafton Todd Eliason, Mark Lepore, and Douglas Holmes, "Ethics in Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Contemporary Review of Updated Standards in the Field," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 67, no. 2 (2013): 1–11.

<sup>47</sup> Eliason, Lepore, and Holmes, "Ethics in Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Contemporary Review of Updated Standards in the Field."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Congruence and Empathy***

**Congruence and empathy** are core ethical principles in pastoral psychology. Congruence involves authentic, transparent presence, aligning a caregiver's internal feelings with external expressions, fostering trust. Empathy requires a deep, nonjudgmental understanding of the care seeker's experience, embodying compassion and respect.<sup>48</sup> Together, they promote ethically sound, relationally attuned care that honors human dignity and theological integrity. In African contexts, they resonate with communal values like **Ubuntu**, ensuring culturally grounded and spiritually responsible pastoral engagement.

### ***Challenges and Prospects of Afrocentric Pastoral Psychology***

Afrocentric Pastoral Psychology aims to offer culturally grounded, spiritually holistic, and contextually relevant care for African communities. However, it faces critical challenges. A key issue is the dominance of Western psychological and theological paradigms in pastoral training, which often emphasize individualism and clinical detachment, values that clash with African communalism, spirituality, and symbolic worldviews.<sup>49</sup> This creates a disconnection between theory and practice in African contexts. Mental health stigma also poses a barrier. Psychological distress is frequently spiritualized and attributed to demonic forces or sin, leading to reliance on deliverance rituals rather than therapeutic care.<sup>50</sup> This dualism hampers holistic healing approaches. Moreover, there is a lack of contextually rooted literature, research, and institutions to support Afrocentric methodologies, risking the underdevelopment of the field.

Despite these obstacles, Afrocentric Pastoral Psychology holds immense promise. It can reclaim indigenous resources—storytelling, ritual, proverbs—for culturally resonant healing. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in interdisciplinary approaches that merge theology, psychology, anthropology, and African spirituality. This opens the door for innovative models of care that affirm African identity, address historical trauma, and foster resilience. The increasing recognition of liberation psychology, narrative therapy, and communal ethics also aligns with Afrocentric values of relationality, social justice, and holistic healing. Finally, Afrocentric pastoral psychology holds promise for transforming theological education across the continent. By incorporating psychological literacy and cultural competence into seminary formation, future church leaders can become more effective healers, counselors, and advocates for mental and spiritual health.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a) **Contextual Curriculum Development:** Theological institutions and seminaries in Africa should integrate Afrocentric pastoral psychology into their curricula, emphasizing indigenous knowledge, spiritual care, and psychological literacy.
- b) **Interdisciplinary Training for Pastoral Practitioners:** Church leaders should receive training in both theology and mental health, enabling them to address emotional, spiritual, and cultural issues holistically and ethically.
- c) **Community-Based Mental Health Integration:** Afrocentric pastoral care should collaborate with community structures, traditional healers, and clinical professionals to create culturally sensitive mental health interventions.
- d) **Ethical Frameworks for Practice:** Clear, context-specific ethical guidelines should be developed to guide pastoral psychologists in role boundaries, confidentiality, spiritual discernment, and gender sensitivity.
- e) **Further Research and Documentation:** More empirical and theological research is needed to document indigenous healing practices, evaluate Afrocentric care models, and inform future scholarly development in the field.

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<sup>48</sup> Eliason, Lepore, and Holmes, "Ethics in Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Contemporary Review of Updated Standards in the Field."4.

<sup>49</sup> Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*.19.

<sup>50</sup> Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices*.58.

## CONCLUSION

Pastoral psychology offers indispensable tools for the practical ministry of the 21st century. By integrating psychological insight with theological conviction, pastoral caregivers can more fully attend to the holistic needs of individuals and communities. Afrocentric pastoral psychology offers a transformative framework that integrates African cultural wisdom, theological depth, and psychological insight to address the spiritual and emotional needs of African communities. It challenges the dominance of Western paradigms by affirming communal values, indigenous healing practices, and holistic care. While facing challenges such as limited resources, ethical complexities, and the stigma of mental illness, its prospects for decolonizing pastoral care and fostering resilience are significant. By grounding care in African worldviews and liberative theology, Afrocentric pastoral psychology emerges as a contextually, ethically, and spiritually vibrant model for ministry, healing, and justice in postcolonial Africa. Future efforts must focus on training, research, and integration within ecclesial and academic settings.

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## ABOUT AUTHORS

Rev. Joshua Djabanor is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, a pastoral theologian, and a researcher whose research interests include Pastoral Psychology, Trauma Theology, and Pastoral Therapy in Africa.

Rev. Prof. Samuel Ayete-Nyampong is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, a professor of Pastoral Gerontology, Senior Lecturer and Academic Dean at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Ghana. He is a former Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.