

## Pastoral Care as Volunteerism: A neo-Pentecostal Perspective

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### Abstract:

This article presents findings from the study that sought to understand pastoral care as volunteerism based on the study conducted among neo-Pentecostal churches in Bushbuckridge, South Africa. Conducted within the discipline of practical theology using Osmer's theory of theological reflection, the study followed a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. It used interviews to collect data from research participants that I selected purposively from the research site. Augmented by autoethnographic data, I interspersed field data with concepts from academic literature as I analyzed the data thematic. The findings revealed that neo-Pentecostal caregivers in the research site offer pastoral care voluntarily using three models, viz. in-person, remote and hybrid volunteerism. Whereas this study reveals that the research participants offer pastoral care at no cost, this practice is not a commonly held principle throughout the neo-Pentecostal Movement. Regardless of these complexities and multiplicity of complementary models, pastoral care from the perspective of neo-Pentecostalism stems from biblical foundations and personal convictions. While these findings are likely to contribute to existing knowledge, the findings may not be generalized to various contexts due to limitations of sample size and geographic context. Therefore, it is recommended that researchers should consider conducting future similar studies other geographical contexts and/or other Christian traditions to enhance these models for use by the broader Christian community.

**Key words:** Volunteerism, pastoral care, neo-Pentecostalism, autoethnography, Bushbuckridge

### 1. Introduction:

This articulates pastoral care as volunteerism based on findings from a study conducted among neo-Pentecostals in Bushbuckridge in South Africa. Neo-Pentecostalism is derived from the experience of the ancient Christian church that emerged after the apostles' encounter with the Holy Spirit as covered in the book of Act (Ugba, 2006). This encounter involved the apostle receiving the Holy Spirit which is also termed baptism in the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues (Stevanus et al., 2023). Subsequent to this event, believers immediately started to exercise their spiritual gifts coupled with acts of philanthropy. As

the Pentecostal Movement developed and grew, it adopted these practices which continue to influence their act of volunteerism up to this day.

The Pentecostals' adoption of the ancient philanthropic activities could be attributed to their literal reading and application of scriptures. This propensity tends to contribute to them internalizing and adopting volunteerism practices of ancient believers as they find them in the Bible (Cheung & Kuah, 2019). While they predominantly adopt practices that are linked to the New Testament church, their voluntary activities also include actions that could be linked to the Old Testament.

For instance, their mobilization of medical care as adopted by neo-Pentecostal churches in countries like Ghana (Benyah, 2021), could be linked to Old Testament texts such as when Prophet Isaiah used herbs from the fig tree to heal King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38, 2 Kings 20, 2 Chronicles 32).

The choice of this topic and Bushbuckridge as a research site is based on an innate drive to contribute to scholarly work on pastoral care and neo-Pentecostalism in Bushbuckridge in South Africa. Congruently, this drive is influenced by the fact that there is some scholarship on the population's spirituality mainly from the work of Izak Niehaus who wrote about witchcraft beliefs and witchcraft accusations from an anthropological background (Niehaus, 2005, 2012, 2023). This paper acknowledges and advances that such spirituality co-exists with other forms of spirituality like Pentecostal Christianity which Ngomane, (2013) posits was introduced in the area around 1910. However, in terms of him little has been researched and written about it within the context of Bushbuckridge, a claim that I support based on literature review that I conducted in my prior work (Nkuna, 2024). Hence, findings from this study contribute to literature on Pentecostal spirituality, pastoral care and volunteering in Bushbuckridge.

## 2. Methodology:

The study followed a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. These entailed interviews conducted among members of the neo-Pentecostal churches in Bushbuckridge to comprehend this phenomenon from the socio-cultural context of both caregivers and care seekers (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Empirical data collected through this method was augmented by autoethnographic data that I collected from my personal experience as both neo-Pentecostal pastoral caregiver and care seeker from the same area. Autoethnography enriched the study by offering my self-experience and participatory observation of encounters of others that span over a period of more than three decades in the area. While interviews entailed gathering of data from research participants who provided insight on their

recent participation in pastoral care, autoethnography blended them with retrospective and concurrent data (Edwards, 2021).

Empirical data from both methods were analyzed thematically, whereby the themes emerged from the data themselves not existing theories per se (Flick, 2018). Document review was used to gain an understanding of relevant theoretical concepts and concurrent practices of the same phenomenon in other parts of the globe, and to interpret empirical data. The use of these three methods resulted in the application of triangulation which reduced potential bias that occasionally emerges from single source utilization (Bowen, 2009). Triangulation helped with corroboration and convergence of findings from these various sources. As there are various forms of documents that are used in document analysis in research (Wood et al., 2020), it is worth specifying that the study used scholarly articles for this purpose. Similarly, the interpretation of all findings was followed by the determination of the biblical foundations of pastoral care to determine these practices' normativity. The entire research approach was informed by Richard Osmer's four tasks of theological interpretation, viz. descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic tasks (Osmer, 2008).

## 3. Summary of Key Findings:

### 3.1 Understanding neo-Pentecostalism:

A brief overview of neo-Pentecostalism is essential to give the context of the study as it was conducted within the auspices of this Christian tradition. Numerous studies have been conducted in relation to neo-Pentecostalism, but this concept does not bear a generally accepted definition. Nevertheless, its origin is linked to the Pentecostal movement which is rooted in its adherents' drawing of inspiration from the influence of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the book of Acts (Ugba, 2006). Just as classical Pentecostalism is diverse, so is neo-Pentecostalism (Soothill, 2014). This study was conducted within the rubric of what could be termed African neo-Pentecostalism which is also broad in nature. For this study, it refers to neo-Pentecostal belief as practiced by indigenous

African population in South Africa. Just like in many parts of the world, the Bushbuckridge Pentecostal population establishes local churches that multiply and pervade the local community due to various triggers. Historically, they commonly started as soul care projects established to drive the eschatological evangelism motive (Roux, 2019), but later incorporate caring for and about the immediate needs of the community of believers.

Despite their diversity, neo-Pentecostalism could be perceived as Christian movement with leaders who claim to have similar spiritual capabilities possessed by biblical believers like prophets and apostles (Banda, 2020). White (2024) alludes that in Africa, Pentecostals put emphasis on experiences such as pneumatologically encounters, miracles, and healing. Aligned to this characteristic, findings from this study highlight that healing forms an integral part of soul care offered by neo-Pentecostals. Additionally, due to their literal reading and application of scripture research participants have internalized the ancient apostles' practice of offering pastoral care at no cost. This is contrary to the tendency among some famous neo-Pentecostal church leaders who charge a consultation fee to people in need of pastoral care (Kgatle, 2024).

### **3.2 Pastoral care among Pentecostals:**

Derived from its history, Pentecostalism was traditionally concerned with evangelization in preparation of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Thus, it could be said that whatever Pentecostals did in the name of ministry, including pastoral care was meant to enhance the spread of the gospel of repentance in preparation for the eschatology. Consequently, Roux (2019) postulates that early Pentecostals paid little attention to caring for souls but for salvation of souls. While this disposition is no longer dominant, evidence from Bushbuckridge suggests that it still plays a central role in pastoral care. This is reflected in the resources that are used by research participants in pastoral care, such as reading of the word that encourages care seekers to seek the face of the Lord when facing adversity and the use of prayer that is meant to reconcile them to God while addressing their challenges. The use of

prayer is unsurprisingly common as it serves as a mechanism that care seekers use to do self-examination while simultaneously fostering divine and human relations (Pleizier, 2022). Concomitantly, the use of scriptures does not only help them to reflect on their relationship with God, but it also serves as a weapon to fight adversity by declaring relevant passages during prayer (White, 2022).

The above practice illustrates that many individual ministers and caregivers integrate salvation of souls with soul care in their pastoral care endeavors. Furthermore, findings from the research site indicate that pastoral care is integrative of traditional pastoral care models and contemporary communal approach which include practices which De Jongh Van Arkel (1995) argues encompass mutual care, pastoral therapy and pastoral counseling. The findings further illustrate that mutual or communal care plays a crucial role in pastoral care within the movement. Research participants depicted this approach in their oral account of how some of them as ordinary members of the local church visit the sick and the needy to pray with them and share scriptures with them (Danbolt et al., 2021).

In addition to the above, field data from Bushbuckridge allude that pastoral care gives address issues that fall within the spectrum of local churches' public theology that contributes to attainment of sustainable development goals (Msebi & Beukes, 2024). These include supporting vulnerable groups like women and the poor to start self-help projects that contribute to development of small-scale entrepreneurs to sustain their households. Research participants shared about how they offer material support to care seekers to develop their small businesses like street vending without asking for repayment or any form of external incentives.

### **3.3 The concept of volunteerism:**

Volunteerism is about providing needed support as an individual or group without expecting any incentive in return (Burbeck et al., 2014). Similarly, for such support to be regarded as voluntary, it also

should be given without external coercion (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). Empirical evidence from Bushbuckridge shows that neo-Pentecostals use volunteerism to offer both spiritual care and material provision as part of pastoral care. This propensity is prevalent among Christians throughout the globe as Cartledge (2021) perceives the church as the hospital for the sick whereby Pentecostals cater for all classes in society. While some ministers commercialize these services by making care seekers pay for the pastoral care services that they offer (Kgatle, 2022), research participants in this study still believe that there is no need for them to charge a fee because they received their salvation for free. The practice that has been affirmed by this study is contrary to the commercialization of pastoral care and ministry which Tagwirei (2023) describes as provocative in nature as it involves preying on predominantly poor members of the community.

The concept of volunteerism has developed over the years to a point where there are various categories within it. Scholars have conceived the emergence of formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering refers to volunteering that is undertaken under the auspices of an organization whereas informal volunteering is not coordinated by an organization (Einolf et al., 2016). African Pentecostal churches tend to adopt these two models concurrently as activities such as outreaches are coordinated by the church whereas members of the church usually carry out caring activities such as home visits without the coordination of the church. Data from the research site indicate that research participants lean towards informal volunteering as caregivers offer their services out of an innate drive that is not sanctioned by their churches. Their link to their local churches is limited to recognizing that they operate within the auspices of Pentecostalism as demonstrated in their way of doing things.

With technological advancement, volunteerism is also offered remotely resulting in the emergence of the concept of virtual volunteering (Ahmed, 2021). This form of volunteering gained much prominence and escalated during the outbreak of

the coronavirus pandemic (Corpuz, 2021). In the Bushbuckridge area this entailed offering counseling remotely, holding virtual prayer meetings and sharing sermonettes via social media platform like WhatsApp among other activities. The sharing of caring content like sermonettes was also widely practiced in other geographic areas other than the research site as Christian leaders wanted to ensure that members of the church get encouraged during the pandemic (Masoga, 2020).

#### **4. Biblical Foundations of Volunteerism:**

As reflected and explained in different words in the previous section, volunteering entails offering support to others without expecting any material incentives either from the beneficiary of the act or a third party (Whittaker et al., 2015). From a Pentecostal perspective this could be traced to the biblical foundations of this Christian tradition as Perpék (2012) suggests that volunteerism could be linked to religiosity. Consequently, both the Old Testament and New Testament tend to offer numerous examples of volunteerism in the area of pastoral care. The Old Testament offers numerous examples of volunteering acts undertaken by ancient prophets and ordinary citizens who offered their services to humankind without charging a fee or anticipating material reward (Burbeck et al., 2014). For instance, in the Pentateuch Moses led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt at no fee; Elisha healed Naaman of Leprosy and refused to receive gifts of appreciation from him (2 Kings 2); and King David invited Mephibosheth to dine with him without claiming any incentives in return as reflected in 2 Samuel 9, just to cite a few.

Examples of volunteerism are also prevalent in the New Testament. Jesus Christ offers a supreme model of volunteerism by generally showing it through spiritual care and acts of compassion. Of great significance is that he came to the earth to offer his life as a sacrifice so that anyone who believes in him can receive eternal life (John 3:16). Likewise, during his earthly ministry he showed compassion by healing the sick, casting out demons from people and feeding multitudes, among other services without any material reward as reported in the four gospels. His exemplary acts of

volunteering were replicated by the apostles who emulated him by offering alms to the poor as reflected in Acts 6, alongside healing the sick and casting out demons while evangelizing as covered in the rest of the book of Acts.

The Pentecostals' direct adoption of the biblical principles of volunteerism is based on the fact that they received their salvation for free and use it to invite others to Christianity. However, as stated in the previous section Pentecostalism is a diverse and complex movement (Nel, 2017). Due to its infinite fragmentation (Wariboko, 2017), it would be illogical to contemplate that all Pentecostal pastoral caregivers offer their services voluntarily. Evidently, its emphasis on pastoral care as a voluntary phenomenon is compromised by some prominent ministers within its ranks charging exorbitant fees for their services, particularly from the African Pentecostal genre (Kgatlé, 2024). This implies that it cannot be generalized that neo-Pentecostal churches have adopted a uniform approach to the biblical foundations of volunteerism. Moreover, it is further compromised by the subtle tendencies towards payment of services that is promoted through manipulative strategies employed by proponents of prosperity theology. This genre of Pentecostal theology that was arguably born in North America introduced the principles of sowing and reaping. Proponents of this theology teach congregants to pay offerings, tithes and pledges bountifully in order attract abundant blessings from God (Adamo, 2021). While the Bible has several verses that encourage believers to give, such as Proverbs 11:25 that emphasize that a generous person will prosper, there seems to be some abuse of these biblical texts. Greedy ministers use them to manipulate members of the church to give to their ministry whereby some of these proceeds are used to finance their lavish lifestyle. Of course, this argument does not suggest that those who sow do not receive the desires of their hearts at all after payment of these offerings to these ministries.

##### **5. Neo-Pentecostal Volunteerism Models:**

The findings from Bushbuckridge reveal that pastoral caregivers in the research site offer

voluntary services predominantly through in-person, virtual and hybrid models. While voluntary services are usually directed at others, this study also revealed that caregivers have also adopted mechanisms that they use to offer self-care. The co-existence of these models became prominent during the era of the coronavirus pandemic as to the research participants increasingly blended the use of technology with traditional mechanisms to offer pastoral care.

In-person volunteering involves offering free pastoral care in a face-to-face setup between caregivers and the care seekers. This model is still practiced even during the digital age after the introduction of virtual pastoral care since some of the services require pastoral care in its conventional physical-presence form (Xu, 2023). There are various services that research participants have indicated are offered in-person, e.g. running funeral services and offering handouts. Handouts are offered to needy families for immediate relief of basic needs as well as for the purpose of helping care seekers to start self-help initiatives. Both material and spiritual care that are offered in-person attract financial responsibility on the part of the caregivers as they have to mobilize resources and travel to the care seekers' place of convenience to offer the required help. Regardless of this factor, research participants indicated that they do not expect any material returns from these actions but give freely to the needy as part of their appreciation of Jesus Christ's love to them (Onyindah, 2020). This practice undoubtedly makes in-person pastoral care as volunteering if consistently offered in this fashion.

Virtual pastoral care is also practiced in addition to in-person volunteering and has gained momentum in the research site since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. This is consistent with global trends on the use of ICT in various sectors such as tertiary education (Nkuna & Nkuna, 2023) and Christian pastoral care (Da Silva, 2020). In Christian pastoral care this includes conducting prayer meetings remotely, online counseling and sermons, and sharing of digital ministry resources (Nkuna, 2024). While the use of ICT is praised for

its cost savings advantage, its preference on pastoral care means calls for the incurring of establishment costs by both caregivers and care seekers. In other words, they should increase their budget to purchase or upgrade their electronic devices and also to procure data required for communication. While in commercial environments caregivers are able to recoup these costs from the fees that they charge, research participants indicated that they do not recover their costs. This practice makes remote pastoral care a model that could be termed virtual volunteerism which is self-funded by the caregivers.

Virtual volunteering also contributed to self-care whereby care seekers access spiritual resources in digital form and use them encourage themselves during trying times. For instance, recorded sermonettes and prayers become caring resources as care seekers choose to use them during times that are convenient to them. While they are generated by caregivers, they take the image of self-medication that is administered by the care seekers themselves in times of need. In this regard, this electronic pastoral care content shared for free remotely within the Christian community facilitates self-care through becoming available to address the care seekers' needs.

Hybrid pastoral care involves the combination of in-person and virtual pastoral care practices (Kulik, 2021). The need for a hybrid model is necessitated by various contexts. In some instances, a caring endeavor may integrate both remote and in-person volunteering based on the circumstance. Using the example of material support to needy families, in this study a research participant illustrated the use of a typical hybrid volunteering. She indicated that the need for material support was expressed in a virtual session with the care seeker whereby both parties discussed the need at length online. This was followed by the caregiver making an appointment to go and deliver the supplies to the family physically. In this regard, the hybrid model could also be perceived in terms of a continuum (Cornforth, 2020). This continuum was also evident even before the coronavirus pandemic as caregivers would have an in-person session and use

a remote model to follow-up on the progress of the intervention. This was narrated by a research participant who explained that she would conduct home visits to pray for the sick and then conduct routine check-in online to assess their progress.

## 6. Conclusion:

The article presented pastoral care as volunteerism from the perspective of the neo-Pentecostal caregivers and care seekers as studies in the Bushbuckridge area of South Africa. The study employed a triangulation of qualitative methods within the interpretivism research paradigm. The project was conceived with the purpose of ascertaining volunteerism models that are used in pastoral care. Correspondingly, the study sought to contribute to existing knowledge in the Pentecostal spirituality in Bushbuckridge and its influence on volunteerism and pastoral care.

Research findings revealed that neo-Pentecostal caregivers in Bushbuckridge are aligned to pastoral caregiving principles of volunteerism as reflected in the Bible. The volunteerism principles are generally based on their adherence to Pentecostalism. Based on the outcomes of the data analysis and interpretation, the study discovered that pastoral caregiving in this research site applies three models of volunteerism, namely in-person, remote and hybrid volunteerism. All these models fall within the scope of volunteerism as caregivers spend their own resources to render the care but never charge a fee to the care seekers. This practice is contrary to the prevalent trend of charging a consultation fee as used by some leaders of neo-Pentecostal churches, as observed in Africa. Concomitantly, volunteerism that was revealed in this study also contradicts that subtle payment for service that is widely spread in the prosperity theology genre of Pentecostalism.

## 7. Recommendations:

- I recommend that researchers consider conducting similar studies in urban centers for comparative assessment purpose with these rural context findings.
- Future studies could also replicate similar research in other Christian traditions to

develop volunteerism models that could be adapted to various Christian communities.

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