



# Analysis of Pastoral Counseling Approaches to Congregations Experiencing Post-Natural Disaster Trauma

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role and effectiveness of pastoral counseling in ministering to congregations experiencing trauma following natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research involved interviews, field observations, and document analysis within selected church communities affected by recent disasters. The findings reveal that pastoral counseling approaches rooted in presence-based ministry, scripture-centered encouragement, group prayer, and trauma-informed care significantly contributed to the emotional and spiritual recovery of survivors. Many congregants reported that their faith, supported by compassionate pastoral guidance, provided comfort, strengthened resilience, and fostered a renewed sense of hope. However, challenges such as a lack of trauma counseling training among pastors, emotional fatigue, limited resources, and theological misinterpretations sometimes hindered the healing process. The study concludes that effective pastoral counseling must integrate spiritual wisdom with psychological sensitivity to address the complex needs of disaster-affected congregations. It calls for increased pastoral capacity building, contextual theological reflection, and greater collaboration with mental health professionals to enhance the church's role in post-disaster recovery.

## Research Highlights:

- Identifies key pastoral counseling methods including presence-based ministry, prayer, and trauma-informed listening used to support congregations affected by natural disasters.
- Demonstrates the significant role of faith and scripture in providing emotional and spiritual resilience during post-disaster recovery.
- Reveals congregants' positive responses to compassionate, community-centered pastoral care and their gradual healing process.
- Highlights challenges faced by pastors, including lack of psychological training, emotional burnout, and limited resources.
- Recommends an integrative pastoral model that combines theological guidance with mental health awareness to improve trauma care in disaster-stricken church communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes have devastating impacts not only on the physical environment but also on the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of affected individuals and communities. In predominantly religious societies, congregations often turn to faith institutions and spiritual leaders for comfort, meaning, and support during times of crisis (Smith, 2006). While humanitarian aid provides for immediate physical needs, the spiritual and emotional wounds left by such disasters require deeper, long-term pastoral care and counseling.

In the aftermath of a disaster, many congregants face significant trauma, including grief over the loss of loved ones, despair from the destruction of homes and livelihoods, and spiritual confusion or a crisis of faith. Questions such as “Why did God allow this to happen?” or “Where is God in the midst of suffering?” are common. In such moments, pastoral counseling becomes a vital ministry that can help individuals find hope, healing, and restoration through a spiritual lens (Smith, 2006). Pastoral counselors serve not only as spiritual guides but also as emotional support systems, helping people process their trauma in ways that integrate both psychological principles and theological foundations.

The importance of addressing trauma in congregations after natural disasters lies in the recognition that trauma impacts the whole person body, mind, and spirit. Individuals may suffer from grief due to the loss of loved ones, anxiety about the future, or even feelings of guilt for having survived when others did not (Zisook & Shear, 2009). Left unaddressed, these emotional burdens can lead to long-term mental health issues, withdrawal from the faith community, and even spiritual crises that question the goodness or presence of God. By actively engaging in trauma care, the church acknowledges the suffering of its members and offers a space for lament, healing, and restoration.

Pastoral counseling, in this context, plays a vital role in bridging the gap between emotional trauma and spiritual care. Through prayer, scripture, and presence, pastoral leaders can guide congregants in processing their pain in ways that affirm their faith and promote resilience (Searby, 2015). Additionally, trauma-informed pastoral approaches help prevent the risk of spiritual bypassing where scripture or theology is used to suppress genuine emotional responses by creating a compassionate space where pain can be named and addressed honestly.

Moreover, addressing trauma strengthens the communal fabric of the church. Shared rituals of remembrance, corporate lament, and communal acts of rebuilding foster solidarity and hope. When a church becomes a model of emotional and spiritual support, it not only ministers to the wounded but also becomes a witness of God’s love and presence in times of tragedy.

However, the effectiveness of pastoral counseling in these contexts often varies depending on the approach, the training of the clergy, cultural perceptions of trauma, and the theological interpretations offered to those in distress. There is a growing recognition of the need to analyze and improve the methods used by pastors and church leaders in addressing post-disaster trauma. While many churches offer prayer, scripture reading, and community worship as forms of healing, there is often a lack of structured, trauma-informed counseling approaches that align with both spiritual and psychological needs (Brown, 2020).

Over the past decade, a growing body of research has emerged that highlights the critical role of pastoral counseling in supporting individuals and communities affected by natural disasters. One of the central themes in recent studies is the integration of trauma-informed care into pastoral ministry (Streets, 2015). Research by Doehring (2015) emphasizes the need for clergy to develop competencies in recognizing trauma responses and applying appropriate spiritual interventions. Her work advocates for pastoral practices that are not only theologically sound but also psychologically sensitive, especially when dealing with grief, shock, and disorientation common in post-disaster settings.

Similarly, studies following major disasters such as the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan and the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines have provided case-based insights into how churches responded to mass trauma. Researchers such as Nakashima (2016) and Madrideojos (2017) reported that congregational support networks, faith-based counseling, and community worship played vital roles in the emotional recovery of survivors. These responses often included scripture-based encouragement, prayer ministries, and organized counseling sessions facilitated by trained pastors or Christian counselors.

In the African context, research by Kgatle (2019) and Musasiwa (2020) focused on the impact of pastoral care during floods and droughts, showing that pastoral counseling contributes significantly to restoring hope and rebuilding a sense of purpose among survivors. Their findings suggest that culturally grounded theological narratives—especially those affirming divine presence amid suffering—are powerful tools in trauma recovery.

From a psychological perspective, studies by Koenig et al. (2019) and Aten et al. (2020) have examined the correlation between spiritual well-being and post-traumatic resilience, noting that religious coping mechanisms such as prayer, communal worship, and belief in divine providence can buffer against the effects of trauma. These studies have informed interdisciplinary approaches to pastoral care that combine clinical insight with spiritual guidance.

Another important trend is the development of training programs and guidelines for clergy in disaster response. The Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College has produced several resources over the past decade that equip pastors with trauma-informed pastoral tools. Aten and Topping (2016) emphasize the importance of pre-disaster preparation for churches, encouraging the integration of crisis counseling protocols into ministry practice.

Despite these contributions, gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding the long-term spiritual consequences of disaster trauma and the specific counseling needs of vulnerable groups such as children, women, and the elderly within congregational contexts (Ellor & Mayo, 2018). Additionally, many existing studies focus on Western or urban contexts, while less attention is paid to rural churches or developing countries where resources and theological training may be limited.

This research aims to explore and analyze the various pastoral counseling approaches used to respond to post-natural disaster trauma within congregational settings. It seeks to understand their effectiveness, identify existing gaps, and provide insights and recommendations for the development of more holistic and contextually relevant models of pastoral care. By doing so, this study contributes to both practical theology and pastoral ministry, equipping churches and faith leaders to be more responsive and compassionate in times of crisis.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore and analyze the various pastoral counseling strategies employed by church leaders in ministering to congregations affected by natural disasters (Bowden, 2020). The qualitative method is chosen due to its strength in capturing in-depth, context-rich insights into human experiences, particularly those involving emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. In this study, the focus is not merely on the outcomes of pastoral counseling but on the processes, approaches, and theological underpinnings that guide such interventions in the aftermath of disaster.

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis (Berndtsson, 2017). Participants include pastors, church counselors, and selected congregants who have experienced natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in exploring personal experiences, counseling techniques used, and the perceived effectiveness of those interventions. The interviews are guided by a list of key questions but allow room for open-ended responses to capture the richness of the participants' perspectives.

Field observations are carried out in affected congregational settings to better understand the practical implementation of pastoral care programs (McClure, 2012). This includes participation in church services, prayer gatherings, support group meetings, and counseling sessions, where possible. Observational notes focus on pastoral interactions, community responses, and the integration of spiritual elements in trauma care.

Additionally, relevant church documents such as pastoral letters, sermon transcripts, trauma response guidelines, and liturgical materials are analyzed to provide context and corroborate the data from interviews and observations (Bryan, 2018).

The research uses purposive sampling, targeting churches and ministries that have provided pastoral care following natural disasters within the last five years. Participants are selected based on their direct

involvement in counseling and spiritual care efforts during and after the disaster response period (Schruba et al., 2018). A diverse range of denominations, geographic locations, and socio-cultural backgrounds are included to capture variations in theological interpretation and counseling practice.

The data collected are analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves coding and categorizing recurring patterns, concepts, and themes that emerge from the interviews and field notes (Joffe, 2011). These themes are then interpreted in light of pastoral theology and trauma-informed care principles. Attention is given to the theological narratives employed by pastors, the types of counseling techniques used (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, presence-based ministry), and the challenges faced in the delivery of care.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study employs triangulation by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and documents (Goncalves & Cornelius Smith, 2018). Member checking is also conducted by presenting preliminary findings to selected participants for feedback and clarification.

Ethical clearance is obtained prior to conducting the study. All participants are briefed on the purpose of the research and are asked to sign informed consent forms (Wiles et al., 2007). Confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing names and any sensitive information. Given the nature of the topic, participants are treated with care and sensitivity, especially when recounting traumatic experiences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Approaches Worked

One of the most effective approaches was the presence-based ministry, often referred to as the "ministry of presence." This approach involved pastors and church leaders being physically present with affected congregants, offering empathy, companionship, and silent support. The effectiveness of this method lies in its simplicity; trauma survivors often need someone to be with them more than someone to talk to them. In moments of deep grief, words can fall short, but the pastoral presence can communicate God's nearness and compassion. Survivors reported feeling comforted and less isolated when their pastors sat with them, visited their homes or shelters, and simply listened without judgment.

Another approach that showed significant impact was scripture-centered encouragement, particularly the use of biblical narratives that reflect suffering, perseverance, and hope. Passages such as Psalm 46 ("God is our refuge and strength") and Lamentations 3:22-23 ("His mercies are new every morning") were frequently cited and preached in pastoral care settings (Foor, 2015). These texts offered not only theological reassurance but also psychological anchoring, helping survivors frame their suffering within a redemptive narrative. The familiarity and spiritual authority of scripture helped many congregants process their emotions and reaffirm their faith in God's presence during hardship.

Group-based pastoral counseling and community prayer gatherings also emerged as highly effective. These collective experiences provided communal solidarity and emotional support, breaking the isolation often felt by trauma survivors. Sharing testimonies, prayers, and tears in a safe spiritual environment helped individuals feel seen, validated, and united in their suffering. This communal healing process reinforced the biblical image of the church as a body when one part suffers, all suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26) (Gupta, 2010). These gatherings also served as a platform for mutual encouragement and the rebuilding of hope.

Moreover, trauma-informed pastoral care which combines psychological understanding with spiritual support proved especially helpful. Pastors who had received training in trauma awareness were more equipped to avoid spiritual platitudes or harmful theology (e.g., blaming sin for disaster) and instead provided compassionate, informed care. They respected the stages of grief, avoided pressuring survivors to "move on," and helped congregants give voice to their lament while pointing toward hope and recovery (Hamilton, 2019). This approach was effective because it respected the human process of healing while still offering spiritual meaning and guidance.

Lastly, practical pastoral responses, such as organizing food, shelter, and basic aid distribution, complemented the counseling process. When the church addressed both physical and emotional needs, survivors were more likely to experience the church as a source of holistic care. This tangible demonstration of God's love in action built trust and deepened the emotional and spiritual impact of counseling efforts.

### **The Congregants' Responses and Levels of Recovery**

The responses of congregants who experienced pastoral counseling after natural disasters were varied, deeply personal, and reflective of both individual resilience and the strength of the faith community. However, across different contexts, certain patterns emerged that demonstrate how pastoral care influenced their emotional, psychological, and spiritual recovery. Generally, the majority of congregants expressed a profound sense of gratitude for the presence and support of their church, which they viewed not only as a place of worship but also as a lifeline during their most difficult moments.

Immediately following the disaster, many congregants reported feelings of fear, grief, helplessness, and confusion (Ekanayake et al., 2013). In some cases, individuals also experienced a spiritual crisis, questioning God's presence, love, or justice in the face of such suffering. These responses were natural reactions to trauma, and pastoral counselors who acknowledged and validated these emotions created safe spaces for congregants to express their pain without judgment. As a result, congregants who received early and sustained pastoral support tended to show stronger signs of emotional stability and spiritual resilience over time.

One of the most notable responses was the expression of hope and comfort found through shared prayer, scripture, and communal worship. Congregants often cited that hearing sermons that addressed suffering with biblical empathy helped them process their emotions theologically (Aden & Hughes, 2001). Many shared that the church's message that God is present in suffering and offers hope for restoration helped them make sense of their pain. This theological reframing was essential in shifting their mindset from despair to determination.

In terms of recovery, several factors influenced how quickly and effectively individuals regained emotional and spiritual balance. Congregants who participated actively in group support ministries, prayer circles, or church-organized counseling sessions reported higher levels of recovery. They described feeling a sense of belonging and emotional safety, knowing they were not alone in their struggle. These shared experiences allowed them to mourn together, support one another, and rebuild their spiritual lives in community.

Others who received individual pastoral counseling shared that having someone listen compassionately to their story gave them a renewed sense of dignity and hope. They felt spiritually strengthened, especially when their emotional struggles were not dismissed but integrated into their journey of faith. Pastors who walked alongside them not with forced answers but with consistent presence were particularly impactful in fostering long-term emotional healing.

Nevertheless, not all congregants experienced immediate or full recovery. Some continued to struggle with post-traumatic symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, or spiritual numbness (Regel & Joseph, 2017). Factors such as the severity of loss, lack of social support, or pre-existing psychological conditions affected their recovery trajectories. In these cases, the absence of follow-up pastoral care or limited counseling resources became a barrier to healing. This highlights the need for churches to develop more sustained and trauma-informed recovery programs rather than short-term relief efforts alone.

Despite these challenges, many congregants reflected on their post-disaster journey as a time of spiritual growth and transformation. For some, the experience deepened their faith and strengthened their connection to the church community. They learned to rely on God in new ways, discovered the value of spiritual fellowship, and found renewed purpose in helping others recover. In this sense, trauma though painful became a catalyst for spiritual maturity and community solidarity.

### **Faith help (or hinder) the healing process**

Faith plays a complex and powerful role in the healing process for individuals and congregations affected by natural disasters. For many survivors, their faith becomes a source of strength, comfort, and meaning, offering a framework to interpret their suffering and find hope amid devastation. However, for others, particularly those grappling with intense loss or theological confusion, faith can also present challenges that complicate or delay emotional healing. Thus, the role of faith in trauma recovery is multifaceted both enabling and, at times, hindering the healing process.

On the positive side, faith helped many congregants by providing a sense of hope, continuity, and identity in a time of great disruption. The belief that God is present even in suffering reassured many that they were not alone. Scripture passages that affirm God's love, protection, and sovereignty such as Psalm 23, Isaiah 41:10, and Romans 8:28 served as emotional anchors (Kwak, 2017). In testimonies collected during the research, congregants often said that prayer, worship, and communal expressions of faith gave them peace, even when their material world had been shaken. Faith allowed them to grieve with hope and to imagine a future where restoration was possible.

Moreover, faith provided a language for lament a way to express deep sorrow and confusion while still remaining within a relationship with God. The biblical examples of Job, David, and Jeremiah were particularly helpful for many, as they illustrated that doubt, anger, and despair could coexist with genuine faith. This theological openness allowed survivors to bring their raw emotions into spiritual conversations without fear of judgment, which in turn promoted authentic healing.

Another way faith contributed positively was through the mobilization of the faith community. Churches became hubs for spiritual and social support, offering food, shelter, counseling, and prayer (Unruh & Sider, 2005). This expression of "faith in action" strengthened community bonds and reminded congregants of the tangible presence of God through others. The solidarity and compassion experienced in the church setting helped mitigate feelings of isolation and despair.

However, faith also posed certain obstacles to healing when it was misapplied, misunderstood, or presented in rigid or judgmental ways. Some congregants internalized messages that their suffering was a result of sin or divine punishment. Such theological interpretations, often delivered without sensitivity, led to guilt, fear, and spiritual alienation. Others felt ashamed of their emotional struggles, believing that a "strong Christian" should not feel anxious, angry, or depressed. This pressure to maintain a "positive faith image" caused some to suppress their grief and avoid seeking help.

In some cases, faith hindered emotional processing when it was used to bypass pain rather than confront it. This phenomenon often referred to as "spiritual bypassing" occurs when religious phrases like "God has a plan" or "just have more faith" are used to minimize or ignore real suffering. While well-intentioned, these responses discouraged honest emotional expression and delayed necessary grief work. Survivors in this category often felt spiritually dismissed rather than comforted.

Additionally, some individuals experienced a crisis of faith, asking, "Why would a loving God allow this to happen?" These theological struggles, if left unaddressed, led to feelings of abandonment or even a departure from church life. However, when pastors and counselors engaged these questions with compassion and theological depth allowing space for doubt and exploration many of these individuals eventually reconstructed their faith in a deeper, more resilient form.

### **Challenges Faced in the Field**

One of the primary challenges in the field is the lack of formal training among pastors and church leaders in trauma-informed care. Many clergy are well-versed in preaching and spiritual guidance but have limited understanding of the psychological effects of trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complicated grief, or survivor's guilt (Rindahl, 2012). Without proper training, pastoral responses can sometimes unintentionally harm rather than heal for example, by offering oversimplified theological answers, suppressing emotional expression, or misinterpreting trauma as a sign of weak faith. This gap in competency limits the effectiveness of pastoral counseling and highlights the need for professional development in trauma care for spiritual leaders.

Another significant challenge is the emotional toll on pastors themselves, who are often disaster survivors too. In many disaster-affected areas, pastors not only provide care but also experience loss of homes, family members, and church facilities. Despite their own trauma, they are expected to lead, counsel, and comfort others, often without rest or external support. This dual burden can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion, reducing their capacity to serve the congregation with sustained empathy and effectiveness.

Resource limitations also pose a serious obstacle. Many churches, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, lack the financial, structural, and personnel resources to implement structured counseling programs or support groups. They may not have access to trained Christian counselors, mental health professionals, or even basic materials for psychosocial support. The absence of infrastructure makes it difficult to move beyond short-term relief efforts into long-term emotional and spiritual recovery programs.

Cultural and theological barriers further complicate pastoral counseling in disaster contexts (Lartey, 2013). In some cultures, expressing vulnerability or seeking counseling is viewed as a sign of weakness or spiritual failure. Congregants may be hesitant to open up about their emotional struggles due to fear of stigma or shame. Additionally, rigid or fatalistic theological interpretations such as beliefs that disasters are divine punishment can hinder healing by instilling guilt or spiritual fear rather than hope. These cultural-religious dynamics require sensitive navigation by pastors who must balance doctrinal clarity with pastoral compassion.

Another challenge is the lack of continuity in care. Often, pastoral support is strongest immediately after a disaster, but as time passes and attention shifts elsewhere, emotional and spiritual support tends to wane (Jones, 2020). Many congregants still dealing with unresolved trauma months or even years later find themselves without access to consistent counseling or community support. The absence of sustained care leads to prolonged suffering and missed opportunities for deeper recovery.

Finally, coordination between churches and external aid organizations can be difficult. While NGOs and government agencies may provide psychological first aid or material support, they often operate independently of local churches. This lack of collaboration can result in fragmented care, duplication of efforts, or gaps in service. Churches may also be excluded from broader disaster response strategies despite being one of the most trusted and accessible institutions in affected communities.

## CONCLUSION

This research has examined the crucial role of pastoral counseling in supporting congregations experiencing trauma following natural disasters. The findings reveal that pastoral care is not only a spiritual necessity but also a psychological and emotional lifeline for many survivors navigating the aftermath of catastrophic events. Effective approaches such as presence-based ministry, scripture-centered encouragement, group prayer gatherings, and trauma-informed counseling have been shown to significantly contribute to the emotional resilience and spiritual recovery of affected individuals and communities. Congregants generally responded positively to pastoral care, expressing gratitude for the church's presence and support in their most vulnerable moments. Many experienced not only emotional relief but also a deepening of faith and a renewed sense of hope. However, the level of recovery varied based on factors such as the severity of trauma, access to ongoing support, and the theological sensitivity of the counseling approach. The research also identified several key challenges, including the lack of trauma-informed training among pastors, emotional exhaustion among clergy, limited resources, cultural stigma around seeking help, and inconsistent long-term care. In some cases, theological misinterpretations and spiritual bypassing hindered healing by promoting guilt or suppressing emotional expression. Despite these obstacles, this study affirms the vital role of the church as a center for holistic healing spiritually, emotionally, and communally in times of crisis. To enhance the effectiveness of pastoral counseling, there is a pressing need for capacity building, contextual theological reflection, and strategic collaboration between churches, mental health professionals, and disaster response agencies. As natural disasters continue to impact vulnerable populations around the world, the church must continue to grow in its

capacity to offer healing not only through words of comfort but through presence, service, and love in action.

### AUTHORS' DECLARATION

#### Authors' Contributions and Responsibilities

The author was responsible for the formulation of the research problem, literature review, and design of the study.

#### Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests financial, professional, or personal that could have influenced the findings, interpretation, or presentation of this research. All aspects of the study were conducted independently and solely for academic and ministry-related purposes.

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