

Article

Public Theology as a Theology of Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Public Pastoral Care Contribution

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Abstract: The negative impacts of COVID-19, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, political unrest, and natural disasters in sub-Saharan Africa have caused widespread suffering. In light of these crises, many have questioned the relevance of theology in addressing such complex challenges. This article tackles critical questions such as: How can public theology effectively engage with the socio-political and economic issues facing sub-Saharan Africa? What role does public pastoral care play in fostering resilience within these communities? Can theology provide tangible support in the face of widespread suffering, and if so, how? The article argues that public theology offers a resilient framework to guide communities through these difficult times, particularly when integrated with public pastoral care. Public theology can provide hope, support, and a sense of purpose to those affected by engaging both spiritual and social dimensions. The article further explores how public pastoral care, as a practical expression of public theology, can address individuals' and communities' emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs. Ultimately, it demonstrates that public theology is relevant and essential in fostering resilience and promoting human flourishing in the face of adversity.

Keywords: public theology; public pastoral care; theology; theology of resilience; resilience; sub-Saharan Africa



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1. Introduction

While reviewing the book *Resilient Religion, Resilience, and Heartbreaking Adversity*, edited by Hermans and Schoeman (2023), I encountered the intersection of resilience and theology. Even within the introductory section, several pertinent questions arose. The sub-Saharan region of Africa, in particular, is burdened by numerous challenges that severely affect the quality of life for its inhabitants. People's lives are at risk. Fretheim (2016, pp. 1–2) pointed out the following:

Living in despair and feeling hopeless, people ask obvious, challenging, and disturbing questions: Why this suffering, and why me? Where is God in this crisis? The problem of evil becomes not only a philosophical riddle to solve, but a personal and collective struggle. It leads us into the abyss of suffering and meaninglessness, as well as to the imperative of care and compassion, and a fight for recovery, reconstruction, and reconciliation. The crisis presents us with not only an intellectual, political, and existential challenge. It becomes a moral commitment.

Reflecting on my previous work in public theology within the African context, key questions emerged: How can theology be a comfort during the crisis to the point that the victims of crises find hope and resilience? How does public theology contribute to fostering resilience amidst the various challenges communities face in sub-Saharan Africa?

The world has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, political unrest, and natural disasters causing widespread suffering, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Agwanda et al. 2021; United Nations Development Programme 2022). These crises have led to

a growing skepticism regarding the relevance of theology in addressing such complex and multifaceted issues (Fretheim 2016). Despite growing skepticism towards religion, many still view it as a source of meaning, moral norms, and social cohesion (Öhlmann et al. 2022). This is because religious values often protect and promote the dignity of all human beings, the integrity of non-human animals, and the environment. Religion's presence in the public sphere is recognized for its positive contributions to social life, where religious actors can alleviate suffering, promote solidarity, and mobilize social and political involvement (Fretheim 2016, p. 27; Öhlmann et al. 2022). To some, religion is seen as irrational, authoritarian, and divisive, leading them to advocate for a public sphere free of religious expressions. For example, Jens Kohrsen (2012), in his article titled "How Religious is the Public Sphere? A Critical Stance on the Debate about Public and Post-Secularity," challenges the dominant views on the influence of theology in public affairs.

In response to these pressing concerns, this article explores the potential of public theology to engage meaningfully with the socio-political and economic challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa. The article addresses the gap in understanding how public theology, specifically in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, can be a powerful tool for fostering resilience amid the region's complex and multifaceted challenges. While much has been written about public theology and resilience separately, a lack of focused scholarship integrates these concepts within sub-Saharan Africa's specific socio-political, economic, and cultural realities.

This article will explore how public pastoral care, as a practical expression of public theology, can offer tangible support to communities facing adversity, thereby contributing to the discourse on theology's relevance in contemporary crises. Doing so fills a critical gap in the literature by linking public theology with resilience-building efforts in a region that faces unique and severe challenges, such as political instability, natural disasters, and economic hardships.

This article posits that public theology offers a resilient framework to guide communities through these difficult times when integrated with public pastoral care. By engaging both the spiritual and social dimensions, public theology can provide hope, support, and a sense of purpose to those affected by these crises. Furthermore, the article examines how public pastoral care, as a practical expression of public theology, can address individuals' and communities' emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs. Ultimately, the discussion demonstrates that public theology is relevant and essential in fostering resilience and promoting human flourishing in the face of adversity.

2. Sub-Saharan Africa: Contextual Overview

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) faces many economic, health, environmental, political, and social challenges (Selassie and Hakobyan 2021; World Bank 2023). These longstanding issues have been further exacerbated by recent global and regional crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, the ongoing conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East, and internal conflicts within the region itself (United Nations Development Programme 2022). Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal (2024, p. 7) made the following assertion regarding the SSA internal conflicts:

The security situation in many SSA countries is acutely problematic, as exemplified most recently by escalating violence and displacement in Sudan. Since the turn of the millennium, intermittently persistent conflicts have caused severe human suffering and economic destabilization throughout the region. Conflicts often begin with isolated operations of extremist groups, but quickly expand into regional violence that spreads, like a virus, from one subregion to another.

Historically, SSA's challenges can be traced back to colonialism's legacy, which disrupted traditional governance systems and imposed artificial borders that continue to fuel conflicts today (Acemoglu et al. 2001). This historical context is critical to understanding the persistent structural issues, such as the dependency on extractive economies and the lack of diversification, which have left the region vulnerable to external shocks.

Economically, SSA continues to grapple with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, all compounded by limited access to education and financial resources (Louis 2015; Sachs 2000; World Bank 2018). Governance issues, including corruption, poor leadership, and weak institutions, further hinder effective policymaking and implementation, perpetuating poverty and inequality (Collier 2007; Fosu 2018). These economic hardships have made it difficult for many countries in the region to achieve sustainable development. Moreover, the impact of globalization and international economic policies, such as trade policies, structural adjustment programs, and debt relief efforts, has been a double-edged sword for SSA. While these external factors have occasionally provided support, they have also imposed conditions that sometimes hinder local development and exacerbate dependency (Easterly 2001). For instance, the emphasis on austerity measures has often reduced investment in critical social sectors, further deepening the region's vulnerabilities.

Juju et al. (2020) say that despite notable progress over the past few decades, SSA remains the world's poorest and least developed region. This underdevelopment is marked by widespread poverty, food insecurity, environmental degradation, low access to essential infrastructure, and weak institutional capacity across the continent (Myers 2017). The region's vulnerability to climate change is particularly concerning, as environmental degradation exacerbates poverty, food insecurity, and displacement, necessitating sustainable development strategies to mitigate these effects (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2014)).

The World Bank (2018, p. 3) and Myers (2017, p. 149) further describe SSA as a region characterized by fragility, conflict, and weak institutions. These factors and the region's inability to effectively translate economic growth into substantial poverty reduction highlight the persistent and complex challenges hindering SSA's development. The effectiveness of international aid and development assistance in SSA remains a contentious issue, with debates about its role in fostering dependency versus its potential to catalyze growth and development (Moyo 2009; Sachs 2005). There is a growing consensus on the need for more localized, context-specific approaches to development that prioritize human capital, mainly through education and healthcare (Bloom et al. 2006).

Given these multifaceted challenges, building resilience is essential for Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to navigate and overcome these obstacles. However, the question remains: how can resilience be cultivated in such a complex and often overwhelming context? White and Cook (2020) argue that the Bible and Christian theology provide a significant source of social and spiritual capital that can help mitigate or transform the effects of adversity. This underscores an essential link between theology and resilience. The following section discusses resilience theory within theological discourse, exploring how theological frameworks contribute to understanding and fostering resilience in contexts of adversity.

3. Resilience Theory and Theology: An Exploration

The concept of "resilience" has evolved, tracing its history to the 1800s (Grygorenko and Naydonova 2023). Initially, resilience was discussed in psychological literature in terms of unconscious defense mechanisms, a view that prevailed until the 1950s. However, by the 1990s, scholars began integrating physiological and psychological aspects of resilience, emphasizing its multifaceted nature (Tol et al. 2013).

Resilience is understood differently across disciplines. Herrman et al. (2011) argue that no universally accepted definition exists, mainly because the concept has evolved alongside scientific advancements. For example, in psychology, resilience refers to an individual's capacity to adapt to and recover from adversity, often focusing on coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and mental well-being (Ungar and Liebenberg 2013). In contrast, sociology discussions highlight the resilience of communities and social systems in overcoming collective challenges, such as natural disasters or political upheavals (Masten 2007).

In theological contexts, resilience is conceptualized as a spiritual and communal strength. It is grounded in faith, where religious beliefs, practices, and community support contribute significantly to resilience. Religious traditions like prayers, rituals, and spiritual

practices provide frameworks for meaning making and support, aiding individuals and communities in overcoming adversity (Hermans and Schoeman 2023; Koenig 2012). Daniel Louw (2008), a notable scholar in pastoral care, highlights the importance of blending theological hope with psychological resilience, viewing life's hardships as opportunities for transformation through faith.

Germann (2005) defines resilience as successfully adapting to threatening situations. Buys (2020) expands this definition by emphasizing that resilience also involves learning from adversity and supporting others facing similar challenges. This approach frames resilience as an individual trait and a relational and transformative process, a view particularly relevant in theological and sociological discussions.

Hermans and Schoeman (2023) note that the discourse on resilience spans various theological traditions, including Black, African, liberation, feminist, and pastoral theologies. Although theology has long engaged with resilience, its integration with resilience theory from other disciplines has recently gained momentum. Various interdisciplinary approaches, for instance, merge psychological and sociological frameworks with pastoral theology, particularly in trauma and caregiving contexts. LaMothe (2020) emphasizes the enriching effect of such interdisciplinary research, where pastoral theology benefits from insights into resilience within caregiving relationships that address spiritual and moral stresses.

Resilience is also prominently featured in contextual theologies such as African and liberation theologies (Hermans and Schoeman 2023). These perspectives incorporate resilience as a response to systemic oppression and historical trauma, framing it as individual coping and collective resistance and transformation. Gutiérrez (1985) highlights the communal nature of resilience within liberation theology, especially in oppressed and marginalized societies. He (Gutiérrez 1985) argues that resilience in these settings is not merely an individual capacity but a collective process deeply rooted in the struggle for justice and dignity. In liberation theology, the community plays a pivotal role in fostering resilience, as solidarity becomes a spiritual and practical tool for survival. The collective experience of oppression drives people to band together, drawing strength from shared faith, cultural identity, and a common vision for liberation. Gutiérrez (1985) observes that marginalized communities often turn to their faith traditions as a source of comfort and a powerful motivator for social action. Through their shared commitment to liberation, they find the strength to resist systems of oppression and to maintain hope in the face of adversity. He emphasizes that the Christian concept of *koinonia* (community) is central to this process, where faith is lived out through acts of mutual support, care, and resistance against injustice (Gutiérrez 1985).

The intersection of theology and trauma studies further explores resilience as a resource for communal healing. Pastoral psychology, for example, applies resilience theory from trauma studies to assist individuals and communities in navigating crises, including post-conflict recovery and systemic trauma (Hermans and Schoeman 2023; LaMothe 2020). These discussions align with pastoral care models integrating theological reflection and psychological insights (Pavesi 2010).

In feminist and queer theology, resilience is often discussed in terms of spiritual empowerment and resistance in the face of marginalization. Theological narratives are viewed as empowering tools that help individuals resist oppression and work toward societal transformation. Scholars such as Bracke (2016) and Butler (2016) examine the dynamic interplay between vulnerability, resistance, and resilience in these discourses.

Finally, resilience is a significant theme in theological anthropology, where discussions often center on human flourishing and the inherent capacity for resilience concerning being created in God's image. This theological perspective links resilience to reflections on human dignity, vocation, and the calling to live fully in adversity (Hermans and Schoeman 2023; LaMothe 2020). These theological reflections reinforce the broader understanding of resilience as a personal and communal process of overcoming adversity, deeply intertwined with faith and divine purpose.

The dialogue between resilience theory and theology reveals a rich and evolving landscape where interdisciplinary approaches, contextual theology, trauma studies, and theological anthropology converge to offer a more nuanced understanding of resilience. This integration underscores resilience as an individual or communal capacity to overcome adversity and a profoundly spiritual process rooted in faith, transformation, and collective healing (Carlin et al. 2015). It is from the communal aspect that resilience also becomes a public concern. How does this communal resilience manifest in the context of public theology in SSA? The following section deals with this question.

4. Public Theology and Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa

Hermans and Schoeman (2023, p. 2) posited the following:

If we want to understand what resilience and a resilient religion mean, we must take as our starting point the experiences and stories from Africa of people who live (surviving) on the periphery of the city in poverty, socio-political exclusion, and culturally marginalized.

The above statement presents two main things. Firstly, it emphasizes that resilience must be understood in the specific context of marginalized African communities, particularly those living in poverty, socio-political exclusion, and cultural marginalization. It suggests that the true essence of resilience is best reflected in the lived experiences of those on the periphery of society who are constantly navigating adversity. Secondly, it highlights that resilient religion in these marginalized contexts significantly fosters survival and hope. It points to how religious practices, beliefs, and communities contribute to resilience by helping people cope with exclusion, providing spiritual and practical support, and enabling them to adapt and persist in the face of hardship (Louw 2008).

While the Sub-Saharan African region offers a distinctive case study of resilience, the Jewish Holocaust serves as another notable example. Morgan et al. (2022), in their research titled *“And the Ones that Survived had Hope: Resilience in Holocaust Survivors,”* delve into the narratives of resilience among five Holocaust survivors, examining their perspectives on resilience during and post-Holocaust experiences. This shows that resilience is a multifaceted concept that can be observed across diverse historical and cultural contexts. While the Sub-Saharan African region and the Jewish Holocaust offer unique examples, the common thread is the enduring human capacity to overcome adversity and persevere in the face of extreme challenges. In SSA, the intersection of public theology and resilience is especially crucial, given the region’s unique socio-political and historical challenges, such as systemic oppression, poverty, and health crises like HIV/AIDS (Nanthambwe 2022). These challenges demand concrete intervention, and this paper proposes that public theology is best suited to help people dealing with adversity in life, as it focuses on public issues, not just church affairs. But before we discuss how public theology can foster resilience in SSA, it is critical to examine the concerns of public theology first. What is public theology concerned with?

4.1. Understanding Public Theology Concerns

This paper argues that public theology fosters resilience. But how does public theology do this noble task? Understanding the concerns of public theology helps to see the interplay between public theology and resilience. What is public theology, and what is it concerned about? Yolanda Dreyer (2004, p. 919), a prominent South African public theologian, defines public theology thus:

‘Public theology’ is a fairly recent term referring to a theology which critically reflects on both the Christian tradition as well as social and political issues. This dialogue is seen to benefit both theology and society.

Dreyer’s definition (2004) shows three primary important markers of public theology concerns. First, public theology involves critically engaging with the Christian faith, traditions, and beliefs. This means it is not just about affirming established theological

doctrines but actively re-evaluating and interpreting them in light of contemporary issues (Mannion 2009). This reflective approach makes public theology relevant and engaged with the world. Second, public theology is outward-looking, involving a dialogue with social, political, and cultural matters. It engages with the pressing concerns of society—such as justice, inequality, poverty, and human dignity—and seeks to apply theological insights to address these issues (Smit 2017, p. 75). The significance of public theology is emphasized by Kim (2017, p. 40). Kim (2017) further elucidates this notion by asserting that public theology arises from the intersection of theology with the realms of politics and economics, subsequently extending its scope to encompass civil societies and other spheres of public existence. This marker is echoed by Forrester (2004, p. 6) asserting that:

Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes ‘the world’s agenda’, or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth.

Third, public theology is a two-way interaction benefiting theology and society. This indicates that theology can inform societal change and, conversely, societal issues can shape and deepen theological reflection. This reciprocal dialogue is central to public theology’s aim of transforming both the church and society, hence contributing to the common good. It is not confined to academic or ecclesiastical circles but seeks to influence broader societal discussions, policies, and actions to promote justice, peace, and human flourishing (Forrester 2004; Mannion 2009).

All public theology scholars agree that public theology deals with public issues that concern societies rather than churches and doctrines (Nanthambwe 2024). This is succinctly acknowledged by Mannion (2009, p. 122), who asserts that:

So, to chart briefly the scope and range of public theology, we can begin by saying that most contributors to such discourse would agree that public theology is theology that is social, political, and practical. But I would argue that at its best public theology involves theological hermeneutics in the service of moral, social, and political praxis.

Resane (2019, p. 1) provides an insightful summary of public theology concerns, pointing out that “Public theology is always public, speaking in public places and addressing public issues for the sake or benefit of the public interest.”

Public theology reaches beyond the boundaries of traditional worship settings, academic circles, and theological associations, becoming an active participant in public life. It promotes an inclusive dialogue with society, engaging with various social environments, including streets, marketplaces, and community hubs (Nanthambwe 2024). According to the Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of South African Society (URTD-SAS) (n.d.), public theology interacts with social realities and the lived experiences of people rather than being confined to institutional theology. Though it is distinct from practical theology, it provides a space for practical theology to enter into public conversations.

By bridging theological principles, church concerns, and societal issues, public theology encourages both the church and theology to respond actively to contemporary social challenges, thus contributing to fostering resilience. But how does this happen? This happens when public theology is applied practically, particularly in public pastoral care. In this role, public theology intersects with practical theology by addressing the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals and communities facing social and political hardships while also engaging with broader societal issues.

4.2. The Intersection of Public Theology and Pastoral Care in Fostering Resilience

Understanding the intersection of public theology and public pastoral care is essential to grasp how public theology fosters resilience. When public theology is expressed through public pastoral care, it directly engages with individuals' spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being within society. Public pastoral care serves as the means through which public theology fulfills its mission of contributing to people's overall well-being, addressing their needs holistically and practically.

Magezi (2024) offers valuable insights into the relationship between public and practical theology. He first highlights that pastoral care is a subset of practical theology (Magezi 2024, p. 3). Additionally, Magezi (2019, p. 119) emphasizes that practical theology seeks to clarify and understand how faith intersects with everyday life and broader human experiences. Osmer (2008) further elaborates that practical theology should address critical questions such as: "What is happening?" "Why is it happening?" "What should be happening?" and "How can we respond?"

The emphasis on public issues within practical theology has led to its recognition as public practical theology. This shift from traditional practical theology to the realm of public practical theology marks a significant development, acknowledged by several prominent scholars in the field, such as Dreyer (2004), Dreyer and Pieterse (2010), and Osmer and Schweitzer (2003).

In defining pastoral care, Lartey (2003, pp. 30–31) explicates that pastoral care refers to the following:

Helping activities, participated in by people who recognise a transcendent dimension to human life, which, by the use of verbal or non-verbal, direct or indirect, literal or symbolic modes of communication, aimed at preventing, relieving, or facilitating persons coping with anxieties. Pastoral care seeks to foster people's growth as full human beings together with the development of ecologically and socio-politically holistic communities in which all persons may live as humanely as possible.

Thus, pastoral care ensures people's well-being is nurtured holistically, addressing their spiritual needs and emotional, psychological, and social concerns. Public pastoral care brings together multiple theological disciplines to address the challenges individuals face in their lives. It is a ministry approach that functions at the intersection of various theological subfields. Public pastoral care is shaped heavily by public and practical theology while engaging in dialogue with other theological areas (Nanthambwe 2022, p. 189).

In pastoral care, integrating resilience theory with theology offers a framework for helping individuals and communities navigate crises. Louw (2008) discusses how pastoral care can engage both the spiritual and psychological dimensions of resilience. Louw (2008) argues that resilience involves more than psychological recovery—it encompasses spiritual healing and growth. According to Louw (2008), faith offers a resource for meaning making and hope, which are critical for enduring life's inevitable trials. He also emphasizes that pastoral care should not focus solely on comforting but on fostering a theological understanding of suffering, leading to spiritual resilience and transformation.

Moreover, public theology, informed by resilience theory, can address communal resilience. Church communities often provide social support and a shared narrative of hope and redemption that reinforces collective resilience. Through worship, scripture, and shared rituals, individuals can draw on communal strength during crises, strengthening personal and collective capacities for adaptation. Public theology in this context calls for a communal approach to resilience, deeply rooted in the African principle of *ubuntu*—"I am because we are"—which emphasizes interconnectedness and collective well-being. Public pastoral care thus plays a pivotal role in fostering resilience, not only as an individual attribute but as a communal process of supporting and empowering marginalized communities (Buys 2020).

In the above understanding, public theology, through the lens of pastoral care, fosters resilience by providing moral and spiritual resources, advocating for justice, building strong communities, and addressing individual and collective needs in times of crisis.

It offers theological insight and practical action to help people endure and thrive in the face of challenges. Public pastoral care fosters resilience by integrating various areas of theology, as highlighted by [Elsdörfer \(2019\)](#) and [Magezi \(2020\)](#). They explain that public theology is interconnected with the social sciences, social ethics, foundational theology, and moral theology. This interconnectedness allows pastoral care to holistically address societal challenges, drawing from theological insights and social science frameworks. Doing so equips individuals and communities with ethical guidance and moral grounding, fostering resilience in the face of social, ethical, and personal challenges.

The public theology framework seeks to engage faith perspectives in addressing societal issues, including fostering resilience. However, it faces several limitations. One challenge is contextual applicability; public theology often struggles to resonate with secular or multi-faith communities in diverse cultural settings, limiting its capacity to promote collective resilience in pluralistic societies ([Magezi 2024](#)). Additionally, theological fragmentation—the existence of various religious interpretations and denominational beliefs—can lead to divergent views on resilience, weakening the framework's ability to offer a unified approach ([Manda 2017](#)). Lastly, political and social resistance emerges, as public theology's emphasis on moral and spiritual values may conflict with political systems and societies prioritizing secular or materialistic perspectives, reducing its influence on fostering resilience ([Louw 2008](#)).

Public theology overcomes these limitations when it adapts its message to diverse cultural contexts, making theological insights more relevant and accessible to secular and multi-faith communities. By fostering interfaith collaboration and emphasizing shared values such as justice and human dignity, public theology can address theological fragmentation and present a more unified approach to resilience. Furthermore, engaging with secular institutions and framing its contributions in terms of universal ethical principles enables public theology to navigate political and social resistance, expanding its influence and capacity to foster collective resilience ([Louw 2008](#); [Magezi 2024](#); [Manda 2017](#)). Having established that public theology can promote resilience in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) through the lens of public pastoral care, a subdiscipline of practical theology, we now aim to conclude this discussion by exploring ways in which public theology can be further enhanced to contribute more effectively to resilience-building in the region.

5. Strategic Approaches for Enhancing Public Theology's Contribution to Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa

Pastoral care is crucial in fostering resilience by offering emotional and spiritual support, empowering individuals to find meaning in adversity, and promoting holistic healing. Empathetic listening and guidance strengthen emotional well-being while helping individuals interpret their struggles through spiritual lenses, leading to renewed hope and purpose. In communal settings, pastoral care builds relationships and support networks that foster collective resilience. Its holistic approach addresses the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, facilitating recovery and growth on multiple levels.

Additionally, pastoral care's connection to public theology highlights its responsibility to engage societal issues like poverty, injustice, and community trauma. It extends beyond individual care to advocate for social change, promoting justice, dignity, and inclusion, thereby contributing to broader societal resilience. As moral leaders, pastoral caregivers help communities mobilize for systemic change and solidarity, enhancing the collective capacity to endure and thrive in adversity.

Here are five ways in which pastoral care within the umbrella of public theology fosters resilience in the SSA region.

Firstly, public theology must provide moral and ethical frameworks that guide individuals and communities in navigating challenges. Religious teachings often emphasize virtues like patience, perseverance, and hope, which are essential for resilience. [Meyer \(2023\)](#) pointed out that the Bible, with its rich tapestry of stories, serves as a profound narrative of hope, consistently affirming God's enduring presence in times of despair. At

the heart of this overarching narrative is the message that the promise of renewal and restoration is always present through God's grace, Jesus's resurrection, and the Holy Spirit's transformative power, even in moments of suffering.

In sub-Saharan Africa, this message of hope has been particularly resonant. For example, in the aftermath of devastating natural disasters, such as the cyclones that recently struck Malawi and Mozambique, many communities have drawn strength from biblical teachings, believing in God's enduring presence and the possibility of renewal despite their hardships. Similarly, in countries like South Sudan, where prolonged conflict has caused immense suffering, churches have become vital agents of hope, using biblical narratives to inspire resilience and faith in a better future. These real-life applications of the Bible's message demonstrate its vital role in helping communities cope with suffering, fostering a sense of hope and belief in eventual restoration.

Secondly, public theology must prioritize fostering a sense of community and belonging to strengthen social bonds, as these bonds serve as a critical support system for individuals facing adversity. Buys (2020) emphasizes that public theology nurtures resilience not only as an individual trait but also as a communal process, deeply anchored in the African principle of *ubuntu*, which values interconnectedness and collective well-being. Through public pastoral care, public theology plays a central role in promoting resilience by empowering and supporting marginalized communities.

In sub-Saharan Africa, churches are uniquely positioned to implement measures that offer public pastoral care and foster community stability, peace, and overall well-being. One significant approach is church involvement in public healing practices, as suggested by Nanthambwe and Magezi (2022). For example, in South Africa, churches have engaged in reconciliation efforts in post-apartheid contexts, facilitating healing between divided racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, in regions plagued by tribalism, such as parts of Nigeria and Kenya, pastors and church congregations play vital roles in mediating conflicts, fostering communal peace, and rebuilding trust.

In addition, public pastoral care can contribute to national initiatives for counseling and healing through public pastoral care. Manda (2017) highlights the importance of this involvement, particularly in post-conflict societies, where churches can help provide comprehensive care at a national level. These efforts, rooted in the African ethos of community and solidarity, illustrate how public theology, when actively engaged in public pastoral care, can foster resilience and promote societal healing across sub-Saharan Africa.

Thirdly, public theology must actively inspire and mobilize individuals and communities to advocate for social justice and equitable policies. By confronting systemic issues, religious leaders and their congregations can contribute to building a more resilient society. (Pereira 2010) argues that the church should serve as a prophetic voice, especially in contexts where social justice, obligations, and reconstruction must be addressed.

The issues of inequality, unemployment, poverty, and gender-based violence (GBV) that are pervasive across the continent are often exacerbated by the suppression of people's rights, the silencing of their voices, and the presence of unjust systems that operate in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to the detriment of the most vulnerable. There is an urgent need for individuals and communities to speak out against oppression, exploitation, and other forms of injustice. For sub-Saharan Africa to progress, churches and pastors must champion democratic values, advocating for integrity, transparency, and accountability. The widespread corruption in many African countries, such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe, has inflicted severe harm, especially on impoverished populations. Remaining silent in the face of such corruption is akin to denying the transformative power of Jesus' Gospel, which calls for liberation and justice for all (Nanthambwe 2022).

The Christian Gospel is fundamentally about liberation—not only in spiritual terms but also in social and material aspects. This has been evident in movements like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, where church leaders such as Desmond Tutu advocated for justice, healing, and social equity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provides a compelling example of how public theology can address the

legacies of injustice and promote healing and reconciliation. By combining moral witness, justice, public engagement, and hope, the TRC demonstrated the power of faith-based approaches to social and political issues. Similarly, religious leaders have been vocal against political corruption in countries like Malawi, demanding better governance and accountability (Nanthambwe 2022). The church, with its moral authority, has the potential to be a strong advocate for these freedoms and rights, thereby playing a crucial role in addressing systemic injustice and fostering resilience in sub-Saharan Africa.

Fourthly, religious organizations must be proactive and sustained in disaster relief and recovery programs. While they often provide essential services such as food, shelter, and medical care during natural disasters or conflicts, their efforts should extend beyond immediate relief to focus on long-term transformation, enabling individuals to become self-sufficient. (Corbett and Fikkert 2012) warn that while charity and relief are necessary in specific situations, they do not lead to a lasting change that empowers people to support themselves and their families. To achieve true transformation, interventions must be designed not only to meet the immediate needs but also to foster independence and resilience.

In sub-Saharan Africa, this has been demonstrated in contexts such as Mozambique, where churches provided critical aid following the devastation of Cyclone Idai in 2019. While initial efforts focused on distributing food and shelter, some religious organizations partnered with local governments and NGOs to implement long-term recovery plans, such as rebuilding homes and supporting livelihood programs for farmers and fishermen.

Similarly, in countries like Kenya, where droughts frequently affect food security, churches have partnered with non-governmental organizations to provide agricultural training and sustainable farming techniques. This shift from charity to empowerment ensures communities can rebuild their lives and develop resilience to future crises. By collaborating with governments and non-religious organizations, churches in sub-Saharan Africa can ensure that their interventions provide relief and lead to meaningful, lasting change that transforms lives and promotes self-reliance.

Fifthly, public theology must facilitate community empowerment by emphasizing grassroots initiatives and local involvement in social change. It should encourage communities to recognize their inherent capacity to address their own challenges, using their experiences and knowledge as tools for problem-solving (Ndukwe 2020). Public theology aims to empower local communities to drive their own development, thereby enhancing their ability to respond to and overcome local issues with resilience and self-sufficiency.

This approach is evident in various community-led initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, in Uganda, faith-based organizations have supported local women in developing micro-enterprises, enabling them to gain economic independence and contribute to their communities' growth (Copestake et al. 2019). These initiatives align with public theology's goal of fostering grassroots solutions and empowering individuals to take charge of their development.

Similarly, in Ghana, churches have facilitated community projects focused on improving access to clean water and sanitation to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Government of Ghana 2019). By involving local residents in the planning and implementing of these projects, the churches help build a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. This empowerment addresses the immediate needs and strengthens the community's ability to manage and sustain these resources over the long term.

Through its focus on connecting faith with societal issues, public theology provides valuable resources for communities to address and solve local problems. Promoting solidarity and advocating for all people's dignity helps communities harness their strengths and capabilities, leading to sustainable development and enhanced resilience.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated that public theology is an indispensable tool for fostering resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the face of the multifaceted

challenges posed by COVID-19, the Russia–Ukraine war, political unrest, and natural disasters. By integrating public pastoral care, public theology offers a holistic approach that addresses both the spiritual and social dimensions of suffering.

This holistic approach provides a comprehensive framework for navigating complex challenges. Public theology offers a sense of purpose and meaning, helping individuals and communities find hope and resilience, even in the darkest times. Additionally, public pastoral care provides tangible support, addressing the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of individuals and communities. By providing a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, seek guidance, and receive support, public pastoral care helps to build resilience and foster community cohesion.

Furthermore, public theology can be crucial in advocating social justice and addressing the systemic issues contributing to suffering and vulnerability. By mobilizing communities and advocating for policies that promote equity and inclusion, public theology can help to create a more just and resilient society.

In light of these findings, public theology is not only relevant but essential for navigating the complex challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa and fostering a more resilient and just society. By integrating public pastoral care and engaging in advocacy for social justice, public theology can provide a powerful framework for guiding communities through difficult times and building a better future.

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