

Bereavement healing ministry amongst Abaluyia: Towards a 'circle for pastoral concern' as a healing model

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Dates:

Received: 26 Sept. 2012
Accepted: 19 Aug. 2013
Published: 04 Oct. 2013
Republished: 08 Oct. 2013

How to cite this article:

Shikwati, B., Magezi, V. & Letšosa, R., 2013, 'Bereavement healing ministry amongst Abaluyia: Towards a "circle for pastoral concern" as a healing model', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47(1), Art. #663, 11 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.663>

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This article formulates a new integrated pastoral care approach to bereavement healing ministry in Africa, termed a *circle for pastoral concern*. In pursuit of this, the article highlights the pastoral challenge brought about by the occurrence of death and bereavement within the cultural and Christian intermix. Using the example of the Abaluyia of western Kenya, traditional cultural bereavement healing approaches are assessed against the backdrop of Christian influence on the understanding and response to death and bereavement healing and the resultant tension. The article juxtaposes the Abaluyia cultural concept of *okhukura* [to encircle with loving care] with the biblical *koinōnia* [fellowship, communion] as springboard for building culturally sensitive and biblically sound Christian caring communities. It is hoped that the juxtaposition helps to establish and promote meaningful engagement between therapeutic traditional beliefs and practices, and the gospel. The gospel-culture engagement within a local church setting provides the context in which bereavement healing and individual growth after the death of a significant other takes place. The juxtaposition is necessitated by the rampant practice in African pluralistic societies where Christians consciously, or otherwise, lurch back to cultural approaches in their effort to provide or find healing when faced with death and bereavement. The 'circle for pastoral concern' model encourages inclusiveness by enlisting the means and talents of the community of believers, both ordained and lay. The principle of inclusion ensures that the load of pastoral care is shared and assumes a deeper response due to diversity of gifts and talents within the caring community.

Die gebrek aan genesende prediking onder Abaluyia teenoor 'n 'sirkel van pastorale besorgdheid' as genesingsmodel. 'n Nuwe integrale benadering vir pastorale hulpverlening en berading tydens rou word voorgestel, naamlik 'n omsirkelingsmodel vir pastorale omgee-uitreiking met die oog op treurbediening binne 'n Afrika-konteks. Die vraagstuk van pastorale hulp en heling word behandel. Treurprosesse in Afrika vind binne die wisselwerkende verband tussen Christelike geloof en kultuurkonteks plaas. As voorbeeld van 'n dergelike interkulturele benadering, word die gebruike tydens rou en smartbeleving van die Abaluyia-groep in die westelike deel van Kenia ondersoek. Die Abaluyia-konsep van *okhukura* [om met liefdevolle sorg te omarm] word met die Bybelse konsep van *koinōnia* [onderlinge ondersteunende gemeenskap] vergelyk. Hierdie verband kan waarskynlik met die vestiging van sinvolle treurgroepe binne kulturele gemeenskapsverbande help, terwyl die wisselwerkende verband tussen tradisionele heling binne Afrikaspiritualiteite en die Christelike geloof in ag geneem word. Binne die Christelike konteks is dit die plaaslike kerk wat 'n deurslaggewende rol in die verwerking van smart kan speel. Dit is ook hier waar die filter tussen 'n Christelike praktyk en ander kulturele praktyke plaasvind ten einde die verwerking van smart optimaal toe te pas. 'n Dergelike sirkelverband is noodsaaklik om te voorkom dat Christene terugkeer na onaanvaarbare kulturele praktyke van smartverwerking binne 'n pluralistiese samelewing. Die model wat voorgestel word, is inklusief en sluit die offisiële amp sowel as die amp van gelowiges in. 'n Inklusiewe benadering versprei die verantwoordelikheid van pastorale betrokkenheid en skep 'n omgee-gemeenskap waar die verskeidenheid van gawes en talente geïnkorporeer word.

Introduction and background: Death and bereavement as pastoral challenges

Death and bereavement are serious pastoral challenges. Although death is an inescapable reality, it is still a source of great distress for the dying, their relatives and friends. It is hard to accept death as a fact of life (Van Lierop 1991:130). The ravages of death, in spite of how or when it occurs, are patently obvious. The pain of bereavement can be diminished by certain factors, but it is never absent. In the words of Manchester (2006:5): '[E]veryone has to deal with grief one way or another'. Grieving, whether normal or pathological, brings about the exigency for healing and restoration.

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The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the verb *bereave* as 'deprive', 'rob', 'dispossess of', or 'leave destitute', which aptly describe the feelings of the bereaved. Bereavement is an objective realisation by a person of the loss by death of another who was significant in his or her life (Mbogori 2002:81). According to Miller and Jackson (1995:225) the emotional pain of bereavement begins from the time a loss is anticipated, such as the diagnosis of a terminal illness, and extends through the period of the actual loss. Moreover, the survivors often experience substantial morbidity and an awareness of their own mortality. As Alexander (1993:9) laments: 'Death makes us question the meaning of life itself.' This question of 'meaning' compounds the experience of bereavement and the process of healing. Death is thus a source of personal, interpersonal and social conflict. Clearly, bereavement affects people's well-being and thus cries out for healing.

As Louw (1998:444) observes: 'Healing is a comprehensive concept [which] indicates health, well-being and the optimal development of life functions within specific structures which focus on a form of integration.' According to Egnew (2005), healing is an intensely personal experience involving a reconciliation of the meaning an individual ascribes to distressing events with his perception of wholeness as a person. Although this definition was made in the context of western allopathic medicine, it helpfully goes beyond the traditional confines of the modern medical focus on diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease. It emphasises the fact that healing does not only concern the physical and the psychological aspects of a person, but also their spiritual and social well-being. Arguing for integration rather than dualism in the processes of healing, De Gruchy (1989:43) befittingly defines health as 'that which enables us to be fully human in relation to ourselves, our society and our environment'. Mwaura (2000:78) explains that in African societies, health is conceived as more than physical well-being. It is also a state that entails mental, physical, spiritual, social and cosmic harmony. Having health evokes equilibrium in all these dimensions. It is thus associated with all that is positively valued in life as well as people's correct relationship with one another, their environment and the supernatural world. Health is understood more in a social than a biological sense.

The Bible uses various verbs to describe the concepts of health and healing. The Hebrew word *shalōm*, commonly translated as 'peace', has a root meaning of wholeness, completeness and well-being. The Greek term *therapeuō*, which means to 'serve' or 'attend a person', usually indicates healing (Wilkinson 1980:4–33; Louw 1998:42–43).

In bereavement, healing is of course not understood as a goal in itself. The pain of bereavement cannot be likened to a wound or some illness that can 'heal'. Bereavement healing is a process by which the bereaved work through their traumatic experience, adapt to their changed status, and find or begin to ascribe new meaning to life as they come to terms with the loss of a significant other. Bereavement healing is often a life-long process. However, following the death of a significant other, the bereaved often actively or passively

engage and/or accommodate various models in their pursuit for healing. Simfukwe (2006:1462) argues that each culture must respond to the reality of death in a way that enables the survivors to recover from the trauma of loss and live in hope.

The pursuit of bereavement healing is not limited to traditional cultures and medical practice. The stirrings for bereavement healing are often made the concern of the community of believers, especially pastors, to enhance coping. In its initial stages, this concern was embodied in the person and healing ministry of Jesus Christ. This foundational ministry was continued in Early Church by the apostles and subsequently the community of believers. Over the centuries, the instituted church has designed liturgies to bury the dead in a dignified way and developed the ministry of pastoral care which is conceived as a healing art (Hunter 1995:18; Louw 1998:1).

Louw (1998) further defines pastoral care in terms of pastoral hermeneutics which links the story of salvation to the story of humankind's misery and hope in order to address the human search for meaning and the quest for the ultimate meaning. He (Louw *ibid*:396) argues that the objective of pastoral care is 'to develop faith in order to establish a mature approach to life and to foster spirituality which enfleshes God's presence and will in everyday life'. Similarly, Crabb (1977:22) observes that the goal of true pastoral healing is to free people to better worship and serve God by helping them to become more like the Lord Jesus Christ, that is to promote Christian maturity. Therefore, as Oates (1976:1; cf. Tidball 1986:1) observes, the aim of the pastor must be 'to make grief an avenue to constructive growth rather than an occasion for destructive deterioration of the personality'.

Cognisant of the reality of death and bereavement, and the need for healing as well as the possible tension between Christian and traditional beliefs and practices, it is imperative to understand the space bereaved Christians amongst the Abaluyia find themselves in. Insight into this space will hopefully ensure a design of an appropriate and relevant pastoral care ministry that effectively fosters bereavement healing. This article therefore provides an overview of traditional cultural and Christian influence on healing – and the resultant tension. Secondly, it provides an overview of bereavement healing models, both cultural and Christian. Finally, it proposes a bereavement healing model that integrates cultural bereavement practices and biblical principles, termed a *circle for pastoral concern*.

A synoptic overview of cultural and Christian bereavement healing space pathology

The pain of bereavement by death is often exacerbated by an apparent conflict between Christian faith and traditional bereavement healing approaches or mourning rites within the Christian community. A concern derives from this conflict, because Christians faced with bereavement, often seek healing from their cultural beliefs and practices rather than be guided by biblical principles and the consequent

pastoral healing ministry of the church. Due to the suspicion of cultural beliefs and practices within the church, bereaved Christians often feel guilty or resentful for being unduly judged in their struggle to discern appropriate responses to their painful experiences.

Bereaved Christians often suffer guilt. The guilt is not only experienced in relation to adopt cultural mourning patterns and practices, but also in failing to do so. In the latter case, believers are often blamed by relatives and friends for neglecting cultural ways. This inevitably causes feelings of guilt as a result of the oscillation between the realities of Christian practice and cultural beliefs and practices (Mbiti 1969:3; Magezi 2006:514). Alembi (2002:108) writes about the perceptions of the Abanyole (a sub-group of the Abaluyia) on death, observes that in the event of death, Christians seem to have 'a dual personality' that makes them suffer. The conflict presents a pastoral need for care and healing during bereavement.

The tension and guilt arising from engaging in or shunning cultural mourning beliefs and practices often hinders their therapeutic benefits. It also highlights the necessity of formulating a corrective approach that is cognisant of the traditional bereavement healing beliefs and practices, but subject to biblical injunctions in order to enhance healing. Louw (1998) aptly captures this need by pointing out that the challenge facing pastoral theology is to develop a theology that not only takes the gospel seriously, but also attempts to understand and interpret individuals' existence within their social context (Louw *ibid*:1). It is here postulated that a sympathetic assessment of cultural bereavement approaches, rooted in social and cultural order, is crucial in formulating a viable pastoral response. The basis for this sympathy is the conviction that pastoral healing entails a transformation of beliefs, values and perspectives through the gospel (Magezi 2006:509). Forde (1954:xvii) correctly points out that there is a need for a sympathetic appreciation of the attitudes and underlying beliefs that African peoples bring with them when they get under the influence of other organised religions such as Christianity. It is irresponsible not to do so and symptomatic of attitudinal challenges, which hinder meaningful and effective integration of Christianity and respective cultures.

The basic questions, however, are:

- How should one respond pastorally?
- What do we know about God and about his will and purpose for the human being in this situation?

The pastoral agenda is rightly informed by God's word, the Bible, and the quest to make it relevant and applicable in people's lives (Simcox 1960:2–3). Louw (1998:2) points out that pastoral theology seeks to interpret and understand the Christian truth in terms of the human experience of the world. It endeavours to bring about concrete and meaningful actions of faith in order to develop a model of human and contextual transformation, interpret God for contemporary situations, and formulate a theological theory for practice that

expresses Christian faith as it addresses the human quest for meaning and identity. He further argues that the focus of this endeavour is to enable a critical dialogue between 'the truth', i.e. biblical text as the normative source, and the 'practice' in an attempt to transform society. In other words, the concern is to understand and discern God's will for the real world. This endeavour follows a 'hermeneutic circle' that seeks to connect the world of human action and the biblical teaching in order to bring about a transformative practice (Louw *ibid*:90; cf. Hendriks 2004:33; Heyns & Pieterse 1990:35–36).

Towards transformed cultural bereavement healing approaches: A case of the Abaluyia

Therapeutic cultural beliefs and practices

In many African societies, the mourning period is marked by elaborate beliefs and practices. Amongst the Abaluyia, the term for bereavement is *okhufirwa* drawn from the act of dying. The term *amasika* [tears], refers to the period of mourning when relatives and friends are expected to pay visits of sympathy and respect, and to mourn with the bereaved family. This period is marked by elaborate rituals and sacrifices that take nearly one year to complete. However, the mourning period is open. For instance, as long as a relative or friend has not paid the ceremonial visit after a death (*okhutsia amasika*), even if months or years have passed since the occurrence of death, the first visit is regarded as the ceremonial one (Appleby 1943:14, 31). The various cultural beliefs and practices are meant to honour the dead and bring about healing for the survivors. They include beliefs regarding:

- death, afterlife and bereavement
- rituals and sacrifices
- performances, eulogies and remembrances
- prescribed care and conduct of the bereaved.

Death as a gateway to life

In common with other African peoples, the Abaluyia believe that death is not the absolute end of existence (Awolalu 1976:275; Malusu 1978:9; Mbiti 1969:159; Shisanya 1996:186; Wabukala & LeMarquand 2001:354; Owuor 2006:9–10). Life, or consciousness in some form, continues beyond physical death (Anderson 1986:23). Consequently, death is perceived as a gateway to life with the ancestors, especially for the elderly and not a phenomenon to be dreaded. This belief does not by any means suggest that bereavement is not a cause of ill health. As Augsburg (1986:65) correctly observes: 'Death is common to all persons, and the dying process elicits review, grief, and separation anxiety in every culture.' However, in a constructive framework, the belief has therapeutic value to the bereaved.

Therapeutic rituals and sacrifices

The elaborate rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies related to death and bereavement also have therapeutic value. These practices are aimed at bringing consolation, healing and meaning following the death of a significant other. The

therapeutic value of rituals is also not unique to the African people. As Reggy-Mamo (1999:8) observes, people in different places and over the generations have developed various rituals of working through the pain and suffering brought about by death. She further notes that in any aspect of human life where there is anxiety and stress, one can expect to find customs and beliefs whose function is to alleviate, or at least decrease, the degree of anxiety. Similar sentiments are shared by other writers, including Mbogori (2002:126), who holds that the purpose of customs and beliefs associated with bereavement is often to reach resolution or healing and to avoid the possibility of pathological grief. He suggests that the curative value of rites derives from social interaction, which brings people together to share in the grief.

In addition, there are prescribed sacrifices (*emisango*) made in order to avert further deaths or misfortune, to help the survivors cope and to give them hope for a future without the deceased. Sacrifices are often prescribed when a death occurs in circumstances that contravene the customary order or is considered a 'taboo death'. Taboo deaths include murder, suicide, often by hanging or drowning, and dying on a battlefield or in a foreign land. Special sacrifices and rituals are also prescribed following the death of a pregnant woman, a childless person or the unmarried. The rituals are intended to serve several socio-religious functions, such as permanently separating the deceased from survivors and re-establishing social solidarity by re-incorporating the mourners into the community (Wako 1985; Wabukala & LeMarquand 2001; Malusu 1978; Mbiti 1969; Magesa 1997). Mbiti (1991:122) argues that by ritualising death, people dance it away, drive it away, and renew their own life after it has taken away one of their own.

Performances, eulogies and remembrances

The therapeutic value of singing, oral poetry and other forms of performances cannot be ignored, as they are often a part of ritual practices. Alembi (2002:103) acknowledges that because bereavement is characterised by deep feelings, performances are useful avenues to let out pent-up emotions that could easily be harmful to the health of the bereaved. Culturally, the bereaved are encouraged to reflect and express their pain through wailing, eulogies and remembrance. Mbogori (2002:54) observes that the feelings of being remembered, act as a protection to the psyche of the living against the threat of death. It renders death less threatening, for one continues to live in the memory of the community. These performances and occasions avail opportunities for emotional expression, benevolence and reconciliation – thus encouraging bereavement healing.

Conduct of and care for the survivors

The conduct of and care for the survivors also form a crucial part of bereavement healing approaches amongst the Abaluyia. It is not uncommon for the dying, especially the elderly, to invite members of their family to bid them farewell. After sitting at the deathbeds of many dying people, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1991:9; cf. Stott & Finlay 1984:73)

observes that if the dying person's call is regarded, as it often is, the survivors value the opportunity of being with the person at his or her dying moments. Culturally, there are set communal systems of conduct and care for widows, widowers and orphans. Malusu (1978; cf. Kiriswa 2002:26) underscores the centrality of community in the bereavement healing process. He rightly mentions that the ceremonies concerning death, involve all members of the community. He Malusu (*ibid*:3) aptly captures the people's approach to the observances related to death arguing: 'It is the last drama of life, the last human act, the last music played for those who can never again join in the rhythmic dance.'

Amongst Abaluyia peoples, the battle of whether or not one will muster necessary resources for healing in bereavement is largely won or lost before the actual death occurs. This is because bereavement healing largely hinges on the observance by individuals and the community at large, of the essential therapeutic cultural values expressed in beliefs, rituals and ceremonies in their everyday life. As Mbogori (2002:77) explains, the relationships and tensions of the dying have to be worked through before one can achieve resolution of grief in facing bereavement of a significant other.

Cultural beliefs and practices as pathogenic

Notwithstanding their positive healing benefits, these cultural beliefs and practices present various shortcomings.

Personalistic view of sickness and death

Amongst the Abaluyia, as in other traditional Africa communities, sickness and death is viewed in personalistic terms, that is, attributed to an agent who may be human (a witch or sorcerer), non-human (a ghost, an ancestor, an evil spirit), or supernatural (a deity or other very powerful being). Sickness and death is thus often attributed to the breaking of taboos, offending God and/or ancestral spirits, witchcraft, sorcery, the evil eye, passion by an evil spirit, and a curse from parents or offended neighbours (Berinyuu 1988:49–50; Mwaura 2000:79; Ncube 2003:108; Mbiti 1969:200; Kiriswa 2002:24). For appropriate intervention, it is imperative to determine 'who' caused the illness or death and 'why' it was caused. The personalistic approach brings about ill health. Death is ultimately blamed on a human agent. Amongst the Abaluyia, for instance, God is nearly absent in the daily events of humankind, although, of course, his existence and sovereignty is recognised in daily prayers (Wagner 1954:28, 31; cf. Mbiti *ibid*:43, 61; Malusu 1978:17). God is not thought to have anything to do with the pain of daily life, otherwise blamed on some human agency (Malusu *ibid*:7; cf. Mbiti *ibid*:156; Mwaura *ibid*:72; Magezi 2006:511). This personalistic interpretive demand for answers to 'who' is responsible for a death and 'why' it happened often fosters conflict within and amongst the bereaved.

Ancestral veneration and ritual sacrifices

The dead are believed to maintain more or less the same status they had in life. As elders, the ancestors retain their high status and roles. Their mediation is between themselves

and the living family members. As such, their place in the family is not diminished by death. In fact, it is believed that their potency increases in death. Death is thus looked at as the gateway to an existence in which larger powers are available, usually for revenge (Friends Africa Mission [FAM] n.d.:6). As Appleby (1943:40, 152; cf. Wagner 1954:42; Elverson 1920:48) observes, the dead members of the clan are considered as truly present and considerably more powerful than the living. Although they may use their power to benefit the living, this power often seems to be shown in bringing illness or other bad fortune. This negative exercise of their power is reinforced by the popularly held idea that most misfortunes have a supernatural origin – either witchcraft or the spirit of the deceased. The resultant ambivalence necessitates ancestral veneration and appeasement. One ritual that persists amongst the Abaluyia, whether they are Christians or non-Christians, is the slaughtering of a bull or heifer following the death of a family member. Traditionally, the animal was offered as a sacrifice to the ancestors in order ‘to facilitate the incorporation of the deceased into the ancestral world’ (Shisanya 1996:189; cf. Malusu 1978:9). These cultural beliefs and practices are a source of strain for the bereaved, whether or not they believe in their assumed potency.

Neglected individuality

The Abaluyia peoples feel comforted by the knowledge that they are not alone in their bereavement. Death and bereavement are primarily communal affairs and, as such, taking care of the bereaved is the concern of the entire community (Malusu 1978:3; Magezi 2006:512; Kiriswa 2002:31). Practical and emotional communal help is invaluable in the process of bereavement healing. However, the priority of the community often means that individual considerations are neglected. Nwachuku (1992) points out that negative:

... traditional ritualistic processes and practices have become resistant to contemporary social changes as a result of habit, fear, or wanton insistence on known patterns for maintenance of tribal or ethnic identity, social cohesion, and the established status quo. (p. 57)

In view of these ambivalences, Magezi (2006:514; 2007:667; cf. Mbogori 2002:100, 114; Matsuda 1984:30; Malusu 1978:5; Mbiti 1969:2) argues that the ‘community performs either a constructive or destructive role in the process of coping’. He aptly adds that communal priorities can put undue pressure on an individual or a group to indulge in inappropriate or retrogressive practices that may result in further ill health.

The practice of reciprocity

In their practice of hospitality and philanthropy, the Abaluyia uphold not only the concept of brotherhood, but also of reciprocity. For them, ‘bereavement befalls all’ (*amasika nobwayi*) and, as such, those who support others are assured of their own support when need arise. The principle of reciprocity is best captured in the proverb ‘*Omuchen i wolashiachen ihi shiomupilakhwo omukhasi*’ [‘Do not pick a fight with your wife for not properly hosting a visitor who has not hosted you’] (Wambunya 2005:14). Therefore, to claim that African people extended generosity or hospitality without

attaching any conditions or without expecting reward (Mbiti 1969:1; Gathogo 2006:39; Sichula 2007:11) is perhaps to overly romanticise this cultural practice. Furthermore, acts of hospitality and benevolence are often motivated by the belief that the dead can see those who are kind or mean to their surviving relatives and reward or punish them accordingly.

Retrogressive cultural beliefs and practices

Some cultural beliefs and practices are observed to be overtly retrogressive and repressive. As such, they are a threat to the well-being of the bereaved. Edet (1992; cf. Shisanya 1996:190; Reggy-Mamo 1999:3ff.) particularly laments the plight of women in most African communities. She (Edet *ibid*) observes that in Africa:

... the death of a husband heralds a period of imprisonment and hostility to the wife or wives. This treatment may or may not be out of malice, but in all cases, women suffer and are subjected to rituals that are health hazards and heart-rending. (p. 25)

Amongst the Abaluyia, for instance *okhwichera*, a practice in which a surviving spouse sprawls over the deceased spouse in a simulation of the sexual act, is encouraged. It is believed to put the surviving spouse in good state with the deceased and to release his or her spirit so that it does not interfere with any future sexual union entered by the surviving spouse. As such, the gesture acts as a form of ritual cleansing.

Shisanya (1996:190; cf. Reggy-Mamo 1999:3ff.) singles out the cultural demand for the ritual of *okhusaaba* [washing hands], which is used to consummate marriage. However, if the husband dies before this ritual is observed, the widow is expected to ritually ‘feed’ the deceased before burial. These practices are demeaning and can adversely affect the physical, social and psychological well-being of the surviving spouse. For instance, some of the practices pose a real danger of the surviving spouse experiencing afterimages and distressing nightmares.

Similarly, the ritual of *okhukhalaka amakhoola* [cutting banana fibres], connected to wife inheritance (Wako 1985:36; 1954:45), exposes a surviving spouse to situations of sickness and contradicts biblical teachings on sexual morality and marriage. Shisanya (1996:192; cf. Mwaura 2000:96; Anglican Church of Kenya [ACK] 1993) laments that widows are often raped under the pretext of the required cultural widow inheritance ritual. She encourages widows to reject this ritual as a way of protecting themselves from health risks, such as HIV. Nwachuku (1992:71) also observes that the concept of widow inheritance, pushed to its extreme by human greed, leads to forced cohabitation of the widow with a select kinsman of the husband. If she refuses, she risks being ousted from the matrimonial compound, or her paternal family being forced to repay dowry in order to earn her independence. Furthermore, the woman is forced to forfeit custody of the children who belong to the husband in the patrilineal societies.

Also related to wife inheritance is the ritual of property inheritance and distribution. Shisanya (1996:192; cf. Wako 1985:34) observes that despite the good intention of the ritual

distribution of the deceased's property amongst relatives, the practice has been greatly abused. Many widows lament the demand of the deceased's personal belongings like clothes, household property, flock, fowl, and the grabbing of the most valuable assets, like land. These acts of greed leave the disinherited widows and children, especially the daughters, economically handicapped and bereft. This is reinforced by the fact that land is inherited patrilineally from father to son or to other male relatives if the deceased had no son. Nwachuku (1992:61) argues that this is a form of enslavement of widows through financial and property disposition by the male relatives of the deceased. Post-burial ceremonies, like *obukoko* [return of the deceased's daughters to their paternal home] around the ritual fire (*omuliro kwamachenga*), often provide opportunities for acts of promiscuity. Such permissive behaviour often leads to unwanted pregnancies and infections.

Fatigue and stigmatisation

Fatigue and humiliation often result from various cultural performances. Fatigue results from lack of rest and sleep as the bereaved are expected to participate actively in various pre-burial and post-burial performances. Performances such as *eshilemba* [a dance in honour of a deceased warrior], which require prescribed cultural ritual cleanliness, can also be a source of humiliation. For instance, if a widow fails to meet the performers, she is suspected of infidelity. Other performances like *okhuchesia* [walk about] which purport to take the spirit of the dead to bid farewell to his neighbourhood and *eshilemba* in which the ancestors are thought to participate alongside the performers in confronting death, often instil fear of the dead and thus encourage ancestral veneration as they believe that such performances avert future misfortune and appease avenging spirits.

In addition, cultural stigma against spinsters, bachelors, physically or mentally challenged persons, family members of those who commit suicide and widows who are not inherited or choose not to enter second marriages, are often sources of angst for the bereaved (see Halperin 2005:108; Shisanya 1996:189; Malusu 1978:5–6).

Therefore, it is clear that in spite of the fact that some cultural belief and practices engender healing in bereavement, the described limitations can be a source of pathological grieving. As such, they require a biblical corrective and constructive framework that can make grief an avenue of constructive growth rather than an occasion for destructive deterioration of the personality (cf. Oates 1976:1).

Towards a biblical framework of bereavement healing

The church's support for the bereaved is primarily hinged on the biblical principles as well as church practice over the ages. As Magezi (2006:517) points out, pastoral healing utilises resources unique to the Christian faith. The approaches for bereavement healing deduced from the biblical analysis

and traditionally adopted by the various groups within the church in corporate worship, proclamation and private devotion, include (see Louw 1998:367f.; Autton 1967:20; Magezi *ibid*:517):

- belief in the presence of the Triune God
- affirmation of life
- the comfort of the Holy Spirit
- edification from reading the Bible
- efficacy of prayer
- grace of the sacraments
- the hope of resurrection
- mutual help by the faith community.

Writing on the art of consolation, Autton (1967:19–20) identifies two basic principles in pastoral care, which can serve as guides for bereavement healing. First, the bereaved ought to be led to face the reality of death, thereby affording them an opportunity to mourn. Secondly, they ought to be led to the resources that the Christian faith offers at a time when they are able to appreciate it and so be helped by it. These biblical principles avail much comfort (*paraklesis*) for the bereaved when used sensitively and appropriately. They are basic in the formulation of an integrated pastoral model for bereavement healing.

Affirmation of life

Bereavement through death is a major theme in the human story. The discussions on death and the afterlife in various ancient cultures and in the Bible, not only point to the universality of grief, but also to the general attitudes towards these phenomena and the processes of bereavement and healing. The biblical example of what it means for the people of God to be bereaved is expressed in part in the beliefs and practices of the Jews (Old Testament) and perfectly in the life of Jesus Christ (New Testament).

In the Bible, death is appropriately understood in the context of life, which is a gift of God (Pickle 1988:7). As Anderson (1986:38) puts it: 'Life and death both belong to that existence which issues from God.' Nonetheless, Anderson further argues that the Bible has no clearly defined theology of death. Rather, he asserts, it presents two approaches to death – one drawn from the Hebrew tradition and the other from the Greek tradition. In the Greek tradition, death is a friend whilst in the Hebrew tradition, death is a natural limitation to human earthly existence (Anderson *ibid*:38; Pickle *ibid*:19). Pickle (*ibid*:12–13) observes that in the early experience of Israel, the focus on individual death was absent. As a result, the importance of the corporate personality of the family, the clan and the nation was primary. In this respect, the loss of an individual by death was not an overwhelming loss, because the group continued to survive. He also observes that, in his teaching, Jesus did not view death as an obstacle to faith in God (Pickle *ibid*:19).

The Bible speaks not only of bodily death which is common to all humans, but also of spiritual death which results from sin. Its focus, however, is on life and the living. The affirmation

of the triumph of life over death represents the main line of thought in the Bible (Jacob 1962:803). It is emphasised, especially in the New Testament, that it is sin that gives death its sting. However, through Christ's death and resurrection, those who put their trust in him have no need to dread death. Instead, the believers look forward to the final defeat of death when, like Jesus, they will be resurrected to eternal life.

Hope of resurrection

There is a progressive understanding of death in the Bible. Two broad views dominate this understanding. On the one hand, death is the end of life. From this viewpoint, there is no hope after life except perhaps remembrance for the righteous whilst the wicked will never be remembered. On the other hand, the Bible teaches that there is life after death. This belief finds ultimate and concrete certainty in the life, teaching and redemptive work of Jesus.

Although dying and death is still an enemy to life and bereavement still hurts even though the sting of death has been removed, death has been swallowed up in victory through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54–55, 57). The hope of eternal life has been made sure, because Jesus conquered death through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Because of Jesus' achievement, believers have assurance of their own resurrection at the *Parousia* and a sure eschatological hope for eternal life. This hope is grounded in believers' faith in God, who has shown his faithfulness in the past by raising Jesus from the dead (cf. 1 Cor 15:3), and the promise regarding the future – that he will also raise those who die in Christ (1 Cor 6:14; 15:20; 2 Cor 4:14). For bereaved believers, as Autton (1967) affirms:

Sorrow there will be, for death means separation and loss, but joy there should be for the Redemption demands that the Alleluia of triumph shall be louder than the Amen of resignation. (p. 16)

Hope is the distinctive quality in Christian grieving. When Christians face death, their grief, though not diminished, is informed by the hope they hold based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of their own resurrection at his return. The hope for resurrection is thus a central Christian paradigm in bereavement healing. As Carson (1978:72) observes, the hope of life beyond the grave is not only a comfort in time of bereavement – it is the final answer to all our suffering. This is the most abundant consolation for the Christians in their bereavement.

In spite of the sure hope of resurrection, however, it is important to note that the Bible does not deny the existence of death or minimise the anguish of bereavement. On the contrary, Jesus set an example in acknowledging the pain caused by death. Jesus identified with and showed wholesale, compassionate love in his encounter with the bereaved. He taught his followers to mourn with those who mourn, wept at the post-burial gathering following the death of his friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35) and was filled with compassion on witnessing a widow's pain on a funeral procession of her only son in the town of Nain (Lk 7:11–17). Jesus reveals a compassionate God. When faced with death and bereavement,

Jesus not only offered words of solace and comfort, but he also revealed his divine authority over death. His example and sacrifice provides the resources for Christian exercise of pastoral care for bereavement healing.

Fellowship and mutual help of believers

A loving and serving Christian fellowship (*koinōnia*) exists for mutual encouragement, comfort, support and healing. The believers are enabled by the Holy Spirit, who indwells them as the Comforter to typify their compassionate heavenly Father.

Words of healing

There is wisdom in reading the Bible or hearing it clearly explained, for there are promises for life and words of healing in it. Reading the Bible brings an awareness of divine involvement in the welfare of the people concerned and transforms their culture to conform to the word of God. It was noted that there exists some wrong uses of the Bible that believers must shun. For instance, the Bible is handled as though it is a magical talisman alongside traditional magical objects. This misuse was noted in cases where a Bible is put in the grave during burial or placed on the grave daily following burial. In other cases, the survivors put the Bible under their pillows before sleep as protection against evil powers or bad dreams involving the deceased. These erroneous practices, though rampant amongst some African Independent Churches, can also be seen amongst some Christians in the mainline churches.

Efficacy of prayer

Prayer is an important pastoral bereavement healing resource. Prayer is a fruit of a believer's trust in God. It is an acknowledgement that God is compassionate in his character, present through his Spirit and listening (Ps 145:18). Although God can grant the desires of the believers without them asking (Mt 6:8), he has chosen prayer as an ordinary means of communication between him and the believer (Mt 7:7, 8). Through prayer, Christians not only ask from God, but they also find an opportunity for confession, thanksgiving and praise. In prayer, the bereaved find power for healing and wholeness.

However, it is important to remember that prayers are not gimmicks or quick fixes and should not be used as though they were. Prayers may not be used for manipulation or as excuse for human responsibility. In addition, the rampant traditional image of God amongst the Abaluyia as only transcendent and thus not directly involved in human affairs, is limiting and contrary to the biblical teaching. There is also no teaching or example in the Bible to pray for or to the departed (Church of England [CE] 1859:336). Prayer is for the encouragement of the living.

Grace of the sacraments

Traditional teaching of the church indicates that sacraments ordained by God are a means of his grace in the sacraments. Therefore, the believers draw comfort from the sacraments in

their bereavement. The sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ are baptism and Holy Communion. These sacraments are particularly crucial in relation to ecclesial burial rituals.

The question that can be posed, however, is whether there can be a model that integrates the dimensions of the cultural approaches and biblical resources indicated above.

Towards an integrated pastoral approach to bereavement healing: A 'circle for pastoral concern' model

Crabb (1977:47) suggests several models of integration and adopts what he terms as *Spoiling the Egyptians*. This model involves a careful screening of meta-theories to determine their compatibility with biblical presuppositions. Consequently, Crabb (*ibid*:49–50) proposes certain conditions for 'a truly evangelical integration'. Firstly, he notes that meta-theories or the concepts drawn from social studies, such as cultural anthropology or naturalistic psychology, must come under the authority of Scripture. The essential content of Scripture must not be compromised. Secondly, the Bible must be affirmed as God's revelation to humankind and be upheld as inspired and inerrant in its propositional form. Thirdly, the Scripture must guide and control the thinking process in the integration process. It must have priority over contrary non-biblical opinion. The scriptural functional control is more critical where the subject matter under discussion greatly overlaps with biblical content. Finally, the integrationist must have a level of competence in both the meta-theoretical study area and biblical hermeneutical studies (theology). The desired competence must not preclude the work of the Spirit and the profit of fellowship in a Bible-believing local church. Crabb (*ibid*:28) argues that the overall goal for the desire to change is to please the Lord. Crabb's model of integration informs the present process of integration. The goal of the integrated model sought, is not limited to heal in bereavement per se, but it also aims to enable the bereaved to look beyond their suffering with hope and to deepen their trust in God.

The church acknowledges that the pain of bereavement by death is real and often makes other hurts seem petite. Generally, as Pickle (1988:3) affirms, the ministry of the church to the bereaved is plausible. He commends the churches' response in the event of death and bereavement with what he terms a *supportive presence* of its members, especially at the burial ritual. However, he rightly decries the practice where only a few churches provide continuing supportive care to the bereaved after the burial of a significant other. His observation is strikingly similar to the experience of bereaved Christians amongst the Abaluyia. The factors advanced to explain this deficiency include dependence on a single leader, the pastor, to care and counsel the bereaved. Faced with the devastating realities of the effects of death and the enormity of the number of the bereaved, pastors are often in danger of burnout or stress. The 'circle for pastoral concern' model departs from this 'super pastor' syndrome towards

embracing the community of believers as the mainstay of care and healing. It draws from the centrality of community in bereavement healing. The model seeks to integrate therapeutic cultural beliefs and practices in bereavement healing ministry. The basis for the integration is the conviction that biblically based healing entails a transformation of beliefs, values and perspectives through the gospel (Magezi 2006:509; cf. Forde 1954:xvii).

Amongst the Abaluyia, as in other African communities, the occurrence of death affects the whole community. The bereaved are immediately surrounded by a caring extended family (community). For the Abaluyia, this rapid response is captured in the concept and practice of *okhukura* [to encircle with loving care, to protect or shield from harm]. The carers form a virtual ring or circle around the bereaved. The circle of carers often includes members of the community who have experienced similar pain and suffering (Kiriswa 2002:59; Nouwen 1972:82–83). It is within this circle of carers (*ingara ya abakuri*) that bereavement healing occurs. In the cultural setting, the circle of core carers engendered healing largely through the observance of cultural beliefs and practices. Transformed by the gospel, this sociocultural organisational system and philosophy of care amongst the Abaluyia resonates with the centrality of mutual help and communal participation in the church, underscored in the biblical concept of *κοινωνία* [communion by intimate participation].

The noun *koinōnia* is derived from the Greek verb *koinōnos*, which means 'to be a sharer, a companion, one who is a partaker, a participant in communion'. True *koinōnia* is therefore demonstrated in genuine intimate care for one another by meeting others' needs and bearing their burdens. It is a contribution for the benefit or relief of one (Green 1794:103; Thayer 1977:352). Service (*diakonia*) is inseparable from the concepts of *okhukura* and *koinōnia* (cf. Kidha 2011:59). This service is demonstrated in genuine care for each other. Like the cultural circle of carers, the 'circle for pastoral concern' seeks to bring about healing, but by the use of biblical resources available to the believers integrated with or sympathetic to transformed cultural beliefs and practices. Unlike the cultural circle of carers, emphasis is on the spiritual family of believers rather than biological affiliations of family or clan members. In this respect, the term *circle* is preferred rather than *family*, because the latter heavily connotes blood relation. Default understanding of 'family' is often assumed to refer to biological relations. For believers, on the contrary, the 'circle' consists of those who, by grace, have come to the saving knowledge of Christ within their local community as well as the universal fellowship (*koinōnia*) of faith.

Traditional philosophy and culture of the Abaluyia embrace both hierarchical and 'circular' organisational aspects. In the present formulation, the 'circular' organisational aspect is preferred, not only because it points to a pastoral approach that avoids the dominant hierarchical pyramid form of ecclesiastical and institutional organisation often favoured by some missionaries, but also due to its rich symbolism. Helpfully, the concept and symbolism of a circle is dominant

amongst the Abaluyia as well as many other African cultures. For instance, a circle is the shape of the sun which the traditional Abaluyia face in their daily morning prayers. It represents the creative life-giving power of God. The circle also dominates the traditional architectural designs. For instance, it is the shape of the Abaluyia's traditional houses. At the centre of these house an *isiro* [centre pole] was erected which is a symbol of stability. In addition, the elders' court usually sat in a circle as a symbol of cohesion and harmony.

The circle engenders an inclusive identity. All those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ, whose worldview has been changed to conform to that of Christ, are included and their role recognised. With this symbolism in mind, a circle of concerned believers is to be formed around the bereaved as an indication of interest in their plight as opposed to apathy and indifference. Each believer is individually and corporately engaged in the ministry of healing through prayer, reading of the Bible, fellowship, compassion, hospitality, counselling, communion, forgiveness and reconciliation. The individuality of the carer and those cared for is not only respected, but also informed through interaction with others within the circle. All the biblical means of healing reach optimum efficacy as they are continually appropriated to the local cultural milieu.

It is important to note that the concern shown to the bereaved is pastoral and, as such, it derives from God who forms its basis and gives it meaning. In this respect, the image of God as the Shepherd informs the attitude and manner of care carried out by members of the circle of carers. The core of the 'circle' is the sacred space of the triune God from whom everything issues. Amongst the Abaluyia, God (*Wele Khakaba*) is the giver of life and all that human beings need. The Abaluyia acknowledge that '*Nyasaye niye oufwisinjia omubasu*' ['only God causes the sun to shine']. However, God is not just a transcendental Creator of the universe; God is also immanently relational. He is Emmanuel, God with us, ultimately made known in Jesus Christ. The relationship between humankind and God that was marred by sin, has been restored through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This relationship will be fully realised at the *Parousia* when the Kingdom of God will have finally been established and its greatest enemy, death, conquered. In the meantime, the believer has the benefit of God's presence in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. Therefore, in their bereavement, believers can draw encouragement from their relationship with God and the knowledge of his presence with them. In view of this relationship, the bereaved can make a cry of trust to the One who hears. God does not forsake the bereaved, but he is concerned for their comfort and healing. He is a father to the fatherless, husband to the widows, sets the lonely in families (Ps 68:5–6) and expects believers to 'look after orphans and widows in their distress' (Ja 1:27). This understanding of God and his character fosters *shalōm* [felicity and wholeness].

The 'circle for pastoral concern' is to be characterised by sincere love – love for God and neighbour. It is composed of believers called to show loving care – not only to those within the circle of faith, but also to aliens and even enemies. God, in

his providence, enables others to be conduits of his relief and grace in stressful times. Love for and communion with fellow believers characterise the believer's transformed life. It is within this circle of loving concern for and fellowship with other believers that deeds of compassion, prayer, hospitality, pastoral visitation and presence, Bible study, teaching, caring, forgiveness and reconciliation for the encouragement of the bereaved happens.

As already noted, in the Abaluyia's traditional setting the circle of carers is mainly made up of members of the bereaved person's extended family, related to them by blood. Those who have stepped into a living relationship with Jesus Christ and desire to live under his lordship are at once members of the fellowship of believers (*koinōnia*) as well as members within their cultural settings. Thus, the 'circle for pastoral concern' is composed of all whose sins have been forgiven and whose life has been transformed to conform to Christ above all things, but who are living within and are sensitive to their cultural world. The non-believer is drawn to the circle by the example of the believers and deliberate evangelism on the part of the believers. For the Abaluyia, the community is the context in which death is encountered, the meaning of it is understood and healing is appropriated. Armed with this understanding, the believers engage in their world with a view to bring it to submission to Christ. It is important to note that Jesus did not condemn the Jews for mourning the way they did, but joined with them, for instance to comfort Mary and Martha following the death of their brother Lazarus. However, Jesus sought to correct the misconceptions in the Jews' view of death, resurrection and the afterlife. Jesus' example prompts the believer to live a life that is honouring to God within their cultural milieu. The believer is enabled to live in such a way by the Holy Spirit, who is the encourager and enabler. The circle of believing helpers draws from and is guided by the example of Jesus as they engage their culture.

The greatest example drawn from Jesus and promised to those who put their trust in him is resurrection from death. Believers have hope in their resurrection to life with him. Hinged on his resurrection from the dead, those who have put their trust in him can be confident of their own resurrection. The believers also have confidence that those who have died in him are equal heirs of the Kingdom of God.

The term *circle* also implies belonging and engagement with others – a relationship. The bereaved are not deserted, but rather engaged through loving and caring concern. The community of believers (*koinōnia*) is the context of grace, and the members are the dispensers of the gifts of grace they have received from God through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. As God is present with each one of them, so the members are present with each other. The believer is individually and corporately engaged with the pastoral concern for those in need. This loving and serving concern which purposefully exists for mutual encouragement and comfort, engenders healing. The dispensation of the gifts of grace work out through the members by being present in order to encourage, care for,

support, build up, heal, host, serve, listen to, talk with and share in the bereaved's grief. Jesus Christ became man so that human beings can relate with him and learn from him. Jesus is the perfect example for the believers as they pastorally engage or become actively concerned with the ministry of healing.

To achieve the full measure of the joy of membership in the *koinōnia*, a radical disengagement with chants, deeds, performances and rituals that are contrary to the teaching of the true head of the 'circle', the Lord Jesus, is required. His perfect will has been fully revealed in the Bible. Contrary beliefs and practices, such as veneration of the dead or the fear of ancestral spirits or other powers, are defeated by the power of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the revealed word. The carers are also endowed with a variety of talents to encourage, heal, restore, rebuke, correct, teach, enable and serve one another.

The envisioned 'circle' also implies porous boundaries or limits. There is a core circle of carers and another porous concentric circle, which embrace other members of the congregation who may include professional service providers and carers (see Figure 1). Carers step into these circles of pastoral concern as they respond to the scriptural petition to 'mourn with those who mourn' (Rm 12:15). This petition entails to not only identify with the bereaved, but also to be willing to service those in need. The carers themselves are beneficiaries of unmerited grace and desire to love and to serve others following the example of Jesus Christ. As members of the body of Christ, the believers find their relevance and meaning within the body. In other words, to step into the circle of faith, is to be in a sphere of security in Christ. In their grief, believers are not isolated, but comforted by the assurance of belonging to the circle of the pastorally concerned.

Finally, the 'circle for pastoral concern' is both outward-looking and eschatological. Its members desire that whatever happens within it would bring glory to God and form a basis

for maturity and witness. Their commitment to and new nature in Christ exerts influence on the present life. When they are seen to sincerely love and care for one another, the world will know that they belong to Christ. Believers are indebted to gospel witness which works permanent change in the lives of those who trust in Christ (Rm 1:16; Phlm 6). Therefore, a time of bereavement presents a unique opportunity for believers to be witnesses to the transforming power of the gospel as well as the sure hope in Christ as they await his return and look forward to life with him where there shall be no more mourning for death will have finally been defeated.

Conclusion

This article has considered biblical and cultural approaches to bereavement healing with a view of drawing principles for an integrated pastoral care model. A number of biblical resources are highlighted whilst therapeutic cultural beliefs and practices are assessed in the light of biblical norms. The interaction between cultural approaches that do not contravene the Bible and biblical resources for bereavement healing, inform the design of a 'circle for pastoral concern' as an integrated model for new practice. This integrated model of bereavement healing puts the gospel at the centre of the Abaluyia cultural world without compromising the gospel or overlooking their cultural beliefs and practices. It recognises that bereaved Christians mourn within their context and seek healing as people whose lives and culture is transformed by the gospel of Christ. This transforming relationship assures hope, trust and faithfulness to Christ and service to one another. Through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, the bereaved believer can live as they seek healing and maturity in Christ.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to the authoring the article.

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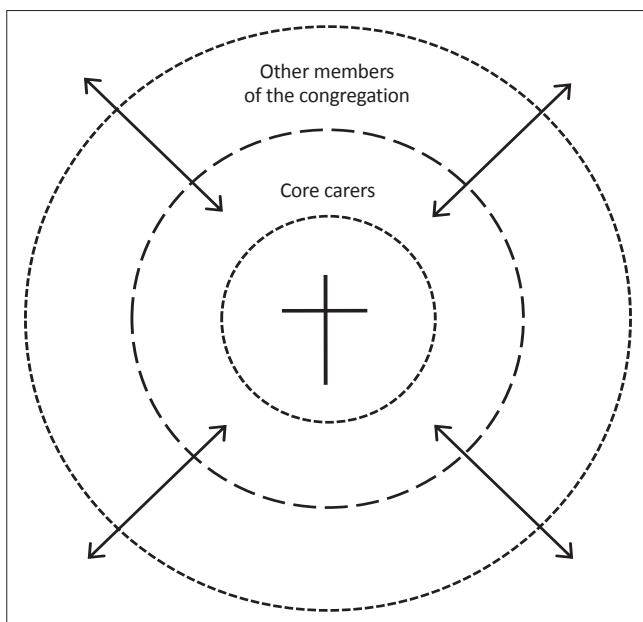


FIGURE 1: Circle for pastoral concern.

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