




# A hybrid approach to spiritual care: The impact of social media in pastoral care spaces

Rabson Hove (PhD)  
Research Institute for Theology and Religion  
University of South Africa  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7179-4190>  
Email : [hover@unisa.ac.za](mailto:hover@unisa.ac.za)

 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.423>

## Abstract

Spiritual care refers to the care provided by religious leaders (chaplains, pastors or ministers), social workers and other counsellors. It reinforces one's understanding of one's beliefs in a moment of a crisis. One's spirituality will always influence one's journey towards healing. Spiritual care calls for an understanding of the holistic pastoral care that seeks to promote the individual's and also a group's welfare by attending to their socio-economic and spiritual matters of concern. Traditionally, spiritual care was only done through contact sessions in pastoral care spaces such as church meetings, hospitals, prisons, and workplaces. This approach refers to the notion that unless one travels to a meeting point, one will not provide or receive spiritual care as desired. With the advent of technology and digital and social media platforms that form our daily lives, spiritual care should be transformed to hybrid approaches, as social media platforms are used in family life, health spaces, business, and workplaces. Social media has become a valuable tool that is unavoidable in pastoral care spaces. The synergy between the physical contact approach and digital platforms increases the capacity of reaching out in providing spiritual care services. This desktop study aims at understanding the role and impact of the social media in spiritual care when used together with the traditional contact approaches. The article utilised literature reviews on spiritual care in general and the use of social media in pastoral care to arrive at its conclusions. It discusses the implications of using social media in pastoral care. This study thus seeks to enhance the hypothesis that social media can neither be ignored nor left out in spiritual care and related issues.

**Keywords:** Hybrid, spirituality, spiritual care, pastoral care, social media, online.

## Introduction

As much as people need physical care through the provision of physical goods and medical care, they also need spiritual care. Spiritual care empowers and strengthens people when they face heartbreaking situations and challenges. Spiritual care is done through pastoral care by the ministers of the Word and members of the church in general. Members of the local congregations provide care to one another as a way of obeying the Word of God that calls them to care for one another. Paul says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). This involves bearing with one another in the context of sin and forgiveness, as well as giving support in crises situations (Romans 12:15). Both the minister (and other religious leaders such as a pastor or chaplain) and members of the faith community are involved in caring for one another when they encounter sin and other life challenges. Spiritual care can also be used as a support system to mentor and nurture members of the community of faith and prepare them to cope with every situation that may threaten their life and faith. Such spiritual care does not only come from the minister but also



other members. The ministers are always not always present in every place and all times, hence the indispensable support from the laity. The laity's work comes as reinforcement of the work of individual members of the body of Christ. The advent of technology and social media has influenced pastoral care nature and practices. It has seen spiritual care being done through phone calls, text messaging as well as WhatsApp calling. Therefore, there is a need for pastoral caregivers to explore ways of expanding and diversifying spiritual care approaches. Pastoral caregivers used to visit every person who needed their services, whether they were far or near. The hybrid approach will close the vacuum that was left before the use of social media platforms in spiritual care. This article explores the need for a hybrid approach to spiritual care, and the significance and challenges of using social media in spiritual care.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study uses secondary sources to explore the importance of a hybrid approach to spiritual care and the impact of social media in the work of spiritual care. The article is essentially a literature study. The secondary sources include relevant academic journal articles, books, dissertations, and memos, among others. The literature on spiritual and pastoral care and social media was consulted, reviewed, and analysed to ascertain the links and usefulness in the study in terms of its main themes.

## **Defining key terms**

### **Spiritual care**

Spirituality has to do with one's feelings of being in a relationship with a higher authority and transcendent or divine power. The concept of spirituality includes a person's worldview and belief system and their relationship with a higher authority, as defined by their faith and guided by the sacred texts and writings (Timmins & Caldeira, 2017). Although people's spiritual beliefs can differ from person to person, they are frequently shaped by their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Bellah, 2002). Above all, spirituality sustains humanity in their life journeys as it connects them to the divine power. It is argued that a patient's ability to tolerate the psychological and physical demands of their illness, their level of pain, tension, and negative emotions, as well as their likelihood of depression and suicide depends on his/ her spiritual wellbeing (Harrad et al., 2019). This is also echoed by Rumhungwe et al. (2023:390) arguing that "addressing patients' spiritual and religious beliefs can improve their treatment compliance". In the context of sickness, spirituality is the key aspect for people's coping mechanism, hence the need for spiritual care.

Wright (2002:127–128) avers that:

Spiritual care affirms the value of every individual and acknowledges the place of cultural traditions and personal relationships. It is based on empathy and non-judgemental love, affirming the worth of each person in the eyes of God. It responds to religious and non-religious spiritual needs by meeting both the requirements of faith and the humanistic desire for another person to 'be there', to listen, and to love.

The individual's value and dignity are at the centre of spiritual care as one is supported towards healing and restoration. In the faith community, spiritual care is the core of pastoral care to empower and strengthen believers to cope with the various challenges of life and faith.



## **Pastoral care**

Pastoral care is broadly understood as the role of the pastor and the church in providing support for general spiritual welfare and sustenance in times of crisis. Louw (2016:348) defines pastoral care as *cura animarum* – the care and cure of the human soul that entails unconditional love and hospitality. It means sharing of spiritual goods for the soul with the other in an effort that enables one to flourish under any given circumstances. This involves accompaniment and attending to the needs of the neighbour. According to Moyo (2015:3), pastoral care refers to “acts of concern, empathy, compassion, kindness and love by the church, in most cases being represented by pastors, to people in unfortunate situations such as sickness, being affected by the spirit world and grieving following the loss of a significant other”. Pastoral care provides care that seeks to comfort and strengthen people in their various crises faced in their life journeys. Although the emphasis may be on care given during difficult times, it is part of church life and the ministry to express God’s love and compassion through its loving and caring ministry towards its members and the community in general.

## **Social media**

Social media refers to the digital space or network sites used by people to communicate and share messages and information. Kent (2010:645) defines social media as “any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback”. For Lewis (2010:2) social media is a “label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share content”. Carr and Hayes (2015:50) also broadly argue that “social media are internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others”. The medium is referred to as “social” because of its nature of providing people with interpersonal interaction without contact meetings. Through these channels people express their ideas, opinions and feelings. It is where people communicate in a more formal or informal way by writing, calling or sending videos, photos, audios recordings (voice notes) and signs (emojis). It has become a space for official communication sending notices, advertising, holding meetings as well as providing individual and group spiritual care. The platforms include Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), WhatsApp and YouTube. Social media platforms allow people to socialise and to remain socially, economically, politically, and spiritually connected. Since social media platforms aim to foster, promote, or preserve social interactions among users, they are intrinsically social (Carr & Hayes, 2015:51). Families, local communities, political parties, institutions, business entities, schools, and churches, whether big or small, are utilising these platforms to engage, share information and unite their members. Spiritual care “provides a sense of connectedness to things or with others” (Weathers et al., 2016), and social media connects people with members of the family, faith community, it provides an opportunity for offering spiritual care and as such social media has become one of the channels commonly used for spiritual care for nurturing, strengthening, and empowering those who are in need of such care. Through digital platforms people share their pain, suffering and hope in the context of spiritual care.

## **Spiritual care through the church**

Spiritual wellbeing is the basis for human religious life and social status despite one’s physical conditions. The point of departure is that all people need spiritual care in one way or another because they are spiritual beings. It is not just a person’s religious belief but centre of their existence (Byrne, 2007). From the standpoint of Christianity, a human being is a spiritual being as outlined in the biblical text indicating that “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living



being” (Genesis 2:7). The breath of life is the source of human spirituality. It gives them permanent connection with God. Therefore, spiritual care becomes crucial for human existence. Spiritual care is usually associated with nursing roles in hospital care, hence the development of the ministry of chaplaincy. This is in line with the multidimensional role of the nurse, which emphasises holistic care and takes patients' physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs into account (Harrad et al, 2019). In this context, it is meant to empower the patients to resist negative thoughts and strengthen them to hold on to their hope for healing and sustenance. Lack of spiritual care leads to lower life quality, higher chances of sadness, and lower perceptions of spiritual serenity (Harrad et al, 2019). Given the impact of both spiritual care and the lack thereof, more specialised training is needed for those providing medical care and the clergy or chaplains to provide holistic spiritual care through the hybrid approaches. However, spiritual care cannot be confined to hospital ministry. In life Christian spirituality has helped people to remain calm and stable during times of crisis. The objective of the paper is to discuss the significance of a hybrid approach to spiritual care and assessing the impact of social media in this regard.

When faced with life-threatening illness, individuals often ask the deep questions of life: Who am I? What is life about? What gives my life meaning? The domain of spiritual care is the real of seeking answers and meaning of life and death when illness arises (Wright, 2002). Seeking answers to such questions can be frightening and bewildering. So having a companion and helper makes the journey of discovery less daunting (Byrne, 2007:121). However, it should be emphasised that spiritual care can be provided beyond the church, clergy, and church members because non-Christians also provide such care (Harding et al, 2008:101). This type of spiritual care includes support from the family, nurses and social workers who give compassionate care when sickness strikes. For that reason, “spiritual care has a capacity to cross the boundaries of faiths and traditions” (Wright, 2002:130). Therefore, those who provide spiritual care beyond family settings need to be sensitive to respect the person’s cultural and religious traditions to effectively address the spiritual needs. In a nutshell, this can facilitate one's own spiritual development and serve as a source of empowerment during the time of crisis.

Broadly speaking, spiritual care attends to existential questions on spiritual, religious and health matters that people come across in their daily life journeys. According to Hummel et al. (2008:45), some of the aspects of spiritual care in the health sector appear to constitute some of the widely agreed upon practices of pastoral care, such as praying with patients, talking to them about God, their religious life and providing various religious and faith materials facilitating their comfort and healing processes. However, it can be argued that, in practice, chaplains assume the role of pastoral caregivers conforming to the following basic definition of pastoral care. Chaplains are labelled either as spiritual care practitioners or pastoral care practitioners (Puchalski et al., 2014). In a church context, spiritual care is provided by those in chaplaincy, parish pastors and members of the congregations who are equipped by the clergy to provide spiritual care (Abraham et al, 2022:178). For that reason, Moyo (2015:3) regards pastoral care as “a ministry by the whole church as the body of Christ to accompany those who have painful experiences of traumatic pathological spiritual, psychological and moral wounds”. The church’s pastoral care ministry goes beyond the community of faith and always make referrals to other stakeholders and specialists such as medical practitioners, psychologists, and social workers. if the need arises. Pastoral care includes multiple dimensional approaches such as “listening, encouraging, visiting, hospitality, advocacy, mentoring, befriending, celebrating, practically helping, prayer, comforting, enabling” (Pastoral Care UK, 2016). The advent of social media has provided another way of providing spiritual care of all forms without being physically present in the pastoral care space. “Spiritual care focuses on those individual stories as they connect with spiritual traditions in co-creating new



stories of hope” (Tamirepi, 2013:343). In moments of suffering, people may be physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually isolated and disconnected from family, friends, and members of their faith community. This further increase questions about the meaning of life, reason for living, love of God and other human beings. Attending to people’s crises such as sickness and loss of loved ones. through social media platforms as well as visiting them promotes hope and assurance of divine and human connections and care in their difficult situations. This can be done by the pastor of religion or other members of the community of faith.

Through contact and social media, the church has a critical role in providing spiritual care among its members and the community at large. Spiritual care should remain contextual, caring responding to the needs and situations of life in a sensitive manner. Ramezami et al. (2014:217) posit that spiritual care is a therapeutic encounter that involves active listening, “non-judgemental and unconditional acceptance” thereby promoting spiritual wellbeing and awareness of the client. Besides, it also gives a one a sense of understanding the presence of the transcendent, of connectedness with the deity and others, and makes life meaningful (Weathers et al., 2016). It brings growth through nurturing and guidance as one is physically or virtually accompanied along the way to cope with the challenges at hand. It brings comfort, confidence, and transformation to move on under the difficult circumstances faced and when the circumstances in life change. The church pastoral or spiritual care seeks the growth, empowerment, and sustenance of members in their spiritual journeys through prayer, preaching, teaching, counselling, and its ministry of presence. It prepares them for a Christian lifestyle and facing every challenge along their journey.

### **Forms of spiritual care**

This section discusses some forms of spiritual care, including among others, prayer, counselling, sharing the message of hope and ministry of presence. Mandizadza and Chidarikire (2016:154) highlight that spiritual care through prayer and scriptural counselling helps the sick and particularly cancer patients in coping with their unchangeable situation.

### **Prayer**

One of the most important aspects of spiritual care is prayer. It is one of the rituals that empowers Christians in their different circumstances, especially in times of suffering. Haugk, (1984:106) clearly states that prayer is the right and responsibility for every Christian, the clergy, and the laity alike at every moment of need. Prayer in spiritual care is a fulfilment of the Christian scriptures. Paul calls Christians to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17); and James urges Christians to pray for one another (James 5:16). In spiritual care, there are different forms of prayer including, among others are private and corporate composed prayers which are usually liturgically, and lectionary connected as well as individual personal and public prayers said in response to a situation. These can be prayed by the individual in a crisis or by the spiritual caregivers accompanying them. However, prayer may be misused or abused in the context of a crisis and especially on virtual platforms when the spiritual caregiver offers to pray with the clients. Moyo and Konjelwayo (2018) argue that prayer should not be used to avoid difficult questions from the patient or client, nor should prayer be used to manipulate the other due to their surrounding circumstances (Haugk, 1984). Despite the difficulties, the dignity and right of the other needs to be observed by spiritual caregivers as part of unconditional acceptance and allowing the patient or client to share their pain and disappointment. It needs to be agreed upon in terms and times by seeking the consent of the client. It may sometimes be rejected or accepted depending on the feeling and situation of the client. Only through careful and sensitive listening one may call for prayer at the appropriate time when accompanying the client (Haugk, 1984). During the conversation or by asking the client, one





may pray for the needs of the other. Prayer must not be selfishly imposed and be manipulative in meeting the desire of the pastor or the pastoral caregiver. The length of the prayer matters whether it is a virtual or contact meeting. Prayers that go beyond ten minutes may be tiresome to the participants as they may be full of repetitions or perhaps bringing in too many issues more than focusing on the actual issue or problem at hand. Prayers should be precise and not wordy in trying to impress the client instead of speaking to the needs of the client.

Virtual prayers have become common sites in spiritual care especially by church ministers. Ministers “practise the presence of God through prayers, rites, rituals, listening, share scriptures and acts of service” (Tagwirei, 2022:5). Church leaders and pastoral caregivers share prayers for spiritual growth with their congregations through social media. Similarly, spiritual caregivers share prayer requests and prayers with those who need spiritual support in times of crisis. The prayers are shared using mobile phones and computers via platforms such as WhatsApp, MS Teams, Zoom, utilising audio and text messages depending on the client’s situation and literacy. It would be difficult to share a text prayer with someone who is very sick or unable to read due to pain and confusion. The obvious advantage of virtual prayers is that they connect people despite the barrier of distance and can be instant instead of waiting for an in-person visit. Social media allows crossing of boundaries and borders as it reaches out every corner which the minister may take time to go. It saves time and money for the congregation, caregivers, and the clients. However, the combination of virtual and contact prayers cannot be minimised. They complement each other and facilitate easy of spiritual care easy to carry out.

### **Counselling**

In the context of spiritual care, counselling is critical since it allows the spiritual caregiver to listen to the needs and experiences of the client. According to Tan et al. (2020:115), “spiritual care interventions include the categories of spiritual assessment; spiritual counselling, guidance or education”. Counselling is a transformative learning process that takes place through a conversation between a counsellor and a counselee helping him/ her to cope with the crisis at hand (Msomi, 2008). Moyo (2015:3) argues that “counselling equips people with coping mechanisms”. Thus, it empowers people to face the realities of life and carry their burdens. According to Mujinga (2021), mainline denominations are used so much in face-to-face counselling that they struggle to engage in virtual counselling. This is coupled with a lack of technological skills in using social media devices in delivering spiritual care services. Hove (2022) posits that during the time of COVID-19, ministers virtually attended to their members for counselling in times of sickness and bereavement. The counselling conversations were held via Zoom, voice conversations, voice notes and WhatsApp texts. Besides the traditional one-on-one approaches to counselling, social media plays complementary or supplementary role in spiritual care as it is used for follow-ups after the contact sessions (Afolaranmi, 2022:6). However, this can also be done the other way around. After having a virtual counselling conversation, people can also arrange in-person meetings and continue to journey with one another to promote healing. The advantage of virtual counselling is that people are immediately attended to despite the distance and physical boundaries.

### **Sharing a message of hope**

Sharing a message of hope has to do with preaching or teaching in the context of nurturing and encouraging one another in the challenges of life. “Pastoral care engages with the questions concerning the fear of death or the uncertainty of what lies beyond death and finds answers to questions about a view of God” (Byrne, 2007:121). To engage with such difficult questions, pastoral or spiritual caregivers depend on Christian scripture in their approach to care giving. Since God is the source of life and power, his word provides comfort and healing



in times of difficulty and crisis (Mandizadza & Chidarikire, 2016). Spiritual caregivers carefully choose Words from the Christian scripture and carefully apply to the crisis at hand helping the client to connect with God through his Word of encouragement, assurance, and hope. This enriches the client's spirituality that contributes to their state of wellbeing. "For many people, it is their spirituality that helps them cope with illness, trauma, loss and death" (Tamirepi, 2013:332). Spiritual care connects humanity to God and one another in a process of healing and restoration. It is through these relationships that healing and wholeness are facilitated.

In the hybrid approach, virtual preaching is becoming popular. Despite people needing contact teaching and preaching, the word of God reaches out to many in the comfort of their home as the church cares for its members. Gralczyk (2020:240) posits that social "media has become a great opportunity and a way of proclaiming the Gospel...". Virtual preaching through WhatsApp messages, videos and voice notes reach out to the members of the congregation for nurturing and those who need spiritual care in times of difficulties. The multiple dimensional approaches provided by social media in preaching and teaching enhances the impact of spiritual care as the clients and members of the faith community receive and pass on the word and message of hope in the comfort of their homes. Both contact and virtual preaching and prayers comfort and heal both members of the church and non-members alike, especially during bereavement (Baloyi, 2024:5). The advantage of social media over contact preaching is that the same message can be passed on or forwarded to others who would need similar care, and where the minister would not have the opportunity to reach out to others in person. In addition to contact forms of sharing the message of hope, social media has become a versatile tool to instantly and massively reach out to people. This can be done simultaneously as the minister shares the word with those physically present in a designated space, but he also reaches out to those who for one reason or another could not be present with others at that particular time.

### **Ministry of presence**

The ministry of presence demands the physical presence of a minister or spiritual caregiver. It is impactful as the members of faith or clients experience the sense of accompaniment as they are in the same space and environment with the caregiver. The physical presence of the minister gives hope and the realisation of God's presence and his divine providence (Tagwirei, 2022). Tagwirei (2022:2) further asserts that "presence is, therefore, a visible sign of invisible grace through which spiritual presence inspires and necessitates physical presence with others before God". Through the ministry of presence, ministers provide physical, social support and spiritual empowerment that facilitate healing among the sick and the bereaved.

Social media is another form of ministry of presence. It can be immediate and spread out in churches, homes, hospitals, and workplaces. Social media promotes some kind of ubiquitous presence of the minister as he/she reaches out far and wide. It makes it possible for the church to connect with people who are not routinely attending services and those who are unable to do so because of age, illness, social obstacles, or employment (Hove, 2022). He further argues that pastors and pastoral caregivers can provide pastoral care and counselling to sick and bereaved individuals as well as church members in their homes via WhatsApp text messages, voice calls and audio voice recordings (Hove, 2022). Social media brings the ministers and clients an experience of close connection and presence despite the distances. Furthermore, Zoom and WhatsApp video calls make the ministry of presence through social media more possible as the client can hear the voice and sometimes see the video of the person that he/she knows.



## **Challenges of using social media in spiritual care**

Social media is as an additional tool that enhances spiritual care which was commonly done through contact ways. However, the use of social media in spiritual care comes with many challenges that need to be navigated. The challenges include the cost or economic implications, technological literacy, network issues, social resistance, and lack of effective communication among others.

### **Economic implications**

While social media has proved to be a useful way of spiritual care, it comes with economic challenges and limitations. Some pastoral caregivers desire to provide spiritual care to their clients and members of their congregations but find it difficult due to lack of access to social media devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. These are not easy to access unless one is privileged to be provided with such devices from the institution or if one has the financial resources to buy such devices. Sometimes the cost of these devices coupled with the cost of data is prohibitive. Thus, Madigele and Amanze (2022:181) emphasise that “digital mediated platforms further exclude those who cannot access pastoral services because they cannot afford technological and internet devices”. Poverty is real, particularly in Africa where unemployment is a constant challenge. Ponde-Mutsvedu and Chirongoma (2022) have noted that many African populations lack access to the message on live streaming on Facebook pages, videos, and WhatsApp audios due to poverty and affordability. In most cases, those who live in remote rural places do not have access to these devices, data, and network (Hove, 2022). Manyonganise (2022:239) further posits that the most affected people are women since most of them cannot be found on virtual platforms as they do not have access to devices such as laptops and smart phones. This causes the ministers and the other spiritual caregivers to continue with the traditional way of visiting members and clients and providing contact services only. Institutions such as churches needing to provide spiritual care should consider mobilising financial resources to acquire social media devices and data for the ministers and other spiritual caregivers. This will promote the use of hybrid approaches to spiritual care.

### **Literacy challenges**

Besides the widespread use of social media in education, health and religious sectors, some people are still technologically illiterate, which causes them to shy away from buying and using these devices to reach out those who need spiritual care. Mujinga (2021:273) found that most mainline ministers in Zimbabwe lacked the technical skills to conduct live stream sermons or virtual meetings. In some instances, those people who need spiritual care may not be reachable due to illiteracy in terms of using devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. But technological illiteracy is also exacerbated by limited and often lack of access to these devices due to the economic conditions of both the institutions that are meant to provide spiritual care and that of the client. Social media compliments contact meetings helping in reaching out those who may not be reached for some reasons. Some people may be tied up with work or family matters or health issues and therefore fail attend contact meetings. Yet others may not be reachable because of distances and financial situations that may not allow them to go out and meet with others. Abraham et al. (2022:180) assert that “the church is not exclusive and only a ‘master at home’ but should be recognized in society and has a positive impact on the surrounding community as the salt and light of the world”. Social media reaches beyond the church’s four walls to impact a wider community allowing the church to fulfil its mandate as the salt of the earth in both evangelising and meeting the spiritual needs of the society at large “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:13). For that reason, the church and spiritual caregivers should





invest in acquiring the necessary technological skills so that they effectively carry out their mandate.

### **Network issues**

In Africa, and South Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, network issues are a challenge. One may afford to have a computer or a smartphone, but one will often give up due to a lack of network availability. Network challenges are fuelled by either remoteness of the area or continuous electricity power cuts. Frequent loadshedding and power cuts result in lack of power in the devices and lack of connectivity (Tagwirei, 2022). Without power and cellular network availability, it is difficult to use social media. This forces spiritual caregivers to depend on in-person/contact visitations in providing spiritual care. It makes it difficult for the minister or spiritual caregiver to carry out the mandate of comforting and showing compassion, and journeying with those in difficult situations. Social media makes it easier for the minister to reach out to others through the platforms while visiting others. However, when the network does not permit it, it becomes difficult and inconvenient. There is a need for the church and government to collaborate and encourage the network providers to provide the necessary infrastructure in the rural areas where there are serious network challenges posed.

### **Social resistance**

For the younger generation, social media has become a more common interactive form of communication that brings them together better than in the real world of contact meetings (Gralczyk, 2020). It has become an almost common meeting point across virtual networks. The younger generation rely on more than one platform for their connections and communication. However, the older generations' culture and religion have become a hindrance as it forms part of interruption and resistance. Depending on the context, some adults do not take social media communication channels seriously. It is often treated like young generations entertainment and playing channels (Edwards & Larson, 2020). Although some ministers and spiritual caregivers found social media more useful and convenient for spiritual caregiving, others have their reservations. "Their rejection of a virtual church has nothing to do with lack of resources, but it is theologically oriented" (Humbe, 2022:282). It is associated with all sorts of evil activities and satanism. This is especially the case among the African Independent Churches (AICs) who resist in embracing social media for spiritual care holding that "the internet and cyber gadgets were filthily filled with sin, too secular, source of Satanism, only for young people and distract people away from the church" (Humbe, 2022:271). This is further supported by Angel (2018) when he suggests that the internet and social media spread false information, has misled the church, are full of uncleanness and lasciviousness, and have destroyed marriage and families. It is blamed for misleading the young people who are known as "the 'digital natives', logged on almost 24 hours a day on social media, where they are often looking for new, attractive forms of communication about faith" (Gralczyk, 2020:238). It is however irrefutable that some social media platforms, particularly Facebook platforms can be hijacked by devious individuals who end up hacking pages posting nude pictures, but it does not warrant all the negative criticism and complacency to use it. The negative attitude and resistance to social media impede its use in spiritual care by other ministers and institutions that provide spiritual care services.

### **Lack of effective communication**

Sometimes social media results in lack of effective communication due to various forms of interruptions such as lack of body language and compromised confidentiality. Social media does not provide the full benefits like contact conversations in prayer, preaching, counselling, and ministry of presence. From both the client and the spiritual caregiver, there is limited or



lack of access to body language, which is important especially in preaching and counselling where communication should be effective (Tagwirei, 2022). This may result in misunderstanding and lack of socio-spiritual connection between the minister and the client. The other challenge is the minister's ability to keep confidential messages and information during and after counselling conversations. It depends on whether the discussion takes place in a safe space without anyone picking up the conversation or if it is a message, that it is not sent to the wrong person or platform mistakenly or deliberately. It may end up in the wrong hands and destination betraying the confidence of the church and its members (Afolaranmi, 2022). This compromises confidentiality which is key in spiritual care ministry. Despite the many challenges discussed, social media is part of life and useful in spiritual care that can be easily combined with actual physical contact forms of care.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although social media provides a certain feeling of being in a community, it should not replace direct contact with ministers, spiritual caregivers, prayer in a community and personal presence among others, as ways of accompanying one another for support, comfort, and healing. I concur with Graczyk that the use of social media in pastoral care may cause disintegration and disunity in the church (Graczyk, 2020). Some may end up losing out as they are not on the platform as others would prefer meeting the minister and spiritual caregiver on the platform instead of coming to church for fellowship. Although it may cause division due to cost and network issues, it is also well known for uniting people as it has a wide coverage enabling spiritual care to spread within and outside the church; far and wide. Contact meetings remain important in that they bring physical and social connections among believers and their spiritual caregivers. It binds the community together with a spirit of love and fellowship. Contact fellowship and spiritual care can help the pastor or chaplain to diagnose the challenges among believers even if they are not shared challenges. This is done through personal interaction or withdrawal behaviour. This is by assessing the way people interact when they meet. A hybrid approach will likely have a greater far-reaching impact in spiritual care giving.

## References

- Afolaranmi, A.O. (2022). *Towards Understanding the Nexus between Pastoral Care, social media, and Sustainable Development in the Post-COVID-19 Era*. Researchsquare.com. Accessed on 25 February 2024.
- Abraham, R.A., Abraham, J.E., Hermanto, Y.P. & Santoso, C. (2022). The pastoral care of congregations during the Covid-19 pandemic. In: *International Conference on Theology, Humanities, and Christian Education (ICONTHCE 2021)*, Atlantis Press, 177–181.
- Angel, C. (2018). The Devil has a Facebook account: (social media)', *The Devil*. Sain Publications: Pulaski, 339–358.
- Baloyi, M.E. (2024). A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Religious Belief (Christianity) within Post-Colonial African Burial Rites: A South African Perspective. *Religions*, 15(2), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel150202481-12>.
- Bellah, R. (2002). Civil religion in America. S. Mumm (ed.), *Religion Today: A Reader*. Routledge, Oxford, 101–103.



- Byrne, M. (2007). Spirituality in palliative care: what language do we need? Learning from pastoral care', *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*, 13(3), 118–124.
- Carr, C.T. & Hayes, R.A. (2015). Social media: Defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23(1),46–65.
- Edwards, R.C. & Larson, B.M. (2020). When screens replace backyards: strategies to connect digital-media-oriented young people to nature. *Environmental Education Research*, 26(7), 950–968.
- Gralczyk, A. (2020). Social media as an effective pastoral tool', in *Forum Teologiczne* 21. Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie, 237–248,
- Harding, S.R., Flannelly, K.J., Galek, K. & Tannenbaum, H.P. (2008). Spiritual care, pastoral care, and chaplains: Trends in the health care literature. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 14(2), 99–117.
- Haugk, K.C. (1984). *Christian caregiving- a way of life*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Humbe, B.P. (2022). Living with COVID-19 in Zimbabwe: A religious and scientific healing response. In: Sibanda, F. Muyambo, T & Chitando, E. (eds.). *Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Africa*. London: Routledge, 72–88.
- Hummel, L., Galek, K., Murphy, K.M., Tannenbaum, H.P. & Flannelly, L.T. (2009). 'Defining spiritual care: An exploratory study. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 15(1), 40–51.
- Hove, R. (2022). The pastoral presence in absence: Challenges and opportunities of pastoral care in the context of the global Corona virus pandemic. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 103(1), 1-11
- Lartey, E.Y. (2003). *In living color: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counselling*. Jessica Kingsley: London.
- Louw, D.J. (2016). Missio Dei” as embodiment of “Passio Dei”. The role of God-images in the mission-outreach and pastoral caregiving of the church – a hermeneutical approach. *Missionalia*, 44(3), 336–354.
- Mabvurira, V. & Nyanguru, A. (2013). Spiritually sensitive social work: A missing link in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work*, 3(1), 65–81.
- Mandizadza, E.J. & Chidarikire, S. (2016). A phenomenological study into the role of spirituality & religiousness in the mental health of people with Cancer in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 18(2), 145–161.
- Manyonganise, M. (2022). When a pandemic wears the face of a woman. Intersections of religion and gender during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. In: Sibanda, F. Muyambo, T & Chitando, E. (eds.). *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*. London: Routledge, 232–243.
- Moyo, H. (2015). Pastoral care in the healing of moral injury: A case of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 71(2), 1-11.
- Moyo, H. & Konjelwayo, M. (2018). *Clinical Pastoral Education*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Practical Theology.



Msoni, V.V. (2008). *Ubuntu contextual African pastoral care and counselling*. CB Powell Bible Centre, UNISA: Pretoria.

Mujinga, M. (2021). Technologization of religion: The unstoppable revolution in the Zimbabwean mainline churches. In: Okyere-Manu, B.D. (ed.), *African Values, Ethics, and Technology: Questions, Issues, and Approaches*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 263–280.

Pastoral Care UK., (2016). 'Guidelines for Good Practice in Pastoral Care', [https://www.pastoralcareuk.org/public/docs/pastoralcare/PCUK\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Good\\_Practice\\_in\\_PC\\_Rev\\_20.09.pdf](https://www.pastoralcareuk.org/public/docs/pastoralcare/PCUK_Guidelines_for_Good_Practice_in_PC_Rev_20.09.pdf). Accessed on 15 February 2024.

Ponde-Mutsvedu, L. & Chirongoma, S. (2022). Tele-evangelism, tele-health and cyberbullying in the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. In: Sibanda, F. Muyambo, T & Chitando, E. (eds.). *Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Africa*. London: Routledge, 103–114.

Puchalski, C., Vitillo, R., Hull, S. & Reller, N. (2014). Improving the spiritual dimension of whole person care: Reaching national and international consensus. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 17(6), 1–15.

Rumhungwe, V.A., Dzingirai, B. & Gavaza, P. (2023). Pharmacy students' attitudes and beliefs about spirituality and spiritual care in professional education in Zimbabwe. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 15, 382-392.

Tagwirei, K. (2022). The ministry of presence in absence: Pastoring online in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 78(4), 1-13.

Tamirepi, F. (2013). *HIV and AIDS within the primary health care delivery system in Zimbabwe: a quest for a spiritual and pastoral approach to healing*. (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Timmins, F. & Caldeira, S. (2017). Understanding spirituality and spiritual care in nursing. *Nursing Standard*, 31(22), 50-57.

Weathers, E., McCarthy, G. & Coffey, A. (2016). Concept analysis of spirituality: an evolutionary approach. *Nursing Forum*, 51(2), 79–96.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.