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A congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires in the African context

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Author:
Alfred R. Brunsdon[1] ●

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Mahikeng, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Alfred Brunsdon,
alfred.brunsdon@nwu.ac.za

The focus of this article is on a congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires in the African context. Deviating from traditional individualistic notions of pastoral care, it argues that congregations can contribute significantly to the spiritual healing of victims of this growing phenomenon characteristic of informal settlements. The article offers a phenomenological perspective on shack dwelling in the (South) African context. The structural and spatial vulnerability of shacks is investigated in order to arrive at the notion of the multi-dimensional vulnerability of shack dwellers as victims of shack fires. The occurrence of shack fires is discussed whereafter a congregation-based pastoral care is explicated. The notion of a congregation-based pastoral care is imagined in practical terms as an approach that revolves around sensitising congregation members to the unique and total loss incurred through shack fires, leading the congregation members to practise a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing towards the victims of shack fires. This research contributes to the discourse on the contextualisation of Practical Theology and pastoral care in the African context.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: By engaging contemporary psychological, sociological and anthropological–phenomenological insights from a practical theological stance, the research challenges traditional individualistic views of pastoral care. The resultant congregation-based pastoral care has implications for pastoral theological theory formation, congregational studies and missiology.

Keywords: shack fires; informal settlements; vulnerability; African context; congregation-based pastoral care.

Introduction

Although not unfamiliar in other parts of the world, the African continent is known for its high density of informal settlements that exposes inhabitants to many risk factors, usually not associated with conventional urban areas. The focus of this article is on one of these risks, namely, shack fires, which has become one of the most horrific and devastating realities associated with informal settlements. Considered a tragedy compounded by factors such as poverty and a lack of resources, surviving victims face the dire consequences of total loss that can include loved ones, shelter and basic assets such as all personal belongings. The further interest of this research pertains to the presence of faith communities or congregations, visible in many forms in informal settlements and the possibilities of a congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires. Deviating from traditional individualistic notions of pastoral care, it is argued that congregations can contribute significantly to the spiritual healing of those touched by this growing and worrying phenomenon.

Research paradigm and method

Shack fires present a well-researched theme as it begs the attention of urban planners, health and safety bodies and psychologists alike to manage both prevention and cure (Greeff & Lawrence 2012; Walls et al. 2019). As this research is interested in pastoral care that faith communities can provide to victims, it investigates the theme from a practical theological paradigm. By nature, practical theology is concerned with critical reflection about the practices of faith communities in light of Christian texts in order to generate better theory for better praxis (Brunsdon 2017:118; Heyns & Pieterse 1990:6; Swinton & Mowat 2016:25). Methodologically, the research is executed by means of a literature study.

In order to put the issue of shack fires in context, this article departs by offering a phenomenological perspective on shack dwelling in the South African context. The structural

and spatial vulnerability of shacks is then investigated in order to arrive at the notion of the multidimensional vulnerability of shack dwellers as victims of shack fires. The occurrence of shack fires is then discussed whereafter a congregation-based pastoral care is explicated. The notion of a congregation-based pastoral care is then imagined in practical terms as an approach that revolves around sensitising congregation members to the unique and total loss incurred through shack fires, encouraging congregation members to practice a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing towards the victims of shack fires.

A phenomenological perspective on shack dwelling

'Shacks' can arguably be labelled as a unique African term that refers to dwellings constructed of unconventional building materials, such as corrugated iron, wood, cardboard and other materials. Large concentrations of shacks constitute what is also known as squatter camps, the equivalent of what may elsewhere be known as shanty towns, ghettos, slums or merely informal settlements (Albertyn 2006:vii).

In the African and more specifically in the South African context, from where this research emanates, informal settlements have become the norm on the outskirts of almost every town and city alike, representing rural and urban informal settlements. In the case of many small rural towns, it seems that informal settlements have outgrown the original town in size and number of inhabitants. The local development of this phenomenon has a long history.

Historically, Harrison (1992:15) associates the emergence of informal settlements in South Africa with the emancipation of slaves during the 17th century that saw large numbers of ex-slaves moving to the fringes of towns, creating refuge for themselves in makeshift dwellings. After the outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1902 and the influenza epidemic in 1918, these concentrations of mainly black – and a minority of other ethnic groups – were deemed as health hazards by government that resettled inhabitants in areas such as Langa (Cape Town), Klipspruit (Johannesburg) and New Brighton (Port Elizabeth, now Mandela Bay) (Harrison 1992:15). The status quo of resettled persons would be sustained for many years through measures such as the *Native Urban Act*, which forced mainly mixed race people to the outskirts of designated areas where they had to provide their own shelter.

The major proliferation of informal settlements is, however, attributed to urbanisation that came in the wake of the Second World War and which was characterised by industrialisation as well as a decline of rural economies. The war also caused the building industry to slow down substantially, making informal housing the only option for the migrating masses who sought a better life around cities across the country (Harrison 1992:15). By 1948, the proliferation of informal settlements grew out of control in most major cities and saw the City Council of Johannesburg adopt a policy of 'controlled squatting', which made provision for 'legal squatting' in designated areas (Harrison 1992:15).

Political winds of change in the early 1950s brought the introduction of the draconic *Group Areas Act* (1950) and the *Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act* (1951) (Harrison 1992:15). These acts led to orchestrated attempts by government to destroy informal settlements and resettle shack dwellers in what became known as 'townships' or 'locations' in an attempt to gain social control. This resulted in the greatest government initiative to provide housing for black South Africans up to that point in history. Present-day Soweto (Gauteng), Umlazi (KwaZulu-Natal) and Gugulethu (Western Cape) remain living testimonies of these attempts.

As the provision of housing for the black populace was only aimed at the so-called homelands – and the urbanisation of black people continued outside of state-designated areas – informal settlements made a powerful resurgence across the country. This time to stay, as no government intervention could since curb the tide of informal settlements forming around areas that provided some form of economic sustenance.

Mainly because informal settlements grew unabated, government was forced to think differently about this form of urbanisation. The period from late 1970s to early 1990s subsequently became a period of radical changes in government policies, which were mainly aimed at bringing order to the reality of black urbanisation. The 1986 White Paper even stated that urbanisation was 'economically beneficial and socially desirable' (Harrison 1992:18), as long as it was orderly and directed by authorities. In light of this, 'squatting' was used to designate acts of unlawful informal settlement and deemed undesirable. This term mainly applied to cases where people settled in unzoned areas where no form of public service was available. In practice, however, the meaning between 'squatting' and 'informal settlement' became blurred as the term became freely used to designate the act of living in an informal settlement in a dwelling made up of unconventional materials.

With the dawn of democracy in 1994, a new ray of hope shone for the vast numbers of South Africans who found themselves living in inadequate housing. In 1995, South Africa was home to 41.5 million people represented in 8.8 million households (Orkin 1996:27). Of these households, 14% represented traditional dwellings and 7% represented shacks (Orkin 1996:27). Henceforth, the new democratic government set the eradication of this situation as one of its primary ideals through the introduction of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This essentially entailed the erection of low-cost brick housing, which would be provided freely to low-income households. It was estimated by 2016 that the government has provided some 2.8 million RDP houses in line with this programme. Viewed

in isolation, this can be regarded as a major achievement. However, seen against the background of a growing housing demand that exceeds supply, the programme failed to successfully address the problem. According to Turok and Borel-Saladin (2016:388), several other factors hampered the programme from the outset, such as poor build quality, corruption and lack of planning regarding the financial sustainability of the project. This led to a reported backlog of more than 2 million units in 2016 and country-wide unrest related to the government's failure to deliver on its promises.

Linked to a steady growth in population and an ever-growing urbanisation, informal settlements still grow in an attempt to satisfy the need of housing of people seeking a better future in urban areas. Such is the current need that a hybrid form of shack dwelling emerged in the form of backyard shacks that are spawning in townships (Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016:3). These constructions appear the same as conventional shacks, but are located in the backyards of established township households as opposed to free-standing shacks in squatter settlements. Some of the obvious advantages include rental income for the landlord, a serviced plot and better security for the occupants in case of a fenced plot.

Irrespective of hybrid forms of shack dwelling, the phenomenon of people living in makeshift housing seems to be far from over. At the time of this research, it was estimated that approximately 2.2 million South African households found themselves in informal structures and that this number is steadily rising (Pretorius 2019; Stats SA 2017).

Seen in the larger context of the African continent, Huchermeyer and Karam (2006) regard informal settlements as a 'perpetual challenge'. According to Myers (2011:71), this enduring challenge intrinsically relates to the bigger issue of the so-called informality, whilst Pieterse and Parnell (2014) ascribe the growth of informal settlements to Africa's 'urban revolution'. Both these constructs are helpful to accentuate the reality and persisting nature of informal settlements. In this regard, 'informality' is an economically inspired term that denotes the African trend towards informal economies and settlements (Myers 2011:71). Not being able to access formal, regulated economic activities that require formal schooling or advanced skills, more and more Africans turn to unregulated economic activities that flourish outside of the regulated, legal and technologically advanced economic sector (Myers 2011:72). This informal workforce typically house themselves in informal settlements around urban areas, which translates to a massive urban migration across Africa. This 'dramatic demographic transition' has already caused more than 414 million Africans to become urbanites and will give rise to the birth of many new cities and towns in the next decade when it is expected that more than 50% of Africa will be urbanised (Pieterse & Parnell 2014:1).

The phenomenon of shack dwelling in Southern Africa is, therefore, not out of tune with the rest of the African continent that is witnessing an increasing number of its inhabitants (of all ethnic groups) housed in the informal sector.

The structural and spatial vulnerability of shacks

As one of the key drivers of informality relates to the exclusion from the formal economy, it is understandable that the basic needs of people in this group pertain to basic goods, such as food and clothing, at the cost of providing adequate and safe shelter for themselves.

Shack dwellers hence usually opt for building materials that are either salvaged at no cost or acquired at a nominal price. These include corrugated iron, wood, cardboard, plastic and glass (Gibson, Engelbrecht & Rush 2019:108). Such materials are then put together with dubious construction methods to form shelters. These constructions are by their very nature structurally weak, leaving them highly vulnerable to natural forces and challenges of an anthropogenic nature, such as burglary and fire. Specifically appraising the fire safety of shacks, Walls et al. (2019) pointed out that shacks are erected without any thought to either active or passive fire protection. Whilst the first would require that informal dwellings are mindfully erected in a region where there are firefighting services present, the second points to making use of fire-retardant materials and building plans that would inherently contain the spreading of a house fire (Walls et al. 2019:346). Several other factors compromise the fire-retardant characteristics of shacks, such as combustible materials used to insulate the inside walls and a combination of illegal and unsafe electrical connections paired with the use of flammable cooking fuels such as paraffin and methylated spirits. Consequently, Gibson et al. (2019) referred to a shack as a 'discrete fuel package' that represents a real fire hazard.

Informality unfortunately also relates to spatial exclusion, meaning that informal settlements tend to develop outside of formal planned, regulated and serviced urban areas or towns. The spatial issues that result from this exacerbate the vulnerability associated with these structures and communities. These include access to running water and sanitation, refuse removal, medical services, education providers, transport, telecommunication and electricity (Statistics South Africa 2017). From a spatial framework, informal housing is vulnerable because of its isolation and detachment from basic services. Issues such as density and close proximity of units to each other also make these dwellings difficult to reach in case of emergency. These include medical emergencies, crime and fire-related incidents, when emergency services need to have easy access to individual dwellings (Gibson et al. 2019:2).

The multidimensional vulnerability of shack dwellers

The vulnerable nature of shacks is arguably only overshadowed by the multidimensional vulnerability of the people who dwell in them. The idea of multidimensional vulnerability is used here to recognise that shack dwellers can be deemed vulnerable on many levels. Vulnerability is

inherently a poignant concept, expressing the condition of being exposed to harm (eds. Soanes & Hawker 2008:1166). Applied to humans, vulnerability can be experienced in a number of ways, such as emotional, physical, economic and social aspects. One can imagine that experiencing vulnerability in one area of life may cause vulnerability in other spheres of life. It can thus be argued that economic vulnerability also makes one socially, emotionally and physically vulnerable. The growing universal condition of human vulnerability fairly recently has given rise to the so-called vulnerability theory. Arguably the pioneer in this regard is Martha Fineman who has put human vulnerability in the framework of justice and equality, to present legal theory to argue for greater state intervention in the lives of vulnerable people (cf. Fineman 2008, 2010). Currently, Fineman's vulnerability theory is widely applied in research pertaining to equality issues, such as child welfare (Atkins 2015).

In unpacking the ideas of vulnerability theory, Rich (2018) identified several principles that are important for the focus of this article. Firstly, vulnerability theory reminds us that humans are in essence vulnerable as opposed to being autonomous (Rich 2018:9). This challenges the notion that people are the real captains of their lives, demonstrating how their well-being is subjected to many factors beyond their control. Secondly, vulnerability theory recognises the important role that state institutions play in the lives of people in general. From birth through education, the state, through a network of institutions such as hospitals, schools and university, assists people in being less vulnerable and leading resilient lives (Rich 2018:15), thereby helping them to flourish. Thirdly, vulnerability theory pleads for a more responsive state and assists people to overcome vulnerability towards resilience through its institutions (Rich 2018:18). These principles can be helpful in assessing and understanding the multidimensional vulnerability of persons that dwell in shacks.

Although it is recognised here that the vulnerability of shack dwellers is multidimensional, the brevity of this article only allows for a few issues to be raised in order to unpack this multidimensional vulnerability further. In choosing these, the terms of reference of the current African National Congress government's housing policy in conjunction with statistical data of Stats SA's housing survey (2017) were used to identify two of the most pressing dimensions of vulnerability, namely, poverty and social exclusion.

Ten years after the dawn of the new democracy and despite the provision of subsidised housing, the South African government recognised in 2004 that informal settlements are rapidly increasing and hence called for greater national attention to housing (Huchermeyer 2006:41). The terms of reference ensuing from the resultant Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme also identified the areas that needed the programme's most urgent attention. Two of the most prominent issues that were identified were poverty eradication and promoting inclusion. In doing so, the government acknowledged that shack dwellers are essentially poor and excluded from mainstream society and the opportunities and benefits it provides (Huchermeyer 2006:43).

As a result of the many different measures and meanings of the term 'poverty' as well as the fact that the definition of poverty is highly context related (Fransman & Yu 2019:50; Mubangizi 2018:28), the meaning of poverty here aligns with the definition of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN CESCR 2001):

> [4] human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. (n.p.)

This definition also seems to be a realistic description of the economic status of the majority of people living in informal settlements.

In the African context, this generalisation seems safer in light of Turok's (2014:77) observation that there is 'no necessary or inherent relationship between urbanisation and economic development in Africa'. Many South Africans who move closer to cities and settle in informal dwellings, as an intermediate measure to a more stable economic future, eventually find themselves in what Melin (2014:286) denotes as a 'poverty trap'. Even though Turok (2015:2) suggests that informal settlements can indeed for some be 'ladders out of poverty', there seems to be persistent notions of the opposite, namely, that shack dwellers remain trapped in severe poverty. Even the eventual provision of state subsidised housing has shown over time that although it provides some form of security in terms of property ownership, it is no guarantee of poverty alleviation. It only seems to transfer poverty from the squatter camps to the townships. A case study of Hlalani Township in the Eastern Cape province, for example, confirmed that persisting low monthly incomes cause previous shack dwellers to remain trapped in rising debt and a downward spiral of growing poverty (Nkambule & Chirau 2018).

This poverty culture mainly relates to failure in securing adequate and sustainable income and the 'spatial mismatch' (SERI 2018:15) that places the poor in informal settlements too far from employment opportunities. This causes shack dwellers to turn to creative endeavours in their immediate vicinity, such as selling firewood, providing transport of goods on donkey carts from the city to the townships, selling homemade beer or scavenging rubbish dumps for recyclable material that they can sell (Nkambule & Chirau 2018; Turok 2015). This, however, causes the poorest of the poor to trust in people equally as poor for a sustainable income, with dire consequences. Hence, poverty remains one of the defining characteristics of informal settlements (Simiyu, Cairncross & Swilling 2019). Whatever is accumulated in the few square meters that the average shack occupies are the only earthly possessions the shack dweller owns.

Another key issue that contributes to the vulnerability of shack dwellers is social exclusion. Emerging from Europe in the early 1970s, the term 'social exclusion' initially denoted individuals who did not comply with prevalent economic 'norms' (Mubangizi 2018:28). As the term evolved, it later included an economic dimension to denote individuals or communities excluded from labour markets, a social dimension to denote individuals or communities excluded from a community and a personal dimension that represents an erosion of self-worth as a result of being excluded from the accepted norms (Mubangizi 2018:28). An even more comprehensive definition is followed by the World Health Organization (WHO), which defines social exclusion as:

> [M]ulti-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions – economic, political, social and cultural – and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels. (WHO 2008)

Given these definitions, it is not difficult to see why Arimah (2011) sees informal settlements as an 'expression' of social exclusion. Living in an unsafe structure, far from economic opportunities, isolated from social and cultural support and projecting victims in a downward spiral of poverty is thus part of being socially excluded.

Arguably, the worst characteristic of social exclusion is the reciprocal relationship between its constituent dimensions. Economic, political, social and cultural isolation feeds the other, creating a vortex of exclusion that becomes difficult, if not impossible to escape. In light of this, shack dwellers can be regarded as highly vulnerable persons living in highly vulnerable structures, thereby leaving them without much recourse in the event of a *force majeure* such as a fire or flood.

Shack fires

Over 95% of the more than 300 000 annual deaths, which occur globally as a result of fires, are in low-income countries and the informal settlements that proliferate there (Twigg et al. 2017:1). Nearly a decade ago, Birkinshaw (2008) estimated that at least 10 shack fires occur in South Africa daily and that someone dies as a result of these tragedies every other day. Based on statistics collected from the Fire Protection Association of South Africa from 2003 to 2016, Löffel and Walls (2020) stated that:

> South Africa has seen an increase of approximately 65% in the number of reported informal settlement fires within a span of 13 years, coinciding with a 34% increase in the population. (p. 1)

This translates to an increase from approximately 3500 fires in 2003 to 5200 in 2016. Keeping in mind that these numbers only reflect the reported fires and that not all fires are reported by local authorities, these figures suggest a startling rise in the incidence of shack fires.

The rise in the number of shack fires is of even greater concern in light of the notion that it mainly originates from human error. To this effect, Murray (2009:167) strongly dispelled the notion that shack fires are a natural occurrence in a stark deconstruction of a fire that devastated a shack settlement in the Alexandra Township in 2003. In this case, it became known that the fire was caused by a household accident where a cooking stove was overturned. The fact that this incident took place long ago is irrelevant in the context of this research, as this fire serves as a generic example of how most shack fires still start today – not as a result of a natural disaster, such as lightning, but simply because of human error or accident. A recent report suggests that the occurrence of shack fires in some ways relates to a particular season, such as winter, because shack dwellers are then more dependent on sources of heat such as making fire in a metal bin. Consequently, Githahu (2019) spoke about 'winter shack fires' and stated that 'winter in the (Cape) province is burn season' because of the higher incidence of shack fires in informal settlements. This, however, in no way diminishes the occurrence of shack fires in other seasons, such as summer, as 24 deaths in 180 shack fires were reported in the city of Cape Town in December 2019 alone (Sokanyile 2019). Although no formal reasons for the high incidence of fires over the festive season are known, the more frequent use of alcohol is related to some instances where victims fell asleep with a lit cigarette (Sokanyile 2019).

The phenomenon of shack fires in South Africa is thus an established and growing phenomenon, which has become part of life in informal settlements. Although influenced by the season of the year, it is not limited to a particular season. Whenever it strikes, the consequences are tragic. In light of the vulnerability of the structures concerned and the even-more vulnerable inhabitants who represent the poorest of the poor and the marginalised of the South African community, victims are left with nothing, except sometimes their traumatised lives. In some cases, these tragedies remain isolated, burning down a single shack, but other times it destroys nearly a whole settlement, leaving thousands desolate and in so doing causing the unspeakable trauma and anguish of losing all of the little that they had.

Congregation-based pastoral care

Over the years, pastoral care has outgrown the narrow understanding of its classic summation as *cura animarum* or soul care and has evolved as intervention used to address very specific needs such as trauma, marital counselling, grieving and so forth. As a sense of acute loss is associated with fire-related trauma and consolation is one of the outcomes associated with pastoral care and counselling (Brunsdon 2009), the latter part of the research seeks to further investigate how pastoral care can be related to this phenomenon. More specifically, thought is given to a particular expression of pastoral care, namely, a congregation-based approach. Congregation-based pastoral care denotes a pastoral approach that relies on members of the faith community to provide care to the victims of shack fires spiritually, emotionally and physically to help them to

come to terms with the total loss incurred during a disaster of this type. This approach is contemplated mainly because the African church in its many expressions is ideally situated and the best-represented institution in communities with a high concentration of African people (Choabi 2019:53), such as informal settlements.

Such an approach will rely on at least three considerations that will guide it in practice.

Compassion for the victims of fire-imposed trauma

According to Krupnik (2019:256), there are different views on what constitutes trauma. In some instances, according to the criterion used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (2013:271), trauma is narrowly defined as a condition related to post-traumatic stress disorder after a victim experienced or witnessed traumatic events such as death or serious injury. In other instances, like the definition of the American Psychological Association (2016), the definition is drawn wider to say that trauma already presents when a person is threatened by physical, emotional or psychological traumatic events.

Irrespective of how wide or narrow working definitions of trauma have become, all life, material and emotionally threatening situations have the potential of traumatising someone. Measuring the effects of a residential fire against a definition of trauma shows that the devastation of fire is a particular expression of trauma that includes most of the criteria associated with trauma: physically, emotionally and psychologically. In support of this, Löffel and Walls (2020:2) maintained that shack fires typically resemble the so-called enclosure fire that proceeds through different discernible stages and in most cases ends in decay or, in lay terms, destruction. As shacks are mostly constructed of scrap material, such as cardboard and plastic, it is likely that only the corrugated iron segments of a shack will survive fire. Everything else in the enclosure will be destroyed, including inhabitants trapped inside.

The victims of shack fires thus represent persons who have been affected by a specific type of disaster, namely, one of the most devastating known to humans. This is exacerbated by the vulnerability of informal settlements, their physical locality far from firefighting agencies and the vulnerable nature inherent in these dwellings themselves. In a certain sense then, the compassion required to pastorally approach victims of fire-imposed trauma should be mindful of the fact that such victims are holistically traumatised.

Shack fires and total loss

A congregation-based pastoral approach to the victims of shack fires should also be mindful of the reality that shack fire victims suffered what can be regarded as total loss. This is largely understood in light of the spatial and structural vulnerability of shacks and the multidimensional vulnerability of shack dwellers, as explained earlier. Considering that shack dwellers represent the poorest of the poor and the marginalised of the South African society, the shack they live in and the meagre possessions that fill it are usually all that they possess. Unlike their counterparts in the society, who are part of the mainstream economy and can afford security such as insurance and medical aid schemes, shack dwellers do not have access to such support that could potentially help them absorb the losses incurred through fire. When tragedy strikes, their losses are complete, leaving them with the clothes on their back when the fire broke out.

A broadening of traditional views of pastoral care and counselling

In mainstream thinking, pastoral care and counselling are generally perceived as one of the functions of formally trained and ordained pastors. Usually congregation members will visit pastors and enter a formal process of counselling, guiding the pastoral process into an individualised encounter focused on the resolution of a specific challenge (Brunsdon 2015:2). Such processes also imply some form of specialisation on the part of the counsellor.

A congregation-based approach to the victims of shack fires, however, requires taking a step back to what De Jongh van Arkel (1995:196) denotes as the most 'basic' form of pastoral work, namely, mutual care. Mutual care points to the spontaneous Christian caring that believers extend to their fellow men (Brunsdon 2017:111). It reminds of the sharing spirit characteristic of the first Christian faith community recorded in Acts 2 and is driven by compassion for the less fortunate. The main agents in this approach are not the pastor, but the congregation members themselves who form part of the community of the informal settlement. Janse van Rensburg (2010:4) sees the deployment of congregation members to do pastoral work as part of a holistic approach to pastoral care, which is especially effective in situations where poverty and want prevail. In such an approach, the focus shifts from the traditional therapeutic responses by the trained counsellor to the emphatic responses of the neighbour which, in the end, become therapeutic in itself.

The important question raised by such a broadening of traditional views of pastoral care and counselling is how a congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires is imagined in practice.

Congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires in practice

Mobilising congregation members in the African context to become pastorally involved with the victims of shack fires will at least entail the following: sensitising congregation members to the unique and total loss incurred through shack fires and practising a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing.

Sensitising congregation members to the unique and total loss incurred through shack fires

It is suggested here that a congregation-based pastoral care to the victims of shack fires will be initiated by sensitising congregation members to the unique and total loss incurred through this tragedy. This argument departs from the notion that permanent exposure to the poverty characteristic of informal dwelling may render shack dwellers numb about this type of affliction. This numbness or desensitisation can also be strengthened by the constant lack of resources and not having anything to assist others, because all shack dwellers are generally immersed in poverty. Santiago, Wadsworth and Stump (2011:218) claimed that living in poor neighbourhoods generally has an adverse psychological effect, rendering such persons emotionally challenged. Casciano and Masey (2012:181) maintained this correlation between disadvantaged locality and positive mental health, meaning that it is less likely that residents of economically challenged environments will emotionally relate positively to the needs of others. Consequently, it will impact negatively on the compassion needed to reach out to other poverty-stricken persons in the event of an emergency.

Sensitisation is used in the context of this article within the emotional and moral sense of the word, thus referring to the ability to show compassion for others as opposed to the strict psychological or medical sense of the word. In a strictly psychological or medical sense, sensitisation usually refers to 'a form of nonassociative learning in which an organism becomes more responsive to most stimuli after being exposed to unusually strong or painful stimulation' (APA Dictionary of Psychology 2020). Here, sensitisation rather refers to the cultivation of compassion for others, despite personal needs.

Within the Christian tradition compassion relates closely to Galatians 6:2 and the imperative to 'bear one another's burden'. This bearing of the neighbour's burden in turn relates to the new life in Christ, which is characterised by the bearing of the fruits of the Spirit, amongst which are 'longsuffering' and 'goodness' (Gl 5:22). As Christian compassion, irrespective of one's own circumstances, is not a mere human ability, sensitisation will primarily be cultivated through preaching as preaching can be understood as a medium for the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. In this regard, African churches in informal settlements should, as one of their homiletic focuses, teach and equip their members on the practical showing of compassion from a position of none to becoming willing to care from the disposition of own need.

Practising a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing

If a congregation-based pastoral care is not intent on traditional counselling roles, how will it be expressed in the framework of the devastation of shack fires? It is suggested that a congregation-based pastoral care can be expressed by practising a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing.

In its simplest form, a ministry of presence refers to the presence of Christians in the midst of people finding themselves in need within the broken reality. According to Paget and McCormack (2006:7), presence revolves around a physical and emotional presence amongst the afflicted. As all Christians stand in the 'office of the believer', which pertains to the threefold office of prophet, priest and king (cf. Rv 1:5–6; Ac 2:16–18), God is made present where believers are present (Hoeksema 1986). The presence of Christians hence obtains a spiritual healing function that is embodied in actions such as listening, prayer and offering consolation (Paget & McCormack 2006:28) or simply through physically embracing the broken-hearted (Holm 2009:31). Through a ministry of presence, solidarity with the victims of shack fires is shown in a practical and visible manner. In Christian tradition solidarity is deeply rooted in the incarnation of Christ, through which God showed true solidarity with humans (Phlp 2:5–8), leaving his God-like being behind to become one with humans, being exposed to their suffering and misery. Human solidarity is therefore more than a human virtue, something that belongs to the heart of Christian anthropology (O'Connor 2012:320). Rooted in the love for God, it finds expression in a practical identification with others, wherever the other is at that time – especially in suffering. Solidarity finds its true meaning when those who have solidarity with me, also know my situation, make it possible for them to truly identify with my suffering and circumstances in an ontological way. The interests of shack dwellers who have lost everything will, therefore, be best served when solidarity is shown by those who also know and understand these challenges, such as fellow shack dwellers.

Authentic Christian solidarity amongst shack dwellers will eventually lead to the sharing of shelter and basic commodities, even if there is very little to go around. Within the African context, this notion should not be a foreign idea, as sharing lies at the heart of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This is supported by the notion that '*Ubuntu* is not just an African philosophy but a spirituality and an ethic of African traditional life' (Aranda 2017:2), which resonates positively on many levels with a Christian ethic of caring. In this way, members from African faith communities in informal settlements have the potential to become agents of an extensive network of caregivers to provide emotional and physical relief through a congregation-based pastoral care.

Conclusion

This article focused on a congregation-based pastoral approach to the victims of shack fires in the African context. It offered a phenomenological perspective on shack dwelling in Southern Africa by putting the phenomenon in a historical context, indicating its steady growth into one of the biggest local human settlement challenges of our time. In this way, informal settlements were also put within the larger global context of informality and urbanisation, making it part of a perpetual challenge that has established itself worldwide. The article also focused on the vulnerable nature of shack

dwellings themselves. Built of disposable materials, unable to withstand natural or man-made destruction, it is inhabited by marginalised South Africans whose vulnerability was described as multidimensional. Put in the framework of vulnerability theory, the multidimensional vulnerability of shack dwellers was described in terms of poverty and social exclusion. As a result of the dynamics of poverty and social exclusion, shack dwellers are sentenced to a life of extreme poverty, with not much hope of escaping the downward spiral of growing poverty and subsequent further social exclusion. Against this background, shack fires was described as a growing phenomenon that claims multiple lives each year and destroys thousands of shacks in the process. Because of its vast network of congregations, it was suggested that the African church is ideally situated to support surviving victims of shack fires pastorally. However, a specific approach in the form of a congregation-based pastoral care was proposed. A congregation-based pastoral care deviates from traditional notions of pastoral care which puts a trained pastor in the centre by shifting the focus to congregation members who stand in the three-fold office of king, priest and prophet. A congregation-based pastoral care is preceded by sensitising congregation members spiritually who are desensitised by their own poverty and lack of resources in order to show compassion to those who have become even more unfortunate.

This approach was then explicated as a ministry of presence, solidarity and sharing. In this regard, a congregation-based pastoral approach does not require any training or special skills, apart from having enough compassion to be wilfully present with those who have suffered total loss and to show true human solidarity. It is a solidarity that rolls over into sharing shelter and basic commodities, which aligns closely with the spirituality of *Ubuntu.*

In this way, a congregation-based pastoral approach to the victims of shack fires in the African context shows much potential to pastorally address one of the growing challenges of present-day Africa.

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Disclaimer

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