




Pastoral Care to People Working in Mining in South Africa from the Perspective of African Women's Ecotheologies

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Abstract

The challenges of pastorally caring for people working in mining in South Africa are addressed by considering scenarios typical to a mining environment. Since mining is considered to be potentially detrimental to the environment, the insights of African women's ecotheologies are called in to assist in the pastoral process, especially that of Sinenhlanhla Chisale's 'African ecofeminist pastoral care praxes'. Seven scenarios from the author's experience as pastor in mining contexts are described to contextualise this particular pastoral praxis. These scenarios are (1) unemployed African youth demanding the opening of mines where the environment, protected by whites for tourism, will be destroyed; (2) an informal settlement of job-seeking miners asking for protection against public abuse; (3) youth in the congregation suffering from poverty and hunger, rendering them unable to pass the medical tests of the mines; (4) parents with broken hearts seeking pastoral support when their children lose their jobs on the mine because of substance abuse; (5) the pastor fruitlessly seeking the opportunity to research the role of religion in supporting people on the mines; (6) the pastor interviewing congregants to establish relevant preaching in order to pastorally encourage the congregation; and (7) the pastor engaging in pastoral care with congregants traumatised after a mine accident. A conclusion points to the insights gained for pastorally caring to people working in mining from African women eco-theologies, namely guiding their minds towards a God who cares for all creation; co-authoring with them towards the interdependence of wo/man and mines; addressing the poverty that disturbs the interdependence between wo/man and mines; and empowering wo/man to put human needs in harmony with environmental rights.

Keywords: Pastoral care; African Women's Theologies; ecotheologies; ecofeminism; South African mineworkers; women in mines

Introduction

Aim

The aim of the article is to consider insights that would enhance pastoral care towards people of faith who work in mining, with specific reference to the contributions of African women's ecotheological pastoral care practices.

Positioning of the author as academic and pastor

This article is written from an autoethnographical perspective. The author as autoethnographer describes ('grapho') and understands 'culture' ('ethno') from her own



experiences ('auto') (see Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011: 273-290). 'Culture' here refers to the mining culture of people working or seeking to work in mining in South Africa.

Writing academically as autoethnographer on pastoral issues calls for the author to position herself as academic and pastor. The author has been teaching and researching in a tenured position at the University of South Africa for almost 45 years, 15 years in the Department of Church History, 28 years at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, and 3 years as Professor-Extraordinarius. For the past 25 years her research focussed on both Oral History and Pastoral Care and Counselling, and especially on the interface between them.

For more than 25 years, also, she has served parttime as a licenced pastor in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). The two congregations in which she served that are relevant to this study, are firstly in Sakhelwe, the African 'township' (predominantly Zulu, Pedi, Ndebele speaking (Statistics South Africa, 2011: 23) of Dullstroom-Emnotweni in Mpumalanga in the north-east of South Africa. She served here for ten years from 2008 to 2018, the broader area housing the core of South Africa's coal mines. Secondly, she has been pastoring in Karlien Park, the 'coloured township' of Rustenburg with its famous platinum and chrome mines, from 2018 to present. Rustenburg is situated in the North West Province to the north-west of South Africa.

Literature review and unique contribution

Ecotheology, church and mines

There are only a few studies published in South Africa on mines and mineworkers from an eco-theological perspective. In 2020 Jackson Chibuye and Johan Buitendag from the University of Pretoria published 'The indigenisation of eco-theology: the case of the Lamba people of the Copperbelt in Zambia' (p. 1-8). They argue for the indigenisation of eco-theology in an African context using the Copperbelt in Zambia as a case study. They combine insights from Christianity and African traditional religion. The supernatural belief of the Lamba people in the sacredness of Mother Earth is combined with the Christian obedience to God's command to look after creation. Already in 2018 Isabella Ras submitted a MTh with Veyani Vellem, also at the University of Pretoria, under the title 'Craving restoration: An ecofeminist theological perspective on Lily Mine'. In this thesis she aims at exposing mining as a colonialist (*apartheid*) confiscation of land for which restoration should be made. In addition, internationally, there is a small but significant encouragement that the church should intervene in the local mining industry to protect the land and the rights of the poor. To be mentioned is an article by William Holden and Daniel Jacobson already in 2007 (p. 155-202) published of which the title speaks for itself: 'Ecclesiastical opposition to mining on Mindanao: Neoliberalism encounters the church of the poor in the land of promise'. Self-evident also is the title of Karolien van Teijlingen that was recently published (2022, p. 443) as 'The 'church of the poor and the earth' in Latin American mining conflicts.' In this article she wishes to proof that mining takes the farming land of the poor in specific Latin American contexts.

Women and mines

Since 1994 South African laws require adequate employment for women, also in the mining sector. The problems experienced by women in mining have not been explored theologically (and especially not from an eco-feminist perspective). However, important sociological research on women in mining has been conducted.

Doret Botha is a sociologist from the North-West University in Potchefstroom. She has, with colleagues Freek Cronjé, conducted extensive empirical research with women in three South African mines which was published between 2014 and 2017. The needs and challenges of



women in mining are found to be as follows:

- Women in mining need career counselling, assistance with childcare and a healthy work environment (Botha & Cronjé, 2014: 1925, in ‘Workplace opportunities for women employed in core mining activities’).
- Women as workers are sexually vulnerable and exploited (Botha, 2015: 11, in ‘Women in mining still exploited and sexually harassed’).
- Requirements are not met in terms of women’s pregnancy and aftercare, as well as in terms of women’s safety when working night shift (Botha & Cronjé, 2015a: 11, in ‘Occupational health and safety considerations for women employed in core mining positions’).
- Women experience frustration when expected to perform work beyond their physical strength, such as operating heavy machinery and using heavy, vibrating power tools without consideration from management (Botha & Cronjé, 2015b: 8, in ‘The physical ability of women in mining: can they show muscle?’).

Women and environment

In 2019 the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, celebrating its 30th year of existence, held its 5th Pan-African Conference in Gaborone, Botswana, under the theme of “Mother Earth and Mother Africa in religious imagination”. Several books on African women theologians’ views on environmental issues were published with papers delivered at this conference. From Sun Media in South Africa came three books. In 2020 Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni, Georgina Kwanima Boaleng and Molly Manyonganise edited *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions*. In 2021 *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and mission* was published under the editorship of Seblewengel Daniel, Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe and Angeline Savala. In 2022 Sophia Chirongoma and Wayna Kiifu were editors to *Mother Earth, Mother Africa: World religions and environmental imagination*.

During the same period (2021), and under the banner of “Mother Earth, Mother Africa”, Sidney Berman, Paul Leshota, Ericka Dunbar, Musa Dube and Malebogo Kgalemang edited and published *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies: Interpretations in the context of climate change* with the University of Bamberg Press. And Sinenhlanhla Chisale and Rozelle Robson Bosch edited *Mother earth, Mother Africa and theology* in the HTS Religion and Society Series.

This amazing output from the 2019 Mother Earth, Mother Africa conference placed several enlightening and useful concepts on the table in terms of eco-theology from African women theologians’ perspectives, such as ‘Environmental Christology’, ‘Africa’s religious heritage in ecological preservation’, ‘gender injustices in land ownership’, ‘re-awakening the sacred’, as well as ‘hope-filled’ and ‘earth-centred’ display insights valuable to this study too. However, the subject of this study – pastoral care to people engaged in minework – is not yet dealt with in this literature. There is a delightful paragraph on “Pastoral care as ecological care” by Mercy Shumbambini (2022: 86–88) in an essay on “Mother earth, our life support systems: Perspectives from a Catholic nun”. However, this is not necessarily helpful when people need pastoral care while engaging in environmentally damaging practices such as mining.

Method

The author takes her philosophical point of departure from Sinenhlanhla Chisale’s article, ‘Women’s reproductive and natural environmental health: An African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis from the Ndebele, Zimbabwe’ (2021: 117-128) in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and theology*. Chisane (2021: 117) enhances the positive connection between the natural environment and women’s reproductive health. She does, however, not deal with people who are engaged in a practice like mining that threatens the environment. However, it is her



situating herself within the following values for an 'ecofeminist pastoral care praxis' (Chisane, 2021: 121–124) in which the author finds herself:

- An African ecofeminist theology rejects the separation of men and women.
- An African ecofeminist theology rests on the value of *Ubuntu* where living and non-living parts of creation are interdependent on one another.
- An African ecofeminist theology is non-essentialist, in that it does not describe an essential nature to women which is binarily opposed to that of men, thereby it is acknowledged that women's connection to nature is multifaceted, and so is that of men.
- African ecofeminist theologies need to be life-affirming and cannot be caught up in the binaries of good versus bad only.
- Pastoral care praxis seeks to serve creation as it interprets human needs.
- Pastoral care cures through healing, sustaining, guiding, nurturing, liberating and empowering.

These insights from Chisane allows for a pastoral praxis to people involved in mining activities that,

- includes both men and women as recipients of African ecofeminist theological and pastoral care,
- respects the interdependence of people and mines as a potentially caring connection;
- enters pastoral care that recognises that the relationship between people and mines are multifaceted and cannot be viewed in a binary way,
- acknowledges that people are part of nature and that their needs are dependent on other natural resources, such as mines, and
- sees pastoral care as life-giving, hope-fulfilling and liberating, as well as nurturing and sustaining.

Seven scenarios in which the pastor had to pastorally care for people in mining in which caring for people and caring for the environment might have been in opposition to one another are described and approached from the interdependency ideals of African women's ecotheology. These descriptions are, as stated in the above, from an autoethnographical perspective, that is, reflecting the author's own understanding and insight of the mining culture.

A scenario is not a case study, but a potential situation based on the experience of the pastor and described autoethnographically. The first, and to some degree the second, scenarios refer to actual cases and are duly referenced. The sixth scenario involves three interviews with congregants. The other scenarios are hypothetical, yet realistic, for which ethical clearance were not applied for, since they do not refer to actual people.

The seven-pronged philosophical approach that is interdependent-multifaceted-non-essentialist-life-affirming-human needs inclusive-empowering/liberating-nurturing/sustaining is supplemented with a narrative therapeutic methodology in dealing with the seven scenarios. Narrative therapy presupposes that people are kept captive in grand narratives, in this case discourses relating to the relation between human needs and mining. Deconstructing harmful discourses towards healing ones can sustain and heal broken people (see Morgan 2000; White 1989) and are described in the scenarios.

Selection of participants and collection of data

Within the 7 scenarios described, both men and women, old and young are at play as research population. UPOC, for instance, in Scenario 1, consists of young people, both male and female. In Scenario 6 three congregants were interviewed. They were 'selected' because of their availability after a snowball effect, which followed from one interviewee to another. The author acquired the names of three women working in management on the mines. They eagerly provided their emails, but eventually was not willing to answer the questions sent to them.



Scenarios for Pastoral Care in Mining Situations

1 Unemployed youth campaign for the (re)opening of mines in an eco-tourist area

In 2015 the Unemployed People's Organisation Committee (UPOC) approached the pastor with the request that the church should join their struggle to (re)open mines in internationally recognized wetland reserves in and around Dullstroom-Emnotweni in the Mpumalanga Highlands. This was to provide jobs for the unemployed in the vicinity (see Landman, 2015: 156). The UPOC was well aware that mines would have had a serious negative impact on the wetlands and, of course, on tourism. However, they argued that the wetlands and the tourism were in the hands of white people, most of whom were not even South Africans but Europeans. And that they, in terms of the Freedom Charter (1955) were entitled to the minerals of the country. Serious conflict ensued between the unemployed African youth of the then 'township' Sakhelwe and the white businesspeople in Dullstroom.

At the time the pastor engaged with the situation only by publishing about it in an academic article (Landman, 2015: 159–162) that juxtaposed African and white, mines and wetlands as binaries.

The situation was never resolved, and the church lost the opportunity to gain the trust of both parties. Much more progress would have been made if

- the interdependence of human needs and environmental concerns was prioritised.
- job creation was dealt with as life-affirming,
- therapeutic sessions with the unemployed could have led to them being empowered towards a variety of jobs, shifting the discourse that only mines could provide employment.

2 An informal settlement of job-seeking mine workers' demands justice

Moving from the north-east to the north-west of South Africa, from the predominantly African township' of Sakhelwe (Dullstroom) to the 'coloured township' of Karlien Park (Rustenburg), and from coal mines to platinum and chrome mines, the pastor engaged in even more severe mining contexts required of pastoral care. There are a variety of informal settlements around Rustenburg of people coming from all over Africa seeking jobs on the mines. One such settlement rose on the borders of Karlien Park. Karlien Park residents have previously expanded into this area building informal houses for themselves, but these structures were removed by the Municipality. However, in their place came shacks and zozos (a small house made from corrugated iron) built and inhabited mainly by non-local people. They retaliated whenever the Municipality tried to remove their houses or illegal electricity connections by burning structures and electricity boxes in Karlien Park itself, as has happened for instance on 4 June 2020.

Apart from pastoring to traumatised congregants, the pastor did not get involved in reconciliation efforts between the informal settlers and the residents of Karlien Park. This was for two reasons. The one is that the pastor viewed herself as not having adequate training to deal with these dangerous and explosive situations. The other was that the mine, on whose land the informal settlers were squatting, started with legal action to have the squatters removed.

However, the pastor has previously, on the 8th of August 2018, visited an informal settlement outside Rustenburg which has named itself Popo Molefe Ward 22. The name is ironical since the people felt that they were not adequately attended to while Popo Molefe was the Premier of North West Province (1994–2004). More than 7000 people have been living here for at least two decades, coming to look for work in the mines. The circumstances are sub-human. There are no roads, schools or any permanent structures. There is no electricity or running water, and of course no service delivery. The pastor accompanied a legal team to this informal settlement after they have engaged in an unauthorized protest march to the Municipality and



were shot with rubber bullets which were shown to the pastor. The pastor was not able to secure another visit to this settlement but was told by the Methodist bishop who initiated the first visit, that in the past six years little progress has been made in terms of justice and development (telephonic conversation on 22 January 2024).

The question remains what the pastor could have done in terms of giving voice to the unemployed in these two settlements who were illegally occupying land, the first settlement threatening the legal existence of her congregants?

In both settlements the pastor noticed that many (enlarged) shacks served as churches, them being independent churches known to be led by a prophet who believed s/he had received its commission from God through a vision. Although churches usually are in competition with one another, the pastor will do well to round their leaders up to form a strong pastoral voice both towards the authorities (both mine or municipal) and towards the community (both legal and illegal). This care can be directed by the African ecofeminist model as discussed above including the values of life-affirmation and the inclusivity of human needs in environmental issues.

3 Hunger forces young people out of mine employment

The young people in a congregation in which the pastor is involved as caretaker pastor, are so underfed that they do not pass the medical test to be employed on the mines. The obvious pastoral path to take is not to console them with the fact that they are lucky to be excluded from the mines that are anyway not healthy to them and the environment.

The path to follow in terms of our model is to address the poverty that leads to hunger, and to involve the mines themselves in enabling young people to become potential workers in the mine. This might be an exceptionally difficult task in the light of the massive retrenchment of people working in mines around Rustenburg lately. From Sibanye-Stillwater's platinum mine alone 11 500 workers were retrenched in the 18 months prior to this writing (Schenk, 2024, published in Netwerk24), '*Sibanye se jongste afleggings beteken 11 500 is al hulle werk kwyf*' (Sibanye's recent terminations result in 11 500 workers losing their jobs).

4 Parents with broken hearts need counselling

This is a potential scenario, loosely based on a variety of cases the pastor in the past had to deal with.

A congregant and his wife approach the pastor for counselling for their daughter. The father holds a managerial job at a local mine and has secured a job for his daughter on the mine. However, on the first day of work the daughter turned up drunk at the mine and was immediately dismissed. The father was hereby humiliated, and him getting her this job is under investigation. Furthermore, it turns out that this humiliation was not a once off occurrence, but that the man and his wife have for several years been suffering because of the daughter's behaviour. They are already raising her two young children. The daughter herself lives in her parent's house, although her own children are afraid of her, especially when she is drunk. She cannot keep a job and drinks heavily over weekends, also using drugs. She extorts large amounts of money from her parents by threatening them with an axe or a gun, stealing and selling their belongings, or breaking things when she does not get what she wants. The pastor offers to do counselling with the couple's daughter, but she refuses to come.

The pastor has consequently started a support group for "Parents with broken hearts". The parents who are attending are mostly working on the mines and suffer psychologically and physically from the tension created by their substance abusing children which in turn threatens the parents' jobs and income security.

Because parents in this situation tend to turn upon themselves and upon one another, they are asked during these sessions to externalize what they think the problem is that keep their



substance abusing children captive in this situation. They will name the problem as “Wanting to be part of the peer group”, “Not having hope for a future”, or “The local drug culture”. Some will also give the problem a name such as “Maybe a disorder”, or “He suffered childhood abuse”, or “She was raped on her way back from school”. They are then encouraged to stand together, with their child, against the problem instead of internalizing the problem and blaming themselves or the child.

While still far away from creating a culture in which substance abusing children stand up against their problems with their parents, the counselling of parents with broken hearts continues with the parents suggesting their own unique outcomes in handling the situation. These are, for example, allowing the child to make them strong instead of sick, developing skills to walk a path with the child within unfulfilled dreams, or deciding not to give up on the child even when one’s own life and career are at stake.

Ironically this situation does not allow the pastor to address the ecological problem of mines being hazardous to the environment. The pastor respects the interdependence of the mines and the human needs of those who are dependent on mining.

5 The pastor seeking opportunities to research religion’s support in mining fears

This situation does not allow the author to give names of mines or the specifics of the application of the pastor to do research amongst mine workers. The aim of the research was to determine, through interviewing people in mining, what the religious discourses were that made mine-workers vulnerable to – or strong against – HIV infection, substance abuse and sexual exploitation. At that stage the mines refused entry to researchers who wanted to investigate the role of religion in the health and moral decisions of mine workers.

Information gathered through such a research project could have enhanced the interdependence of mines and workers and could have invited mines into life-affirming practices vis-à-vis their workers.

6 The pastor interviews congregants on their preaching needs

Ensuing from the above, the pastor is seeking ways in which to address a congregation on ecotheological issues. The reason for her uncertainty is because members of the congregation are mine-workers or dependent on contracts from the mines. Two research questions therefore drove the pastor to interview congregants: How would congregants react to the pastor posing ecotheological questions to their work place, that is, mines? And, what indeed would congregants working in mining need the pastor to preach about? Consequently, three congregants only were interviewed with the interviewing schedule consisting of four simple questions:

1. What does your mine(s) do to preserve the environment?
2. What is your personal view: Does the mine do enough to preserve the environment?
3. Should the church intervene in the affairs of the mines?
4. What do you want me as pastor to preach to you?

Interviewee 1

Interviewee 1 is 48 years old and a shift supervisor (‘skofbaas’) in a nearby mine. He is married and the couple has three teenage children. He is not familiar with the concept ‘environment’ as it relates to mining. Also, the idea of the church getting involved in environmental issues vis-à-vis the mines seem to be strange to him, although he remarks that meetings at the mine are opened and closed with prayer.

The pastor finds this interviewee’s reaction to the question ‘What do you want me as pastor to preach to you’ most useful. He says that they work in very dangerous circumstances,



and they need to hear that God personally remains in contact with them, there where they are, very deep down under the ground. That is what they can take with them to work.

Interviewee 2:

The second interviewee is 53 years old. He has his own business and supply batteries to a variety of local mines. He is also responsible for maintaining the batteries. He feels that mines do enough to protect the environment. There is a waste compliance memo which must be filled out to secure the safe disposal of batteries.

Interviewee 2 does not expect from the church to address environmental issues such as pollution. He actually had a good laugh at the idea that the pastor would go and discuss environmental issues with the powerful CEOs of mines, the latter earning salaries of hundreds of millions of rand per year.

Interviewee 2 does not want the pastor to preach about mining issues. “I don’t want to come to church bringing the week’s baggage with me. Batteries are a hazard. I do not want to be reminded of that on a Sunday. You can pray for those in the buses who come to work during a strike and who are thrown with stones. Pray for those underground – they are foreigners, not in our church. Local people don’t want to work underground. So, they are from Lesotho – or from the Eastern Cape in terms of cheap labour which have been with us for many years.” As far as he is concerned, he comes to church to hear good and happy news.

Interviewee 3

The third interviewee, too, feels that the mine(s) are keeping strictly to the prescriptions of the Department of Minerals and Resources (DMR) on environmental issues and that compliance with these laws is checked regularly.

The third interviewee is an accountant at a local mine. He is 44 years old. He acknowledges that mines are a threat to the environments. Smelters are the big polluters. However, he also feels that there is little chance of success if the church would try entering an environmental war with the mines. He points out that mines are not interested in religious issues. For instance, they will not appoint a chaplain but outsource people experiencing mental hardship to psychologists in private practice.

South Africans do not want to go underground, he continues. Mine(s) ‘permit’ those who go underground to take a ‘zoll’ (hand-rolled marijuana cigarette) with them to push them beyond ordinary human performance. As he says: “Preach and pray for safety”. This is the only thing you as pastor can do.”

Because of these interviews, the pastor starts to preach about God’s personal involvement in securing the safety of people—without specifically referring to mining situations.

An example is a sermon about Jonah. Jonah’s story is a story of multiple interventions by God to attend to people’s safety. Firstly, God keeps the people on the boat safe in the midst of a storm, although they do not even know him. Secondly, God keeps Jonah safe by letting a fish swallow him. Otherwise, of course, Jonah would have drowned. Thirdly, God keeps Nineveh safe from the judgement He himself has passed on them. Finally, although the story of Jonah does not have a final moral ending, God keeps Jonah safe from his self-pity.

7 The pastor counselling those affected by mine accidents

After a deadly accident at one of the mines where a lift snapped and tens of miners died gruesomely, the mine was closed for two days. A deacon came into the consistory



with fear in her voice and eyes. Her husband has received the dreaded SMS: '*Julle sak sesuur vanaand*' (they, including her husband, will go underground again at 18:00 that night). This was no time to say: Get out of the mines because they are anyway a source of serious pollution. This was no time either to say: Just pray and hope for the best.

It was a time to engage with the families of those going down in the mines, in terms of narrative therapy, to externalise death and to talk about life-affirming outcomes, and empower them with tested beliefs in the caring characteristics of God.

Conclusion

This article takes as its point of departure 'an African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis' of Sinenhlanhla Chisale (2021: 121-123). This includes the following values: Ubuntu is resonated in the interdependence of humans and the rest of creation; African ecofeminist theology applies to both men and women; non-essentialist ecofeminists acknowledge that people's connection to nature is multifaceted; African ecofeminist theologies need to be life-affirming; Pastoral care praxis seeks to serve creation as it interprets human needs; and pastoral care cures through healing, sustaining, guiding, nurturing, liberation and empowering. Pastoral care in the above scenarios would mean:

- Guiding people in mining towards a mind frame from which they experience the protection and safety of their belief in a caring God.
- Looking for opportunities where pastor and counselee can co-author ecclesiastical discussions on the relationship between both mines and people being part of "nature" that need to take one another into account as interconnected.
- Addressing the poverty that forces people into jobs – or keep them from jobs – in the mines that disregard their human dignity and threaten their sexual security.
- Empowering people as agents to address their human needs in harmony with the rights of the environment and the divine demand to care for the earth.

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Interviews

Interviewee 1: interviewed January 6, 2024 in Karlien Park, Rustenburg

Interviewee 2: interviewed January 7, 2024 in Karlien Park, Rustenburg

Interviewee 3: interviewed January 13, 2024 in Karlien Park, Rustenburg

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.*



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