



# The pastor as an ecumenical leader: Reflections and Pastoral Ministry experiences at Bvumbura parish, Zimbabwe

Rabson Hove  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics  
P/B X01, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3201  
South Africa

Prof Herbert Moyo (PhD)  
Religious Practices in Africa  
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
P/B X01, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3201  
South Africa.

Doi:

## Abstract

This article explores the position and the role of the pastor in local ecumenism. It argues that the pastor is a central figure who consciously and unconsciously influences local ecumenical engagement between his/her local congregation and other denominations. Local ecumenism is ecumenism 'from below', whereby Christians in a given locality enjoy sharing spiritual and material resources as a way of being church together. It is in this context where the pastor is found to be an ecumenical leader as he/she gives services to the members of the community as families and member churches. The researcher has used his experiences at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) Bvumbura parish as a point of reference on how a pastor would be found engaging in ecumenical work as well as in carrying out expected pastoral duties. It is within this context that many denominations cooperate with each other at various levels serving the church and community in general in the process. The paper ends up discussing the expressed five pastoral roles as a means of fulfilling the call of the pastor as an ecumenical leader.

**Key words:** Pastor, ELCZ, local ecumenism, church, leader, Bvumbura Parish.

## Introduction

Local ecumenism is whereby local<sup>1</sup> churches<sup>2</sup> seek to worship, and work together in serving the local community. This ecumenism 'from below', the networking and cooperation of churches is done in a specific local context. Such movements need sound pastoral leadership to bring about meaningful participation, contribution and networking among the churches. The pastor<sup>3</sup> is strategically placed to take initiatives of local ecumenical engagements.

---

<sup>1</sup> Local refers to geographical location in space of the same area and community as opposed to regional or national space.

<sup>2</sup> Church is used interchangeably with denomination.

<sup>3</sup> Pastor is a local church worker who is deployed to oversee the ministry of the parish in a given local community



Notwithstanding that the laity have various ways of engaging in ecumenical activities without necessarily being led by members of the clergy. But they equally need the support and leadership of a motivated willing pastor. It is important to note that the local pastor is accountable of the membership, congregational and parish resources which are needed for ecumenical work. The pastor has pastoral and theological tools needed for ecumenical engagement and serving the community. These are some of the issues to be explored using the researcher's pastoral ministry experiences as the pastor in charge of Bvumbura parish<sup>4</sup> from 2015 to 2017.

This paper begins by highlighting the context of Bvumbura parish. Ecumenism is defined as the desire of both God and the church mission giving emphasis on local ecumenism. I will discuss ecumenical opportunities which form a major gap to be explored in pastoral ministry. The discussion is placed in the context of the role I played as a pastor in local ecumenical engagement in Bvumbura parish. Finally, I will discuss the five pastoral duties that continue to place the pastor at the helm of local ecumenism. These include amongst others, being a theologian, priest, prophet, counsellor and community leader, all rolled into one. Throughout this paper I argue that the pastor plays a pivotal role as an ecumenical leader in the local congregation, parish and community in general.

### **The Context of Bvumbura Parish**

Bvumbura Parish is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) parish in Mberengwa district in Zimbabwe. It is one of the newly established parishes in the central diocese. It was born out of the division of Mavorondo parish in Chief Mahlebadza area between ELCZ Chegato Mission in the East and ELCZ Masase Mission in the West. Bvumbura is composed of four congregations stretching the radius of 6 to 28 km apart. These are Bvumbura, the parish centre, Gaha in the East, Gweshiri in the West and Nyororo beyond the mountain ranges in the North. When I arrived in 2015 as a pastor, there was no parsonage but a small two roomed storehouse which accommodated the pastor. We established and launched the parish centre by building a parsonage at Bvumbura congregation. The pastor operated from Bvumbura congregation reaching out to the congregations and communities around.

Within the area of Bvumbura parish are many other denominations including African Indigenous Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal Churches. There are no well-known mainline Protestant churches like the Dutch Reformed, Methodist or Anglican except a small congregation of the Baptist. Amongst other local churches around are the different splinter groups of the Zion churches, Baptist, Jekenisheni, Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Johane Masowe, Madzibaba, Mataramhashu, Jewish Voice, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), Chema, and Hossana. Some of these churches were created as a result of misunderstanding in local congregations, and some due to migration<sup>5</sup>. In Bvumbura, local Zion churches became divided because of leadership struggles after the death of their leaders. Currently, they are about five Zion churches under different leaders. There are also those who came out of the ELCZ due to the desire for new religious experiences, participation or cultural issues such as informal marriages and polygamous marriages. Those who temporarily lived in towns, other provinces or neighbouring countries like Botswana and South Africa, came with some of the new churches. These denominational formations show signs of division in the body of Christ (Fackre, 2007:150). Since new churches continue to be formed day by day there is need to work towards church unity and cultivation of ecumenical spirit. This is done by celebrating

---

<sup>4</sup> Bvumbura parish is one of the ELCZ rural parishes in Mberengwa district in Zimbabwe. This is the area of experience under discussion.

<sup>5</sup> When a member of the community goes to town or other places and joins another church, he or she comes back and start the church in Bvumbura community as a founder of a new church.



diversity and recognizing each other as members belonging to the same body of Christ (Field, 2016:122). Otherwise without “mutuality, the body is broken, distorted, maimed, disfigured, even absurd” (Fackre, 2007:154). Given these situations in Bvumbura, one would not ignore divisions that are so glaring. Ecumenism in this context can be enhanced by clergy leadership and participation as well as social ties in the community. The church should not be divisive among the people who after all, have their relationships in the family and community.

Ecumenical enterprise is realized as the community meet at various social gatherings for socio-political and religious reasons. Gatherings such community meetings at school or clinic and church gatherings for prayers for rains provide give such expressions of local ecumenism. Church leaders from different denominations are always invited to share the word and prayers at these local community gathering. Although these local people belong to different denominations they come from the same family or home. One section of the community and congregations or denominations are dominated by the totems of Shava and Moyo families while the other is dominated by Shoko and Shumba, and yet others are dominated by Dube, Gumbo and Nkomo totems. These people of the local community are related in one way such as in marriages and having close family backgrounds. They are always together at home and in their economic activities. Among other activities are meeting at church, school, political meetings, weddings, funerals, and irrigation projects.

### **Defining ecumenism**

Ecumenism is generally understood as the unity sought among churches of different denominational backgrounds. Such unity is a desire and a gift of God (Kinnamon, 2014:22). Ecumenism can be hierarchical whereby theologians and the clergy come together discussing convergences and divergencies in doctrinal matters. Such meetings and dialogues are done through a council of churches. This is how the traditional ecumenical movement was found through the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. In this regard ecumenism is understood as a well-structured institution of high-profile clergy and theologians (Aoanan, 2015:256).

Besides this kind of ecumenism there are local ecumenical engagements. The 1961 WCC New Delhi Assembly called for local ecumenism by emphasizing that, it should be characterized by;

a visible and committed fellowship of ‘all in each place,’ united by a common baptism and Eucharist, joining in common prayer, possessing members and ministers accepted by all, reaching out together in witness and service and united with Christians of all places and ages (WEN, 2015:185).

Ecumenism can also be a form of informal fellowship among local churches and Christians in a given locality. The local ecumenical engagement is the grassroots or ecumenism from below stated earlier. Grassroots or local ecumenism is born out of the efforts by the local Christians and their pastors. The political will of the pastors would influence such local ecumenical engagements.

The local church unity is neither consensus based in doctrine or apostolic succession, but embracing one another in love and service (WEN, 2015:184). Ecumenism does not call for uniformity in doctrine and praxis. Churches in the local community are united by the local social landscape and the changes in life of Christians in the community. Social landscape refers to general social ties amongst people in a given community. They can also be united as a theological call to fulfil the mission of the church in Christ (Aoanan, 2015:261). Complete communion is found in post denominational unity serving each other in the community which is the desire and law of Christ of serving one’s neighbour. The unity of the church is a response to Christ who called the church to be one. Jesus Christ’s prayer was centred on oneness and



unity of the church as reflected by the Trinity (John 17:21-23). The unity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit is an existential and missional communion. The Trinitarian faith should influence the unity of the church. The church's understanding of the triune God is part of church's identity, life and ministry. Church identity is marked by communal unity sharing the faith, love, economic goods and mission (Acts 4:32). This is experienced in local churches where churches share a "reconciled diversity" by sharing their resources and Eucharistic fellowship in "organic unity" (WEN, 2015, Fuchs, 2008). Local ecumenism is more open and flexible bringing together various denominations across denominational doctrinal barriers (WCC, 2014:3). It is easier to notice that Christians from the mainline, Pentecostal and indigenous denominations work together at local levels than at other levels.

Promotion of unity is part of the mission of the church hence ecumenism should not be relegated to certain individuals in leadership structures of the church. Church leadership, individual believers and the community have a "collective task to advocate Christian unity" (Aonan, 2015:255). Christ taught his disciples to live in love and communion, hence the challenge for today pastors and priest is "building communities characterized by true communion" that Christ desired (Singarayar, 2012: 20) The priestly function of the church is gathering people for corporate worship and ecumenical faith (WEN, 2015:179). The clergy and the laity practice the priesthood of all believers by advocating for and participating in the church's ecumenical enterprise. The pastor plays a central role in ecumenical engagement due to the nature of pastoral work that is undertaken in the local communities.

### **Some ecumenical opportunities**

Despite the ELCZ being engaged in national and international ecumenism, there is need to emphasize some local engagements which are experienced daily by members of the local congregations. "Top-down "elite" ecumenism of institutions is no longer effective; emphasis must be given to local ecumenism, receptive ecumenism, with new methodologies of communication and networking" (WCC, 2014:8). I concur with Koopman who argues for genuine catholicity found in embracing others as churches in the local community (Koopman, 2013:96). Such recognition of each other as authentic churches help the local denominations to celebrate unity in diversity (Conradie, 2013:26). Unity is achieved by recognizing each other as members of the body of Christ and admitting that we cannot do without others (Fackre, 2007:154). Despite the differences among denominations, they still need each other to fulfil their mandate as the church of Christ. Divisions that came about for various reasons can be resolved through obedience to Christ's mission. The current crisis faced in Christianity is the split in the Orthodox church after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The availability of these different churches in Bvumbura parish became an opportunity for ecumenical engagement. The starting point was to introduce myself as a new ELCZ pastor in the community and ask to meet with the leaders of the different local denominations such as the Zionist, Baptist, Chema and AFM, on a one-on-one basis. I met and introduced myself to other church leaders, bishops, pastors and elders. After the first meeting we met time and again at other places and occasions, and shared our joys and concerns. During our meetings we prayed to acknowledge and ask God to lead the way as the main actor in our journey. During these meetings we discussed how churches operated in the community and finding ways of coming together for fellowship and evangelism. We had to organize ourselves so that whenever we meet for an occasion we would know how to work together. This was a way of bringing churches together and being church with one another (Koopman, 2013). However, for others this was a new thing treated with both appreciation and suspicion. Major challenges came from the Jewish Voice, SDA, Johane Masowe and the Jewish Voice. They could not work together with those who do not observe the Sabbath law. They refused our invitations to gathering and neither did they participate in funeral processions by pastors and church leaders. The other problem came from Madzibaba who were resented by other churches



because they hold their church services on Friday and they do not read or use the bible for preaching. Some Christians do not recognize Madzibaba as a church.

Among the local clergy, I was the most educated with a Diploma in Education and a Master's degree in Theology. The majority of the clergy did not finish high school in the deep rural area commonly known by a Karanga name *mukati*<sup>6</sup>. If going to town, one would need to wake up around 2 am to get transport. Other church leaders took advantage of my education for support and collegiality. I became a resource person for bible study, preaching and leadership training. Some came as individual leaders for consultation, but some invited me to teach in their churches. I was also generous to share some of my books on leadership and pastoral care to help those who could read and write some notes. This was a great opportunity for learning and serving one another. "Mutual learning and acceptance is the *modus vivendi*: being minister, priest and servant to each other" (Pratt, 2016:236). I learned a lot from their experience since majority were old people and experienced church leaders. I was also humbled by their humility to learn from a new inexperienced pastor. They also helped me to understand some of their practices and the basis for their liturgies. In most cases we shared same songs and hymns. This was common during funerals. Fackre (2007:155) argues that foundation of ecumenism is acknowledging the benefits of charisms each one may bring in the body. "Life in the ecumenical family enriches every particular tradition and denomination" (Koopman, 2013:97). The meetings gave us opportunity to learn from one another and share material and spiritual resources. Basically, we learnt that most of church practices are based on certain verses from the same Holy Bible but they are emphasized differently from one denomination to the other. Through engagement we are always able to develop understanding and tolerance, giving us love and greater unity as is needed in the body of Christ.

### **Pulpit exchange programmes**

From our meetings we began to work together in various ways. We began to have pulpit exchange. This is one of the areas that brought us together especially with members from Baptist, Chema, Zion. "True fellowship, both in society and church, consists of all kinds of people" (LWF, 2010:62). We began to invite each other for services and bible studies bringing members into strong and genuine fellowship. During revivals and conferences, we invited pastors and some gifted speakers from these churches around and neighbouring ELCZ parishes. We intentionally invited them to participate with us. This also generated interest in them as they reciprocated. In some cases, I conducted a service in my congregation and then conducted another in a different church by invitation.

Different denominations worked closely when we went for home visits and evangelism outreaches. We used to have two outreaches a year and several home visits. Sometimes the ELCZ would plan or it was jointly planned, to give each other duties and make contributions towards food provision. During these sessions we gave chances to different churches around to share some songs and provide a preacher. During home visits people from various denominations brought different kinds of food and people would share and eat together. These activities strengthened church to church and church-community relationships. There was love and mutual trust for one another. We would liaise with other church leaders and encourage the baptized members from different denomination to participate in Holy Communion if they do so in their respective churches. Sharing the communion table has a spiritual significance of meeting with God and care for one another (LWF, 2010). Christians share life together in communion. Through the Holy Eucharist, Christians across different denominations continue to live with Christ, "the head of the body" (Fackre, 2007:113). This was a source of joy for some who would only access the communion cup once a year at regional or national conferences or when their bishop comes to their local churches. These fellowships went well

---

<sup>6</sup> Mukati refers to most remote rural area difficult to access, with limited modern goods and technology.



because the community saw unity among churches despite our various denominational and doctrinal differences.

We encouraged local fellowships initiated by Christians in congregations. Gaha congregation had established exchange fellowship programme with the local Zion *rekwa Pikicha*<sup>7</sup>. They would have visitation Sundays when Lutherans would attend Zion and then Zion would attend a full Lutheran service at Gaha congregation. During the services visitors would have a slot to share the word and songs. After service they had lunch together. Such embracing ecumenical engagement was apostolic in continuing with gathering for word, prayer and eating together (Koopman, 2013). Their ecumenical engagement through exchange visit made it easier for Christians to work together during weddings and funerals in the community. There was a strong bond between these two congregations which was strengthened by the pastor's participation whenever they occurred.

Bvumbura congregation had women fellowships held on Wednesdays or Saturdays, once a month. This was between the ELCZ vashandiri (women wing) and several denominations around Bvumbura congregation. The fellowship involved women from the Baptist, Zion, Hossana and the ELCZ. Besides forming women coalitions, they had a fundraising project through talent system. They contributed monies into a pool and then share it back among the members to generate some little profit which they would disburse towards the farming season to buy farming inputs. This was to empower women wing in different denominations since most of them did not have formal employment. This was a form of women and church empowerment. The pastor supported this women fellowship. The pastor did not only encourage, but also took part by leading through bible study, teaching and prayer. We allowed them to use the ELCZ local chapel for their meetings and fellowship since other denominations did not have infrastructure. They normally used the local primary school or worship under the trees.

### **Schools and community ministry**

In any given society, the church or other religion establishment, invariably tends to play an important role in shaping the community. The church functions as a spiritual and social institution (WEN, 2015:179). The pastor links the church and other social institutions. He/she carries the dreams and concerns of the community. There is no way one would leave out schools and clinics within the parish. These schools need pastoral or chaplaincy ministry. I had three primary schools and one secondary school, and one public clinic. I organized meetings with staff for community engagement and development. We discussed common issues that affect the clinic, school and the community as a way of building clinic, school-community rapport. In this context the pastor met with staff from different denominations. Once every month after work in every school, we had staff fellowships with those who wanted to have bible studies and prayers. Different topics for Christian living, marriage and family, and facing different challenges were dealt with. Crisis counselling on individual, family and work-related issues were handled. We offered prayers for the sick and suffering, and catechumen classes for those who wanted to join our church and be baptized.

The schools gave me an opportunity to hold catechumen lessons once a week during lunch breaks. Catechumen classes were attended by children from the ELCZ, Baptist and Zion as requested by their parents and church leaders. I did not segregate or reject them for not being ELCZ members. After teaching them they were baptized in their respective churches. Some of these leaders knew our catechumen lessons since they had Lutheran background. Some of them were former members of the Lutheran church or they learnt it at ELCZ mission schools they attended. In all these situations the pastor bridged the gap between the churches because people who are non-Lutherans received pastoral care from a Lutheran pastor. It was

---

<sup>7</sup> This was a Zion church led by a former ELCZ member who left because of polygamy.



a time of informal ecumenical engagement. In a way it was an expression that we belong together as the body of Christ.

### **Social and cultural occasions**

In the community, funerals, memorial services, weddings are social occasions that matter. The pastor and the church are expected to be available and provide the different services. "The Church has a presence and a diaconal ministry to offer into all such situations" (Pratt, 2016:225). The pastor and members of the congregations mark the presence of the church. During weddings people from different local denominations celebrate together bringing gifts and relaying their best wishes to the newly-weds. Although I was not a marriage officer, I facilitated four weddings and also performed premarital counselling sessions. I invited marriage officers to officiate weddings in my parish.

At funerals there was burial of Lutherans and non-Lutheran members. I accepted the call by the local community to officiate funerals and called other church pastors to work together on these services. In cases where one died in the city and was to be buried in the local parish, we gave the visiting pastors an opportunity to preach and contribute in burial procedures even if they were non-Lutheran pastors. Funerals were moments of giving theological and pastoral teaching, explaining and clarification on the rites and procedures conducted during these services. This helped to answer different questions from ELCZ and other churches on aspects of body viewing, laying of flowers, testimonies about the departed and confession of the apostles' creed. People have been doing these procedures without knowing their meaning and significance. Such explanations assisted churches to understand why we do these procedures and appreciate each other as 'church'.

### **Sharing of human and material resources**

Various forms of ecumenical engagements strengthened our relationships as local churches in the community. The ELCZ received and shared many gifts and resources from Chema, Jekenishini, Zion and Baptist. During our parsonage project we received human, financial and material resource support from our local ecumenical partners and neighbouring parishes. Through their contributions we managed to complete our project in a period of ten months. As churches, we celebrated together the official opening of the ELCZ parsonage and we became proud of our work together.

I also made a significant contribution by giving transport services to people from different churches on emergencies. I would use my car to transport wounded people to Masase and Sandawana police stations respectively. They needed to report and open their cases before being admitted to the hospital. I also transported the ill and the pregnant to Masase hospital with a minimal charge only for fuel. This was only possible due to our common understanding of being church together in the local community and being a pastor in the community. These services strengthened our local ecumenical engagement as local people regarded these as pastoral services through the ELCZ pastor. During my stay and farewell I received many compliments and wishes from various denominations. Some of them shared with me included grain, utensils and mats. We celebrated and cried together. This was a period of teaching and learning and development, strengthening local ecumenical engagement.

### **Lutheran Development Service (LDS) projects**

Through the LDS projects churches work together and strengthen their ecumenical ties. The LDS is a development wing of the ELCZ which runs the *diakonia* work and community development programs. In Bvumbura parish it contributed in the building of a classroom block



at Gaha primary in 2016. Through this type of diaconal work, the church promotes ecumenical work in local communities. People would see the ELCZ pastor as an ecumenical leader as I would be called by the LDS officials to participate in the LDS meetings with the school and the community. My duty was to officially open with prayer and encourage people to work hard on this project to meet the target set for the benefit of their children at this school.

There were two projects which ran continuously every year. These promoted local ecumenism by drawing membership from different denomination in the parish. Members were predominantly from AFM, Baptist, ELCZ and Zion churches. The LDS irrigation project brought the community together. In this garden they produced grain and vegetables for sale and family consumption. LDS also had self-help fundraising project of Savings Community Cooperative (SACCO) which equally drew its membership particularly from the local churches. The pastor was also an active member in this project. Members would bring together their monies and lend it out with small interest. After a certain period, members would share the profits and use them for personal development. These are community projects to empower the community but also promote local ecumenism. The role of the pastor was encouraging members of the community to join those projects for family and community development. The role of the pastor as an ecumenical leader remains outstanding in promoting local ecumenism. These are usually strengthened by the roles of the pastoral office.

### **Five pastoral roles in ecumenical context**

The pastor is strategically placed to promote local ecumenical engagement. The office and duties of the pastor to the community should provide him/her with better opportunities to serve as an ecumenical leader thereby promoting ecumenism 'from below'. This section will discuss the five key roles of pastoral office in the local ecumenical context. These are the pastor as a theologian, priest, prophet, counsellor and community leader.

### **The ecumenical theologian**

The pastor is a theologian means that he/she combines their pastoral calling and learning. The pastor generally has had some theological training and hence has theological tools and resources for to equip him or her in the ministry. Besides having Lutheran or specific denominational theology, one needs to be equipped in public theology<sup>8</sup>. Since the pastor is involved in public ministry, he/she cannot avoid public theology. Public theology enables the pastor to attend to issues with theological insights and give theological teaching to the church and community. The word of God and nature of the work of the pastor is theological, hence a pastor needs to be equipped theologically and have a compassionate and empathetic nature.

According to Carr (2008:x), "The pastor's practice of ministry informs (as well as being informed by) theological reflection". The pastor teaches doctrine and preaches the gospel. This requires one to have sound theology to help people to understand the link between the different Christian doctrines and the gospel. Paul told Timothy, a church leader "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:13). The role of the pastor's office is to guard against erroneous teachings. This is done through continuous preaching, teaching and correcting error amongst the congregants. The teaching and preaching become helpful to the church and the faith community in general when they are well thought out and organized. The pastor as a theologian equips the congregation for teaching, preaching and pastoral care even beyond their congregation. "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men (sic) who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). The role of a theologian is the identification of gifts and training of the laity

---

<sup>8</sup> Public theology is the desire for theology to engage with issues affecting the community. It involves reading the Bible with contextual issues in mind to build theological answers.





(Prime & Begg, 2004:60). Training is done through leadership, ministry and preachers' courses. The other way is that congregants tend to learn as they see the pastor/theologian do something as a role model. The congregation which is well equipped will do pastoral work better. The pastor as a theologian equips believers for ministry in his/her understanding of priesthood of the baptised.

Theologians continue to study and ask critical questions and look for answers on current contextual issues. A pastor reads the bible in context as he/ she reflects contextually to make the word of God relevant and meaningful to the community. Both the gospel and the pastoral interventions drive the pastor to give a theological integrated model response in every situation (Carr, 2008:1). This journey of studying helps in discernment of issues and challenges in the local context. The local pastor will be able to work with people of different denominational backgrounds. A pastor as a theologian is watchful of the things that create divisions like the continual use of references such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism (Prime and Begg, 2004:292). These need to be avoided since they tend to cause divisions among the people. A pastor as a theologian is always sensitive to topics and issues that divide people and strive to keep people together by reinforcing unity.

### **The pastor as the ecumenical priest**

All Christians become priests<sup>9</sup> by baptism, but pastors are further ordained for their ministry of service to the people of God. In the Old Testament priests were set apart for specific special role from the sons of Aaron (Leviticus 21). Their chief duty was consecration of the offering in the temple. Basically, a priest stood between God and people as he brought people's sins and petitions to God. Christ is the high priest who became both the priest and the sacrifice for human sins (Hebrews 8-9). The pastor as Christ incarnate also plays a priestly role. The pastor prays for the community and community's needs. Pastoral-priestly prayers are not meant only for the pastor's denomination but for the church and community in general. "Prayer opens us to the reality of God's grace and reminds us of our fundamental connection to others who call on the name of Christ" (Kinnamon, 2014:22). A priest "does not merely pray about the people but also offer prayer to God from the people" (Osmer, 2008:35). The pastor is identified with his/ her priestly role when his or her prayers articulate the needs of the people. This involves thanksgiving to God for all blessings for people from all across the denominational divide and the community. There is no segregation since all people belong to God and are part of His 'holy nation' (Nicolaidis, 2010).

The pastor leads the community into priestly listening by drawing their attention to the needs and care and support of others (Osmer, 2008:35). A priest listens to what God is saying to a given community context. "As a leader, a priest is also a good listener who listens to the word, to the people, and to the community at large" (Singarayar, 2012:17). Listening to God's word leads to discernment of the will of God. Listening to the people helps in finding ways of pastoral intervention. Priestly listening required in intercessory prayers for the community is equally needed in preaching and pastoral care roles. The role of a pastor as a priest demands a lot of listening to attend to God and his people in the congregation and the community. The pastor has a role to teach the members of the congregation some listening skills for them to do their pastoral roles within the congregation and community in general.

The other priestly role of the pastor is bringing the people together for Holy Communion "Through sacraments, priests make God present to the faithful, share His word with us and, at the same time, help people relate to each other and to God through community" (Singarayar, 2012:16). Through the communion table the pastor builds people's vertical and horizontal relationship. The pastor helps to create a meeting point for people and their God

---

<sup>9</sup> Priest is being used slightly different from other pastoral roles as a way of emphasis but generally the word pastor and priest are used interchangeably.



and with one another. The communion table does not only unite members of the pastor's denomination but also bring together in unity members from other denominations. It further unites us as Christian family with those who are near and far.

### **The pastor as an ecumenical prophet**

A prophet is a messenger of God to his people in a specific context. While the priest goes to God with the needs of the people, the prophet comes to the people with God's word. The prophet listens and speaks with God. He/she dwells much on the word of God. Thus, prophecy grows from priestly listening. In order to exert a positive prophetic role, the pastor has to understand the social realities of the community (WEN, 2015:179). The pastor keeps on reading the bible, with the community in mind. This is discerning the truth about the life of the people and their different life situations. Through discernment the pastor would prepare and preach sermons connected to the hearers' situations (Osmer, 2008). People can only be transformed if the pastor "offers concrete applications of the gospel" to their life situation (Singarayar, 2012). A prophet is always contextually relevant in his/her message. This should be the vision of the pastor in any given community.

The prophetic word would educate, comfort, counsel the hearer, warning and rebuking sin. The vision of the prophet is an alternative life-giving society. The word of the prophet seeks to change lives and transform the community to express the will of God on earth (Singarayar, 2012). "This is our commitment to contribute meaningfully to the realization of God's reign that ushers in the transformation of church and society" (Pratt, 2016:256). The pastor's role is preaching the word that build fraternal society that care for every member of the community (Acts 4:32).

Like the Old Testament prophets, the pastor boldly criticizes and rebuke sin and seek justice for all. The message of the pastor as a prophet seeks to bring about "God's reign characterized by peace, justice, freedom and abundant life for all" (Pratt, 2016:256). The prophet's message should build the community and encourage holy living that promotes love and unity. Love and unity begin in the local churches and provide a model for the community. The pastor preaches against oppression of the poor and the vulnerable of the society by the rich and powerful. As God's messenger the pastor takes sides with the poor, the widows and orphans. The work and vision of the prophet in the community is seeking the common good.

Communities are wounded because of sin and suffering. This gives birth to the spirit of despondency. As a prophet at every given opportunity, the pastor brings a word of life, hope and promises of God to heal the communities across denominational boundaries. When sin is rebuked, error is corrected love is built and strengthened. The pastor's message is a word of hope for abundant life in Christ. Hope is built by understanding the love of God and that he is the ultimate source of all life (Ecrement & Zarski, 1987:463). The pastor is the prophet of God to the church and community.

### **The ecumenical counsellor**

Pastoral counselling is at the centre of pastoral ministry. This takes place in and outside the pastor's specific denominational congregation. Being a pastor has to do with shepherding the flock. Shepherding involves feeding the congregation with the word through teaching, preaching and pastoral care and counselling. However, as an ecumenical leader, the pastor's work overlaps and end up crossing the boundaries beyond his/her congregation. The community looks up to the local pastor to give services in moments of suffering. He/she becomes the shepherd to all people in need throughout the local community. The office of the pastor is a community office where people access pastoral counselling services for free.



Pastoral counselling has to do with restoration of humanity to emotional, physical stability and well-being (Bowen & Bishop 2003; Waruta & Kinoti, 2000). According to Waruta and Kinoti (2000:7) a pastoral counsellor is both a pastor or any other member of the Christian community combining faith and science. Unlike other professionals the pastor applies biblical, religious and theological knowledge in counselling. Pastoral counselling relies on calling the presence of the deity making it sacred and unique. Counselling becomes one of the sacred services which the pastor can offer to the local community despite denominational affiliations. As a counsellor the pastor offers ministry of incarnation and presence of God throughout different life situations in the community. Through pastoral care and counselling the pastor becomes the servant of the community (Singarayar, 2012:19).

In the community he/she meets and offers pastoral care to the wounded, ill and bereaved. The pastor is embodied by the love and compassion of Christ that meet people in their situation of suffering. Christ felt compassion and attended to people's needs (Mark 8:2). "The love for Jesus also demands responsibility and sacrifice" to enter the pains of others (Singarayar, 2012:20). Like God who enters in the life of suffering humanity, the pastor enters in the people's suffering (Peterson, 1980:93). God is always where the sufferer is. Pastoral counselling allows people to meet God through the pastor in their own different circumstances. Through sermons the pastor provides counselling to the sick, the bereaved and their families, friends and relatives. These actions are meant to encourage, comfort and act as an expression of solidarity with the suffering (Dan Laing, 2015). It is common that the sick and bereaved have friends and relatives from different denominations and neighbouring parishes hence the local pastor attends to all according to their needs.

Wherever there are people or groups of people, conflicts and challenges are easily generated. Conflicts may arise in a family, in the congregation and sometimes across denominations and institutions. Through reconciliation, pastoral counselling helps and brings people together despite their often seemingly unbreachable differences. Reconciliation is meant to bring, unity, peace and harmony fulfilling Christ's mission (Lartey, 2003:65). The pastor is a worker of peace and reconciliation. He/she works toward resolving differences among Christians, couples and amongst the people in general (Prime & Begg, 2004:228). "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). The pastor is the counsellor and mediator to bring unity and reconciliation in the families and community. This is done without focusing a single denomination but attending to the needs and situations of the local communities. By virtue of training in pastoral counselling and the nature of his/her ministry the pastor crosses denominational boundaries performing duties of pastoral counselling. When dealing with teachers and school children, the pastor provides guidance through counselling. The pastor becomes an ecumenical leader.

Throughout his/her work as a counsellor, careful listening is required (Lartey, 2003; Singarayar, 2012; Ecrement & Zarski, 1987). Listening leads to understanding the underlying issues even beyond what is being verbalized by the client (Lartey, 2003). The form of listening required for the pastor is beyond individual matters but also community matters. The pastor needs divine guidance in the process of listening. In providing counselling services, "the pastor relies on the Holy Spirit for discernment of the problems" and intervention needed to address the needs of the people (Ecrement & Zarski, 1987:465). Dan Lang (2015:25) further asserts that "Seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance, then, the spiritual director/pastor should sensitively discern how to appropriately present applicable and eternal theological truths". This helps to provide existential and eternal comfort through integration of contextual experiences and biblical truths Here the counsellor listens to the counselee and to the true comforter, God the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18). The Holy Spirit equips both the counsellor and the counselee. The pastor/ counsellor is an ecumenical counsellor for he/she attends to the needs of people across the denominational divide.



## Community leader

A pastor is a community and thought leader. The pastor is highly regarded in the community due to the influential role of the pastoral office he or she is in. Generally, the pastor commands respect across denominations. His/her roles are performed in institutions like schools and hospitals and in the community at social gatherings such as for example funerals where people of different denominations meet for services. Pastoral leadership is assumed through teaching and guiding the community and its various institutions. Besides his/her personal presence in various community circles, pastoral roles are performed by the members of his/her congregation thereby shaping community life. It is through pastoral leadership that the congregation plays an important role in community development (Manala, 2010). As a community leader the pastor equips the saints for service and community engagement (Manala, 2010). The pastor uses the biblical and theological tools in teaching the congregation and community about good and responsible citizenship (Throop, 2008:18). In face of crime, substance abuse, violence and women abuse, the pastor becomes the thought leader seeking to make a difference in the community he/she is serving. This cannot be done in isolation but through bringing in other ministers from different denominations and other stakeholders forming cooperation and partnership agreements (Pratt, 2016:236). The pastor needs to engage with other local leadership for community development to avoid discord between the church and the community. Councillors, *sabhuku* (village head) and chiefs should have access to the pastor. The pastor seeks collaboration building broader local ecumenical networks.

Pastoral work focuses on the restoration and humanization of people of the community fulfilling the will of God (Peterson, 1980). Throop (2008:17) also avers that “Theologians and pastors joined forces to promote civil rights and face the social injustice of poverty and hunger”. This is driven by the conspicuous presence of love from within the pastor as a community leader (Prime & Begg, 2004:42). The pastor as a community leader should always alert about issues and events; such as funerals and community meetings that take place in the community. The pastor should be able to do a contextual analysis and offer a theological interpretation of issues of community concern (Osmer, 2008). Analysis would shape the practical action and response to every given situation in the community. The pastor should be relevant in both preaching, teaching and in his or her actions. The sermons taught should relate to contextual issues facing the community. The relevance connects the congregation to the community hence equipping Christians in their lives and towards service within the community.

The major role of the pastor is providing community leadership (Peterson, 1980:151). A leader should be a role model to others. “Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7). A church, a community of faith is a community that belongs to a larger community. All people belong together as they live and work together in social clubs, political parties, churches, schools and community development programs. The faith community or congregation where the pastor works is influenced by various social groupings in the community and similarly, the congregation has impact to these those social groupings (Peterson, 1980:152).

What the pastor/leader teaches at church filters down to larger community. It is equally true with the weaknesses of the pastor. One must be conscious that his or her words and actions affect both members of the church and the community at large. He/she needs to be exemplary in many ways (1 Timothy 4:12). The pastor is expected to teach and behave like a community thought leader. The pastor should be ready to teach and develop ideas within the community. He/she should be found to be available and contribute wisely in the occasions that matter to the people. People expect help and solutions to their problems from the pastor. The community look up to the pastor due to his/her status as a shepherd, professional and servant of God.



## Conclusion

Although the pastor is deployed to serve a specific parish in the ELCZ, his/her roles in the local community cut across the denominational divide. Generally, the pastor's work is ecumenical. This was my experience in Bvumbura parish. The parish does not exist in a vacuum, but in community with others. I served among various denominations within Bvumbura parish. Even without official invitation one is found in ecumenical engagement at weddings, funerals, meetings and in schools where people from different denominations gather and receive pastoral service from the pastor. This became a space for mutual learning and experiencing the love of God with one another. Given these experiences, the pastor should deliberately take initiatives to cultivate ecumenical spirit among the denominations in the local community. However, one should expect some challenges as churches are not easily convinced to work together for various reasons.

By nature of his/her office the pastor is an ecumenical leader. The pastor is also a theologian, priest, prophet, counsellor and community leader in every given context where he/she practices his/her pastoral ministry. In these offices, he/she listens carefully to give theological and pastoral interventions in the community. This is done both within the congregation and community at large. These offices continue to present the pastor as an ecumenical leader hence he/she should always leave like one. The pastor shapes community life hence influences the life of people from various denominations in the local community. The pastor remains the key role player in local ecumenical engagement.

## References

- Aoanan, M.L. (2015). Educating Pastors for Ecumenical Leadership, *Asia Journal of Theology*, 29, 2, 251-271. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 11 May 2018.
- Bowen, D. & Bishop, D. (2003). Pastoral Counselor Training in Russia, *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, 6, 4, 3-22, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 16 May 2018.
- Carr, W. (2008). *The Pastor as Theologian. The Formation of Today's Ministry in the Light of Contemporary Human Sciences*, Second Edition. London: SPCK.
- Dan Laing, S. (2015). Resurrection and Reason: A Patristic Consolation of the Bereaved, *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 8, 1, 8-27, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 16 May 2018.
- Ecrement, E, & Zarski, J. (1987). The Pastor-as-Counselor: Adlerian Contributions to the Process, Individual Psychology, *The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice*, 43, 4, 461-467, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 16 May 2018.
- Fackre, G. (2007). *The Church. Signs of the Spirit and Signs of the Times. The Christian Story. A Pastoral Systematic. Volume 5*, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Field, D.N. (2016). Where on Earth is the Church (Ekklesia)? In Ayre, C.W and Conradie, E.M., *The Church in God's Household. Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 116-136.
- Fuchs, L.F. (2008). *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology. From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality*, Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Kinnamon, M. (2014). New Contours of Ecumenism. Challenges to the Next Generation, *The Ecumenical Review*, 66(1), 16-24.



- Koopman, N. (2013). "Embracing Ecumenism Today", In Conradie, E.M. *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenism*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press,95-100.
- Lartey, E.Y. (2003). *In Living Colour. An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Second Edition. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- LWF. (2010). *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread. Official Report 2010*, Geneva: LWF Publications.
- Manala, M.J. (2010). A Triad of Pastoral Leadership for Congregational Health and Well-Being: Leader, Manager and Servant in A Shared and Equipping Ministry, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*. 66(2), 1-6, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 16 May 2018.
- Nicolaidis, A. (2010). 'The Laos tou Theou – an orthodox view of the "people of God"', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 66(1), 1-5.
- Osmer, R.R. (2008). *Practical Theology. An Introduction*, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans publishing Company.
- Pratt, D. (2016). "Unintentional Receptive Ecumenism: From Ecclesial Margins to Ecumenical Exemplar – A New Zealand Case Study". *RES* 8 .2. pp. 219-237.
- Peterson, E.H. (1980). *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Prime, D. & Begg, A. (2004). *On Being a Pastor. Understanding our Calling and Work*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Singarayar, J. (2012). Priest as a Prophet, *Priest*, 68(11), 15-14, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 11 May 2018.
- Throop, J.R. (2008). "The Pastor as Community Witness: Prophetic Call, Public Limits". *The Clergy Journal*, (July/August), 84(8), 17-18, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 16 May 2018.
- Waruta, D.W & Kinoti, H.W. (2000). Introduction. In Waruta D.W and Kinoti, H.W. (eds.) *Pastoral Care in African Christianity. Challenging Essays in Pastoral Theology*. Second Edition. Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1-13.
- WCC. (2014). *Ecumenical Conversations. Reports, Affirmations and Challenges from the 10th Assembly*, Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Wen, G. (2015). In Search of the Ecclesial Identity of the Post-denominational Churches: A Case Study of the Contemporary Chinese Ecumenical Theology in the Making, *Asia Journal of Theology*, 29(2), 175-194, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 11 May 2018.

**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**

The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.