



# Psychosocial Impacts on Pentecostal Church Pastors of Providing Support to Children in Need of Care and Protection: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Design

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## Abstract

Pentecostal church pastors are engaged in supporting children in need of care and protection. This study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis design to explore the psychological impacts on pastors of Pentecostal churches supporting children in need of care and protection. The study was conducted in South Africa with 19 criterion purposively selected Pentecostal church pastors. Semistructured face-to-face interviews were conducted. Data were analyzed thematically, guided by the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework. The trustworthiness of the study was established through adherence to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Findings indicate that Pentecostal church pastors derive satisfaction and happiness from providing care and support to children in need of care and protection. However, their inability to provide the requisite support results in feelings of sadness and disappointment. The provision of care and support to children encroaches upon the Pentecostal church pastors' family time and occasionally necessitates the utilization of family resources to deliver the required assistance. The assistance offered by Pentecostal church pastors to children in need of care and protection is accompanied by conflicting emotions of both satisfaction and emotional distress. Researchers recommend collaborative efforts between child protection practitioners, such as social workers and Pentecostal church pastors, to enhance support for children in need of care while maintaining their health and families.

**Keywords** Care and protection · Children · Pentecostal church · Pentecostal church pastors · Psychosocial · Support

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## Introduction

This interpretative phenomenological analysis study presents the psychosocial impacts on pastors of Pentecostal churches of providing support to children in need of care and protection. In the Republic of South Africa, children are protected under the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Republic of South Africa's (2006) Children's Act 38 of 2005. In terms of Sect. 110(1) of the Children's Act, social workers, ministers of religion, and religious leaders, pastors among others, are required to report any suspicion of children being abused or in need of care and protection. This suggests that while Pentecostal church pastors (PCPs) are not primarily responsible for supporting children in need of care and protection, they do play a vital part in the children's support networks.

Moreover, the support function aligns with the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, which are the fundamental mandates of Pentecostal churches (Melton & Anderson, 2008). Scriptures such as Matthew 18:5–6 and Matthew 19:14 stress the need to protect children by promoting their rights and dignity (Adebayo, 2020). Biblical teachings require pastors to create conditions that serve children in need of care and protection as this is a genuine expression of love (Vieth et al., 2012). Pastors should regard helping children in need of care and protection as a component of their biblical duty to love God and people as Christians are obliged to love their neighbors, which include children (Dwiraharjo, 2019). Furthermore, according to Adebayo (2020), by interpreting religious scriptures that emphasize the protection and dignity of children, pastors are well positioned to advocate for children's rights in society. Pastors are in a good position to inform their communities regarding the detrimental effects of child abuse and neglect, thereby promoting a culture of support and protection (McLeigh & Taylor, 2020).

Based on the above, PCPs in South Africa are providing care and support to children in need of care and protection. Leaders and members of Pentecostal churches are Christians who prioritize the influence of the Holy Spirit and are characterized by faith healing, baptism in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and the use of miraculous spiritual gifts (Kgagile, 2017; Nel, 2016; White, 2017). It is worth noting that Pentecostal churches in Southern Africa have experienced rapid expansion, influence, and participation in community development, rendering them an indisputable force in development discourse and practice (Gukurume, 2022). These churches have been recognized as playing a significant role in communities, as Niyodusenga (2021) indicated that they support child abuse victims in multiple ways due to their involvement in the community, families, and individuals' lives.

Although social workers are considered the main custodians of supporting children in need of care and protection (Alftberg, 2023), the involvement of PCPs in supporting children in need makes them play important role in child protection efforts. In their study, Spaumer and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2025) demonstrate that PCPs make significant contributions to the support of children in need of care and protection. While PCPs are supporting children in need, they are challenged by the lack of an integrated formal support system as well as the burden of an invisible workload (Venables et al., 2023). In their pastoral responsibility of supporting children in need, PCPs encounter trauma that can result in physical, cognitive, and behavioral repercussions, affecting both the pastors and their families (Hendron et al., 2014). Juczyński et al. (2022) highlight that while pastors provide support to children in need of care and protection, they are exposed to emotional distress, necessitating awareness and coping strategies for effective support. These experiences may contribute to traumatic stress. A study conducted by Roggenbaum et al. (2023) indicated that pastors encounter secondary traumatic stress because of their supportive functions,

especially when supporting children needing care and protection. Though the above studies explored the psychological effects of caring on religious leaders, the focus was not specifically on PCPs who support children needing care and protection in South Africa. Thus, this study focuses on the psychosocial impacts on PCPs of providing support to children in need of care and protection in the context of South Africa.

## Theoretical framework

The study was guided by the ecological systems theory, which is well positioned to provide a framework for understanding the various environmental factors influencing a child's development, particularly in the context of child protection (Erten & Kelebek, 2023). The ecological systems theory provides an understanding of the complex interaction between children and their environment while highlighting how factors like social support from institutions such as religious institutions can help mitigate the risk (September & Roman, 2023). In child protection, understanding these dynamics is crucial as it enables targeted interventions that enhance protective factors, such as collaboration among children's families, child protection practitioners, and PCPs. In the context of PCPs providing support to children in need of care and protection, the ecological systems theory helps to show how the interconnectedness of various systems in the PCPs' lives affects their family dynamics, as stated by Shelton (2024). By applying the ecological systems theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the PCP's family system by examining the multiple layers of influence on them, including their immediate family, extended family, community, and societal factors (Cook et al., 2024). Using the ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive approach that allows researchers to explore the psychosocial effects on PCPs who provide support to children in need of care and protection in a deeper manner.

PCPs' decision to provide services to children in need of care and protection has an impact on their microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. As Ru'iya (2019) indicated, the ecological systems theory can be used to understand the psychosocial behavior of pastors towards children in need. By applying the ecological systems theory, we can understand how different systems within the pastors' lives contribute significantly to shaping their psychological processes, potentially influencing their behavior and attitude towards children in need (Maranges & Fincham, 2024). According to the theory, individuals and their environments are seen as interdependent, which highlights the two-way influence of one on the other (Foo & Goy, 2023). The ecological systems theory can help to illustrate how PCPs' responses to children in need are shaped by their ideals, community norms, and institutional frameworks, which is useful for understanding their psychosocial behavior.

## Methodology

### Research design

The study was qualitative in nature, focusing specifically on the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. The IPA is a qualitative research method aimed at understanding lived experiences, and its strength lies in its focus on the personal meaning the research participants attach to their experience (Conroy et al., 2024). Interpretive

phenomenology focuses on understanding the deeper, contextually situated meanings of lived experiences (Kimberley, 2025). Kimberley (2025) further indicates that this research design allows researchers to engage with the participants' narratives; researchers are able to interpret the significance of these experiences within their specific contexts, in this case leading to richer insights and a more profound understanding of the phenomena surrounding supporting children in need of care and protection and its psychosocial impact. The use of IPA enabled the researchers to comprehend the lived experiences of PCPs who provide support to children in need of care and protection, as well as the psychosocial impacts of delivering such support.

## Setting and sampling

The study was conducted in Tshwane, which is one of the districts in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The City of Tshwane is significant to South Africans due to its role as a major urban center and as the administrative capital of the country (Phetla et al., 2024). The city has a diverse population and cultural heritage, which includes various Indigenous and religious practices. Schoeman (2017) reported that the proportion of Christians in South Africa rose from 79.8% in 2001 to 84.2% in 2013 and demonstrates the enduring presence of Christianity in South African society. This correlates with Matshobane's (2023) assertion that there is a significant growth in Pentecostal churches in South Africa, particularly in townships. Moreover, it is reported that one third of the overall population in southern Africa are members of Pentecostal churches (Anderson, 2018). Pentecostal churches in South Africa are characterized by large buildings and significant attendance, contributing to the prosperity gospel and social networks among members (Kgatlé, 2024).

Study participants were purposively sampled using criteria that included being above 18 years old, married, having at least passed grade 12, and having led a Pentecostal church for at least two years. Nineteen Pentecostal church pastors (16 males and three females) participated. The biographical data of the participants are given in Table 1.

## Data collection

The data were collected from 3 August 2023 to 20 October 2023. Each participant was interviewed at a venue of their choice, which was mostly their church. To initiate data collection, the first author (AS) sought informed consent from participants after providing them with the study's aim, benefits, risks, and how those potential risks would be mitigated. Furthermore, issues of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to disengage from the study were emphasized. Participants also agreed to be audio recorded. To uphold ethical standards and maintain the anonymity of participants, all identifying information was removed and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Data were gathered through face-to-face semistructured interviews aided by an interview guide. Semistructured interviews allow the researcher to gather rich and detailed data as they allow the participants to express their experiences in their own words, providing depth and nuance to the data collected (Benedict et al., 2024; Scanlon et al., 2024; Seo, 2024). After obtaining signed consent, the researcher asked questions related to biographical data. This was followed by the following core question: "How does supporting children needing care and protection affect you as pastors within the Pentecostal church?" Based on the participants' narration, the researcher explored further information regarding their

**Table 1** Biographical data of participants

| Pseudonym<br>Pastor (Ps) | Age | Gender | Education Level | Marital Status | No. of<br>Children | Race Group | Position  | Years in Pas-<br>toral role | Formal Theo-<br>logical Training | Church Area     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|------------|-----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Ps Jack                  | 52  | M      | Diploma         | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 18                          | None                             | Pretoria        |
| Ps Joe                   | 55  | M      | Degree          | M              | 2                  | B          | S. Pastor | 16                          | BA Theo                          | PTA East        |
| Ps Molatelo              | 45  | M      | Master's        | M              | 2                  | C          | S. Pastor | 14                          | BA Theo                          | PTA East        |
| Ps Tumelo                | 52  | M      | Grade 12        | M              | 2                  | B          | S. Pastor | 8                           | Diploma                          | Pretoria        |
| Ps George                | 41  | M      | BA Hon          | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 7                           | BA Hon Theo                      | Centurion       |
| Ps Leshaba               | 50  | M      | Degree          | M              | 2                  | W          | Pastor    | 28                          | BA Theo                          | PTA East        |
| Ps Mudau                 | 51  | M      | B-Tech          | M              | 5                  | B          | S. Pastor | 4                           | Adv. Diploma                     | Pretoria        |
| Ps Phophi                | 46  | M      | BA Degree       | M              | 2                  | B          | S. Pastor | 4                           | Diploma                          | Pretoria        |
| Ps Moses                 | 49  | M      | Matric          | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 3                           | None                             | PTA East        |
| Ps Muleya                | 45  | M      | Master's        | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 13                          | None                             | PTA East        |
| Ps Zwane                 | 41  | M      | Master's        | M              | 1                  | B          | S. Pastor | 12                          | MA Ministry                      | PTA East        |
| Ps Morris                | 55  | M      | Diploma         | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 22                          | Certificate                      | Bronkhorstspuit |
| Ps Molele                | 42  | M      | B. Com          | M              | 2                  | B          | S. Pastor | 10                          | Dipl. Minst                      | PTA East        |
| Ps Noel                  | 48  | F      | BA Social Work  | M              | 3                  | B          | Pastor    | 5                           | Diploma                          | PTA East        |
| Ps Tshupo                | 57  | M      | BA Ministry     | M              | 3                  | W          | Pastor    | 28                          | Diploma                          | Pretoria        |
| Ps Thabiso               | 43  | M      | Diploma         | M              | 3                  | B          | S. Pastor | 17                          | Diploma                          | Pretoria        |
| Ps Given                 | 63  | F      | B-Tech          | M              | 1                  | B          | S. Pastor | 6                           | None                             | Pretoria        |
| Ps Glory                 | 49  | F      | MA Mech Eng     | M              | 2                  | C          | Pastor    | 15                          | None                             | Pretoria        |
| Ps Masina                | 56  | M      | PhD             | M              | 4                  | B          | S. Pastor | 27                          | PhDTheo                          | Bronkhorstspuit |

experience and how they interpreted those experiences by utilizing probing questions, minimum encouragers, and paraphrasing of narratives to avert misunderstandings.

## Data analysis

As the design used was IPA, which emphasizes interactive data collection and analysis, the audio-recorded interviews were distributed to the co-authors after each data collection for verbatim transcription and analysis. The analysis was guided by the IPA framework for data analysis, focusing on participants' individual experiences (Starr & Smith, 2023). The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading the transcripts while becoming familiar with the content, using the opportunity to identify initial insights (Smith & Osborn, 2014). The researchers used the initial notes to identify emergent themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences; the themes captured were not predetermined but emerged from the data collected (Seo, 2024; Smith & Osborn, 2014). Emergent themes were then clustered into subordinate themes, which were further synthesized into superordinate themes (Seo, 2024). This hierarchical organization helped in structuring the analysis and understanding the broader patterns within the data. Through empathic engagement and critical questioning of the data, the researchers engaged in a double hermeneutic process, interpreting how participants made sense of their experiences while also reflecting on their interpretative role (McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021; Smith & Osborn, 2014). The final stage of data analysis involved constructing a coherent narrative that presented the findings in a way that was faithful to the participants' experiences, incorporating direct quotes from participants to illustrate key themes and interpretations supported by the literature (Scanlon et al., 2024). The data analysis of this study concluded with a discussion of the findings, highlighting their implications for PCPs supporting children in need of care and protection.

## Measures to ensure rigor

Rigor in the study was achieved through observing the following criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative studies by Lincoln and Guba (1985),

**Credibility** The study achieved credibility through prolonged interaction with participants while observing their nonverbal communication to gain a deep understanding of their experience (Ahmed, 2024). The researchers utilized multiple data sources to cross-verify their findings, and research participants were also involved in reviewing and validating the findings to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Ahmed, 2024).

**Transferability** The study achieved transferability as it provides detailed accounts of the research context, including the participants' experiences, which provides an opportunity to determine the applicability of the findings to different settings (Ahmed, 2024). Situating the findings within the broader context of the study helped to understand the relevance and potential applications of the research findings (Hartman & Squires, 2024).

**Dependability** By maintaining comprehensive documentation of the research process, which included data collection and analysis decisions, dependability of the study was achieved (Ahmed, 2024). The researchers engaged in reflexive practices through group

consultation to acknowledge and manage their biases and preconceptions, which they knew could influence the research process and outcomes.

**Confirmability** Through group discussions and critique, the researchers were able to review the research process and findings, ensuring that the results were not influenced by their own perspectives (Ahmed, 2024). This maintained a record of their experiences, thereby contributing to the transparency and confirmability of the research.

## Findings

Two superordinate themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) emotional impact and (2) social impact. Each superordinate theme is composed of themes and subthemes, as indicated in Table 2.

### Emotional impact

Emotional impact refers to the psychological effects individuals experience following a significant event (Sharma, 2024). The emotions of someone supporting children in need of care and protection can be positively or negatively affected as such support significantly touches and shapes their overall emotional health (Harp & Neta, 2023). This superordinate theme highlights the impact of supporting children in need of care and protection on PCPs. The superordinate theme is followed by two themes: positive and negative impacts on PCPs who support children in need of care and protection. The subsequent discussion pertains to these two themes.

**Positive impact** Supporting children in need of care and protection enhances their quality of life by promoting their safety and well-being (Higgins et al., 2024). This support also influences the physical and psychological well-being of the supporters as it fosters a sense of compassion and connection (Namkoong et al., 2020). The research participants reported that offering support to children in need of care and protection results in a sense of fulfillment and happiness. The subsequent section elaborates on these positive emotions, accompanied by quotations from the research participants:

**Table 2** Emergent themes and subthemes

| Superordinate Themes | Themes               | Subthemes                                           |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional impact     | Positive impact      | Sense of fulfillment                                |
|                      |                      | Happiness                                           |
|                      | Negative impact      | Sadness                                             |
|                      |                      | Disappointment                                      |
| Social impact        | Impact on the family | Encroaching on family time                          |
|                      |                      | Utilizing family finances                           |
|                      | Community            | Being hated by parents<br>People leaving the church |

**Sense of fulfillment** Supporting children in need of care and protection brings fulfillment and joy to PCPs. Providing support to children in need of care offers PCPs a profound sense of fulfillment in their divine mandate. The feeling of fulfillment and joy is encapsulated in the following narratives from the research participants:

When you help them, you feel great and like you've done something. Whether it's one child, two, or three, the fact that you managed to do something for someone is a feeling that will last for some time. You feel beyond and out of this world, knowing that you have at least protected or assisted someone in the way that you did. (Ps Molatelo)

Supporting children in need of care and protection is seen as part of fulfilling the Great Commission, which, according to Glucklich (2020), brings PCPs fulfillment and pleasure as this practice enhances social bonds and contributes to a sense of meaning, aligning with the broader goals of religious pursuits.

**Happiness** Participants expressed that providing support to children in need of care and protection brings them joy and happiness. The subsequent quotations encapsulate this concept:

In instances where I have assisted, it is gratifying to witness someone smiling as a result of my support. I experience joy when I recognize my contribution to the positivity in a child's life. (Ps Morris)

You become happy and proud that you are fulfilling your mandate, like someone had a better day or life because you stood in the gap. (Ps Moses)

PCPs engaging in mission work find fulfillment and purpose as their actions align with divine intentions, which fosters a sense of joy and satisfaction in their spiritual and communal responsibilities (Konz, 2018). PCPs have articulated a sense of fulfillment and happiness by effectively supporting children in need of care and safety. However, although there is a sense of fulfillment and joy in providing support to children in need of care, West (2016) indicates that failure to achieve this can create a sense of failure and shame, which can result in sadness. This is discussed below.

**Negative impact** While providing support to children in need of care and protection is beneficial to the children, West Al-Mahdi (2017) indicates that it can have a negative impact on those who are directly exposed to it as it inadvertently affects their own emotional well-being. These sentiments were shared by the research participants, who indicated that providing support to children in need of care and protection makes them sad and disappointed, especially when they are not in a position to provide the services the children need. These are discussed in detail below.

**Sadness** The inherent nature of pastors' work, which aims to positively impact individuals in distress, can lead to feelings of condemnation when they fail to provide the necessary support. PCPs perceive themselves as God's emissaries to their followers, and when they fall short of providing essential assistance, they experience disappointment, believing that



God has let the people down. The following statements from research participants align with these sentiments:

You experience a sense of disappointment and a sense of failure, as the church's purpose is to provide answers. If the church fails to respond, you experience discouragement, a sense of powerlessness as a pastor, a sense of inadequacy, as people look up to you, and ultimately, a sense of failure. (Ps Phophi)

When the children encounter a predicament and I am unable to assist, I experience a sense of guilt due to the unpleasantness of the situation. As a pastor and a father, I feel compelled to assist or intervene when someone approaches me. Inability to articulate your feelings of sadness may result in a sense of helplessness. (Ps Molele)

I am disappointed that it is our responsibility as a church to assist those who are unable to assist themselves. It makes me feel like we have failed the word of God, God, and the children who need care and protection. I am filled with disappointment, and I find myself addressing the church in one way or another. I believe that we cannot ignore issues that truly require our attention, particularly because we must demonstrate love to those who are unable to help themselves. (Ps Zwane)

Below, we examine the emotional experiences of pastors within Pentecostal churches—specifically their feelings of sadness, the impact these emotions have on their ministry, and their sense of fulfillment when they can assist children in need of care and protection. PCPs frequently hold moral authority in their churches and communities, and neglecting to support and protect children significantly undermines trust within these communities (Ryan, 2020). The pastoral role comes with role expectations, and failure to fulfill those roles can result in shame and stress (Cafferata, 2017). According to Jones and Gordon (2022), pastors approach their responsibilities with the expectation of perfection, and those who fail in what they perceive as their responsibilities often feel sad and engage in self-blame and self-criticism. Witnessing children's suffering and trauma can profoundly impact PCPs, particularly when they lack the necessary resources or training to respond effectively (Russell, 2018). This can contribute to secondary traumatic stress among PCPs, leading to mental health challenges such as sadness, depression, and anxiety, which can negatively impact their interactions within the church and their overall well-being (Roggenbaum et al., 2023). The emotional effects of PCPs' disappointment in supporting and protecting children in need are discussed below.

**Disappointment** Research participants viewed supporting children in need of care and protection as part of their calling mandate, and when their efforts appear insufficient, it leads to feelings of disappointment and personal inadequacy. When PCPs perceive that they are not fully meeting the children's needs, it can lead to further disappointment or compassion fatigue. The following evidence corroborates this:

When I fail to support these children, I feel disappointed with myself. This, in turn, affects my preaching as a pastor because you end up hearing voices like you're fighting a lost battle because you have to support and protect the children here on earth. After all, it is not just about going to heaven, even though we're winning souls. (Ps Mudau)

In situations beyond my control, I experience disappointment both in me and in God for not adequately supporting the child. This resulted in a deep sense of sorrow, particularly in light of the possible constraints imposed by external forces. It deeply saddens and disappoints me when I am unable to assist them. (Ps Leshaba)

PCPs should prioritize the protection of children, but their failure to fulfill this mandate undermines the moral and ethical responsibilities outlined in their religious teachings (Adebayo, 2020). Inadequate resources and manpower to address children's issues in the church and community contribute to the challenges in supporting children in need of care and protection, potentially leading to disappointment among pastors (Nyaga et al., 2024). Failing to support vulnerable children during a cost-of-living crisis could lead to significant emotional distress and disappointment among PCPs as these children face increased hardship, including hunger and inadequate living conditions (Purdy, 2022). According to Purdy (2022), when PCPs experience disappointment because they have failed to provide necessary support to children, this can lead to emotional strain and burnout, thereby reducing their capacity to provide adequate support and guidance. Children in need of care and protection might find themselves suffering more acutely during crises as the PCP is experiencing emotional strain.

## Social impact

Pentecostal church leaders address social issues that touch their families and resources while supporting children in need of care and protection. Efforts designed to improve the welfare of an individual or community are referred to as social impact (Rickard & Vella-Brodrick, 2014). The issue of social impact demonstrates how the actions of PCPs affect their families and familial resources. The subsequent analysis focuses on the social impact.

**Impact on the family** Family members of PCPs may experience emotional strain due to their loved one's caregiving responsibilities (Dutra & Rocha, 2021). Involving PCPs and their spouses in child protection initiatives can promote a shared responsibility for children's welfare, thereby strengthening the social fabric and support networks within families and communities (Diaconu et al., 2022). Providing care and protection for children impacts families of PCPs. The support also affects the families' finances as they typically utilize family resources to support children in need of care and protection. The following section elaborates on this theme by looking into the subthemes, with quotations from the research participants.

**Encroaching on family time** In times of crisis, parents or children often overlook boundaries when seeking support from PCPs, a choice that can eventually affect the leader's family. Such behaviors may negatively impact the PCP and their families. The research participants articulated this as follows:

Then they called me... the children came to fetch us at home... I took the car and went with my wife. It was midnight, and we made our way there in an attempt to communicate with the family. Due to the father locking them outside the house, the mother sent them to call us from the street. We had to wake up and drive there. (Ps George)

PCPs are invaluable resources for families going through tough times and for children in need of care and protection (Greene et al., 2020). Pastoring is a highly regarded profession because people and families look to PCPs for guidance in many different difficult times (Maina et al., 2018). While ministering to others is central to a pastor's vocation, Aguilera (2014) argues that separating one's responsibilities at home and in the church is necessary for a healthy family dynamic, avoids misunderstandings about who does what, and creates an atmosphere where members of both groups can flourish. Church and community members may start to expect their PCP to be available at any time, regardless of the pastor's family's needs, if there are no firmly established boundaries.

**Utilizing family finances** PCPs utilize their personal and familial resources to accomplish the Great Commission and Great Commandment, which encompass supporting children in need of care and protection. While this may benefit children in need of care and protection, it could adversely affect the financial stability of the families of pastors. A statement from one of the research participants corroborates this:

I have instances where I did not depend on the church to assist vulnerable children. I possess a compassionate disposition that compels me to allocate my financial resources to aid children in need, contingent upon their specific circumstances. (Ps Muleya)

PCPs rely on their family resources to fulfill their ministry calling, and where the income is insufficient, they supplement it with paid work (Ambrose, 2017). PCPs rely on congregational tithes, offerings, and donations for financial support, but these sources are often deemed unreliable due to fluctuating loyalty and economic hardship (Tagwirei, 2022). Due to limited church funding and the need for practical ministry initiatives in impoverished communities, pastors often rely on personal finances to support their ministries (Kabongo, 2021). However, it is worth noting that some PCPs integrate business or employment with ministry to achieve financial success while expanding their ministries (Masenya, 2021). Having personal financial resources enables PCPs to utilize their own and their family's resources to assist children in need of care and support, particularly in situations where the church lacks the financial capacity to do so. According to Tagwirei (2022), while some pastors utilize church funds and donations, concerns have been raised regarding the church's finances, particularly in relation to special collections such as love offerings, pastor appreciation, and assistance for the needy. These concerns have led some PCPs to resort to using their personal finances and family resources to support children in need of care and protection.

**Community** The community plays a crucial role in a child's ecosystem by sharing the responsibility for child protection, together with the parents and child protection practitioners (Mahmuddin et al., 2023). Positive interactions among residents can foster a supportive environment, enhancing children's safety (Katz & Maguire-Jack, 2022). Although PCPs play a crucial role in supporting children in need of care and protection, they have reported that parents of those children hate the PCPs. They have also indicated that they sometimes lose church members due to their intervention in cases where children need care and protection. We discuss this in detail under the following subthemes, incorporating quotes from the participants.

**Being hated by parents** In their intervention and support of children in need of care and protection, PCPs have indicated that parents sometimes retaliate against them. They are often seen as instigators of problems in families and are hated for it.

You remain the problem when parents and children resolve their challenges, especially after you have put in efforts to bring peace in the house. You find the other parents saying that the pastor is the one who started problems in our family, and as such, the family hates you. (Ps Tumelo)

Parents reportedly display resistance and hatred towards individuals attempting to support children in need of care and protection, often resorting to deception, which can adversely affect the assistance required by the child (Littlechild et al., 2016). The significant occurrence of parental neglect and psychological abuse underscores the necessity for enhanced parental knowledge and education regarding suitable child-rearing practices to avert various forms of abuse (Bachari et al., 2024). This might be challenging to accomplish in situations where parents abuse their children and instill hatred towards others who seek to provide protection and care for their children. Children frequently establish profound emotional connections with their parents, irrespective of the care quality, and this attachment may result in an enduring yearning for affection and approval from the parents, even under abusive circumstances (Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2020). Having to choose between their parents and an outsider, they will easily choose their parents, which can lead to more abuse and a lack of support.

**People leaving the church** PCPs are concerned that their efforts to support children in need of care and protection result in members leaving their church because of their intervention. Research participants capture this concern in the following quotes:

You need to be wise. If you rush to approach the parents, they can withdraw their child from the church, and you end up losing church members. Ps Noel

She no longer comes to church; her parents are not coming anymore. They have told one church member that they are no longer Christians. The parents said they want to raise the child the way they want. This becomes painful as you want to support the child, but you can't as she and her parents left the church. (Ps Masina)

Churches often face criticism for their handling of abuse cases, particularly when there is perceived complicity or inadequate response (Whyte, 2024). The fear of losing church members in cases of abuse or child neglect often leads to silence and inaction within the church community (Mukuka, 2023). As indicated by Banda (2020), PCPs often worry about member retention due to their individualistic leadership style, which prioritizes personal visions over Christ's teachings. Furthermore, PCPs fear losing church members due to the competitive nature of the religious market, where multiple churches vie for followers. They rely on the loyalty and financial support of their congregants, making them hesitant to speak out against abuse (Agazue, 2016). Churches and their leadership are often criticized for not speaking out on abuse happening both in the church and the community, as indicated by Zondag and van Uden (2015), and such silence has led to the erosion of trust, resulting in unintended consequences such as loss of reputation and congregants' gradual

distancing from the church. Intentionally ignoring supporting children in need of care and protection will make members lose faith in the church leader.

## Discussion of findings

PCPs experienced both positive and negative aspects in their roles of fulfilling the Great Commandment and Great Commission, as commanded in Matthew 22:37–40. They felt fulfilled and happy when they supported children in need of care and protection, which boosted their sense of self-worth, and they found alignment with their divine purpose and their role in advancing their faith's core teachings. However, they also faced challenges in supporting children who needed care and protection, which evoked deep and complex emotions given the spiritual and moral weight of fulfilling the Great Commandment and Great Commission.

PCPs believe their congregants trust them to provide answers or solutions to their challenges, and failing to provide such often leaves them with a deep sense of guilt. Due to limited resources and, in some cases, a lack of knowledge about the support available for children in need of care and support, PCPs often find themselves helpless and sad. Their experience of sadness and empathy overload can result in unresolved pain and hardship, which can weigh heavily on their hearts, causing emotional exhaustion. In supporting children in need of care and protection, PCPs face complex cases, which makes them interpret failing a child in need of care and protection as exposing the child to divine failure. This inability to provide support and protection to children in need impacts PCPs' mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

The time spent supporting children in need of care and protection often leads to PCPs being extremely busy, struggling to satisfy all parties involved and neglecting their own well-being, including that of their family. In their pursuit of fulfilling their divine purpose by ministering to the community and church members, there is an expectation that PCPs are always available. Those who fail to set reasonable boundaries risk compromising their health and jeopardizing their family's happiness. While supporting children who need care and protection provides PCPs with a stronger sense of closeness to God as they demonstrate love through service and worship, it can have unintended negative consequences for the PCP's family.

Using family finances to support children in need of care and protection can negatively impact the stability of the PCP's family. This, in turn, can affect the pastor's relationship with their spouse and children, particularly when there is a lack of proper communication or decision-making processes. When there is agreement within the family about using family finances to support children in need of care and protection, this can result in a shared sense of mission and purpose. When PCPs use family resources and finances without family agreement to support children in need of care and protection, it can result in unmet personal needs, debt, or reduced financial stability, which can lead to stress and tension within the marriage. While supporting children in need of care and protection is important for PCPs, they have the responsibility to make sure that their own children and spouse do not feel undervalued as this can lead to strained relationships.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are meant to address the impact of supporting children in need of care and protection on PCPs. The recommendations provide an opportunity to strike a balance between the spiritual and emotional demands of ministry and self-care while ensuring that children in need of care and protection are supported. The following are the recommendations:

- PCPs need to establish a distinction between their personal and pastoral responsibilities, be transparent about their working hours, and only work after hours if necessary. This approach will safeguard their mental and physical well-being by ensuring that they have sufficient time for introspection, family time, and relaxation.
- PCPs should seek regular supervision or mentorship from experienced peers or counselors with an understanding of the emotional demands of their role, especially in supporting children in need of care and protection.
- PCPs should build a network of professionals such as social workers, counsellors, and child protection experts who can offer specialized support while helping PCPs distribute the emotional and practical burden of supporting children in need of care and protection. This will further help ensure that their support for children in need of care and protection is holistic and appropriate.
- PCPs and the church leadership should develop an action plan for child protection in collaboration with child protection practitioners, providing actionable procedures for supporting children in need of care and protection. The action plan can, among other things, involve developing child protection policies, identifying organizations for referral, and ensuring that church leadership and structures are aware of reporting procedures in line with the legal statutes.
- PCPs should conduct community awareness and engagements in collaboration with child protection practitioners, which will assist in reducing the pressure on the pastors as the only source of providing solutions while promoting a collective approach to supporting children in need of care and protection.

## Conclusion

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that PCPs experience a complex psychosocial blend of fulfillment and emotional strain in their efforts to support children in need of care and protection. Their desire to please God in fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission becomes a crucial driving force in their efforts to support children in need of care and protection. Although the role of supporting children in need of care and protection aligns well with their faith's core values, they face challenges such as limited resources, overwhelming emotional responsibilities, and pressure to provide solutions for children in need of care and protection. Facing these challenges results in guilt and emotional exhaustion, which impacts their well-being—especially when their personal and family life is neglected. When PCPs make improper use of their family resources to support children in need of care and protection, it can result in unresolved strain within the family, financial instability, and stress.

**Authors' contributions** AS (Lead Author & Conceptualization): Developed the research idea and formulated the study's aims. Led the writing of the manuscript, including the introduction, literature review, and discussion. Conducted initial data coding and thematic analysis using the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework. Ensured academic rigor in research design and methodology. AHMM & AS (Data Collection & Methodology): Designed the qualitative research methodology, including participant selection and interview structure. Conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the 19 religious leaders. Assisted in thematic analysis by cross-checking codes and validating themes. RPM & AS (Findings & Recommendations): Focused on analyzing and synthesizing findings. Drafted and refined the results section, highlighting key themes of satisfaction, distress, and family resource strain. Formulated recommendations for collaboration between religious leaders and social workers. Reviewed and edited the manuscript for coherence, ensuring alignment with ethical considerations and practical applications. Contributed to the discussion on rigour (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability).

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethical consideration** The Department of Research and Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa analyzed and approved the study proposal under the reference number 37360450\_CREC\_CHS\_2022, thereby providing ethical clearance. The researchers ensured adherence to the following ethical principles: obtaining informed written consent from participants, ensuring their voluntary participation, safeguarding their anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality, and maintaining scientific integrity. The study had the potential to cause emotional distress among participants by eliciting past sensitive experiences during interviews. This was prevented by employing specific therapeutic strategies, including empathic listening. Following the interview, participants who required support were referred to a counsellor.

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