



Death and mourning rituals in a Pentecostal church in Bolobedu South, Limpopo, South Africa



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Background: Death is an inevitable event that impacts most individuals in various ways, prompting some to participate in numerous activities in response to its effects and to seek healing or closure. Among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South in Limpopo province, South Africa, there existed speculation regarding death and mourning customs observed by grieving members, which left some followers of a Pentecostal church, Emmanuel Assemblies, uncertain about how to engage with these rituals. They turned to the Bible as their guide to assess the situation, aiming to uphold their faith without compromise.

Objective: The study's objective was to explore the death and mourning rituals performed by the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South in Limpopo province, South Africa.

Method: Utilising Osmer's framework, the article initiated research into these rituals by purposefully selecting 39 participants from five villages, namely, *Ga-Motupa*, *Kgwekge*, *Relela*, *Morutjie* and *Motlhomeng*, with the aim of ascertaining the reality of the situation.

Results: To develop a biblical counselling model that could assist members of the Emmanuel Assemblies Church residing in the same area in addressing death-related rituals that require their involvement.

Conclusion: This model integrates Magezi's seven pastoral care approaches and Scott and Lambert's counselling steps.

Contribution: The article contributes to the effort by offering practical solutions tailored to the specific African ministry in Pentecostal context of South Africa.

Keywords: death and mourning rituals; counselling model; bolobedu south; Pentecostal church; pastoral care.

Introduction

Death impacts every aspect of life; it brings sorrow, mourning and engages many in rituals of remembrance. Martin et al. (2013:42–62) explore the importance of studying these rituals to understand their psychological effects on bereaved family members. The willingness of the living to participate in such rituals underscores the significance of death and individual beliefs. Lobar, Youngblut and Brooten (2006:44–50) suggest that rituals are inherited across generations. Through observations during visits, the inseparability of death and mourning rituals from belief systems becomes apparent. Makgahlela (2016:42) notes that people's understanding of death profoundly influences their experiences of grief and the process of healing.

While death is a universal experience, its impact varies from person to person (Shelly 2012:1). Kotzé, Lishje and Rajuili-Masilo (2012:746) suggest that while the loss of a life partner is deeply personal, mourning rituals are communal practices.

During a district conference held by the Emmanuel Assemblies in Bolobedu South, the youth sought guidance from pastors on matters concerning death and mourning rituals. These instances highlight the impact of such rituals on believers and non-believers alike and underscore the need for well-equipped counsellors to aid Christians navigating these experiences. Unfortunately, there is a lack of a biblical counselling model within the movement to assist its members.

To address this gap, the researcher adopts Osmer's (2008) research method, enabling engagement with ethnographic contexts. Osmer's (2008) practical theological reflection research methodology focusses on four tasks, namely, the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. These four tasks seek to answer these questions: What is going on? Why is it going on? What ought to be going on? and How might we respond? Osmer's approach

is applied as a framework to direct the data collection method. Thus, the below-mentioned subsidiary questions. The researcher selected the Osmer's model because his steps serve as a window to shape the researcher's observation and interview process. Therefore, his efforts are relevant and will help the researcher to develop a biblical counselling model that will assist Balobedu Christians of Emmanuel Assemblies in Bolobedu South in dealing with death and mourning rituals.

The central objective is to develop a biblical death and mourning counselling model to help Balobedu Christians of the Emmanuel Assemblies Church deal with death and mourning rituals practiced in their community. The main research question is: *How might a biblical death and mourning counselling model help the Balobedu Christians of Emmanuel Assemblies Church in Bolobedu South deal with death and mourning rituals?* The associated subsidiary questions are: Historically, how do Balobedu people view death and mourning? What do social scientists and theologians teach about death and mourning rituals? What does the Bible teach about death and mourning rituals? What strategies can one use to design a biblical death and mourning counselling model to assist the Balobedu Christians of Emmanuel Assemblies? Biblical in the fourth subsidiary question refers to textual interpretation that resonates with the Bible. Unbiblical being the opposite.

Undeniably, death and mourning rituals are very elaborate and can span a broader range between communities. It was, therefore, necessary to delimit the research, using purposeful sampling (Palys 2008:697–698), to increase the focal point. The study only investigated death and mourning rituals performed by community members except for the royal house. According to Kweku (2013:paragraph two), Bolobedu has over 150 villages, but the study focusses only on the following places: *Ga-Motupa, Kgwekgwe, Relela, Morutjje and Mohlomeng*.

The researcher resides among the participants, understands many cultural factors of the communities involved, and can also address challenges, unlike when a researcher is an alien among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South. A few months of a participatory ethnographic study containing the necessary data helped to identify consistency from one village to another within the same cultural group.

The following four sections address each of the subsidiary questions.

Some observed death and mourning practices in Peru, Italy and Ghana

Death affects all facets of life; death brings grief, bereavement and mourning and subjects many to death and mourning rituals. These are nation or clan and culture-specific, impacting the immediate family members rather than relatives who observe them. To demonstrate this view, three nations from three continents are discussed.

In Accomarca, Peru and Rojas-Perez (2017:51–65) differentiates between two categories of death: natural and unnatural.

Natural death typically arises from illness or the natural process of ageing while unnatural death results from suicide, accidents or disease occurring before old age. When community members pass away from natural causes, they are accorded customary mourning rituals, which involve: (1) holding a wake for mourners to view the deceased, (2) sharing anecdotes and memories of the deceased's life at the wake, (3) presenting flowers; (4) organising gatherings and (5) conducting extended memorial services, reflecting the celebration of the deceased's reunion with ancestors (Rojas-Perez 2017:51–65).

Among Italians, death and mourning customs were established by preceding generations and passed down through the ages. As early as the 13th century, these traditions persisted, drawing attention from legal authorities. Such rituals often involved women publicly lamenting and tearing their hair, as documented by Lansing (2008:14). In the city of Orvieto, Italy, authorities implemented regulations governing funeral and mourning observances specifically for women while excluding men from participation. Failure to adhere to these regulations could result in imprisonment or substantial fines (Lansing 2008:14).

According to a report by Stoeltje (2017:58–92), among the Komboka people of northern Ghana, a unique method involving a self-made tube filled with gunpowder is utilised to announce someone's passing to the community. Drummers accompany this sound with additional beats, providing further context such as whether the deceased was a senior citizen or a young man. This tradition contrasts with Nigerian customs, where it is customary for widows to publicly lament their husband's death by wailing through the streets to alert community members. Additionally, upon the death of a member among the Komboka, their immediate family gathers clothing to adorn the house, symbolising the deceased's prosperity.

Death and mourning in some Bible passages

1 Kings 13:1–13, provides the narrative of a young prophet whose life and death are detailed. God had tasked him with specific duties in Bethel, where King Jeroboam of the northern kingdom had erected an altar. Tragically, the prophet met his demise when he was attacked and killed by a lion while travelling. An older prophet later buried him and erected a monument at his grave site. Matthews (2020:200–206) asserts that this monument, which endured even after King Josiah's destruction of graves and burning of bones, stood as a testament to the steadfastness of God's word regarding his people's obedience. Similarly, Angel (2005:31–39) draws parallels between this account and the narrative of Balaam and the donkey, highlighting the themes of divine will and human interaction. The contrast serves to illuminate the question of whether God's will can be altered and how he interacts with humanity.

In Mark 5:35–42 and Luke 7:11, the Bible recounts the accounts of the death and subsequent mourning rituals observed for a

young girl and a young boy, both of whom were miraculously raised from the dead by Jesus. Similarly, John 11:1–44 details the mourning rituals surrounding Lazarus, whom Jesus also resurrected. When Jesus encountered mourners wailing over the girl's death, he instructed them to cease mourning, stating that she was merely asleep. The mourners swiftly transitioned from sorrow to laughter. Michael (2012:79) suggests that their reaction stemmed from being hired mourners who lacked genuine empathy for the family's loss.

Pope Francis (2021:53) posits that Jesus' motivation for performing the resurrection was not solely prompted by the death and mourning rituals but rather by his deep sense of compassion and care. He discerned genuine emotion beyond the mourning customs exhibited by the woman, which moved him to action.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the South African Theological Seminary's Research Committee (No. REC2019_12779).

Research participants and field study results

The researcher applies an observatory and purposeful primary interview sampling (Palys 2008:697–698) to explore death and mourning rituals among the Balobedu. A total of 39 participants were interviewed (8 adult males, 11 adult females, 15 youth females and 5 youth males). The participants were widows, widowers, young males and females, adult males and females. Some are Christians and others are not. The researcher obtained an ethical clearance letter and a letter of informed consent. The participants signed the letter of informed consent before participating in the study. During the interviews, the researcher noticed that although perceptions and experiences on death and mourning rituals differed from one person to another, there were common expressions among participants from the five villages. If more than 50% of the target population mentions ritual incidents in funerals, it indicates that the practices are consistent. The researcher later transcribed the responses from the respondents (Bernard, Wutich & Ryan 2016:121–122; Saldaña 2015:58–60), and categorised the data into different clusters. This categorisation process is called verbal exchange coding (Elliott 2018:2850–2861; Saldaña 2015:7 & 370). Themes emerging from the coding process are: (1) pre-burial practices, (2) intermediary mourning rituals, (3) burial rituals, (4) post-burial rituals and (5) rituals for unnatural deaths.

A proposed biblical counselling model for Emmanuel members

This section zooms in the main research question and the last subsidiary question mentioned in the introduction section. What strategies can one use to design a biblical death and mourning counselling model to assist the Balobedu Christians

of Emmanuel Assemblies? And, What strategies can one use to design a biblical death and mourning counselling model to assist the Balobedu Christians of Emmanuel Assemblies?

To respond to the main research question, the following section proposes a biblical counselling model that applies Magezi's seven approaches of pastoral care¹ (Magezi 2016:4–6) and Scott and Lambert's (2012:157–180) three steps of counselling. The model also includes a section on psychological support.

Enculturation of the model

As per Mokhutso (2019:64), there exists a necessity to amalgamate Christian bereavement rituals with African cultural death and mourning customs to mitigate conflicts between the church, family and community. Nonetheless, this amalgamation should not mandate Pentecostals in Emmanuel Assemblies to merge indigenous practices with the teachings of Scripture. Rather, the criteria for inclusion and exclusion ought to be grounded in identifying parallels between these customs and biblical principles.

The researcher contends that merely providing spiritual counselling is insufficient and advocates for integrating a section on psychological support that addresses the African death and mourning context within the counselling framework. This approach harmonises the Bible, psychology and the African death and mourning milieu. It underscores the community's role in offering care and support (compare Kiriswa 2002:26) as well as the counsellor's role as a listener akin to a diviner, as individuals seek her guidance for healing or life advice (Berinyuu 1989:93–98). Consequently, the pastor, akin to a diviner, should demonstrate Kasambula's (2004:159–160) stages of: discernment, clarification, interpretation, support, reflection and response to the concerns raised by grieving family members. The pastor delivering pastoral care must assist Pentecostal church members in prioritising Scripture over community practices in cases of contradiction. Hence, the proposed hybridisation of Magezi's and Scott and Lambert's approaches and adding psychological support. Magezi's seven approaches are discussed first, Scott and Lambert steps are discussed second and a psychological support is discussed last.

The first in formulating a biblical counselling model for Emmanuel members is to apply Magezi's (2016:4–6) counselling steps.

Magezi's seven approaches

Magezi (2016:4–6) discusses how pastoral care and its associated ministry in various regions of Africa manifest in at least seven distinct ways, naturally emerging in response to the pastoral needs of the people. He outlines these approaches as follows:

The first approach involves blending African traditional practices with Christian pastoral care practices. The second

1. "Pastoral care" and "pastoral counselling" are used interchangeably.

approach draws a clear distinction between Christian values and practical life. The third approach involves persevering in Christianity despite facing scorn and criticism. The fourth approach focusses on forming family and community support structures. The fifth approach emphasises family group enrichment, while the sixth approach revolves around exorcism and healing. Lastly, the seventh approach, known as position reversal, involves reverting to old traditional methods of problem-solving.

In the first approach, individuals combine African traditional practices with Christian ones because they believe neither alone can adequately address their issues. Similarly, in the second approach, believers supplement Christian values with African traditional practices, such as '*ho laola*' (using indigenous healers to predict conditions). The third approach, labelled agonising in Christianity, involves maintaining Christian beliefs despite external criticism.

The fourth approach concentrates on establishing support structures within families and communities to tackle challenges together. The fifth approach fosters peer-group discussions to address life challenges, while the sixth centres on exorcism and healing by using tangible objects believed to ward off evil spirits. Finally, the seventh approach sees Christians reverting to traditional methods to solve life problems.

While the researcher agrees with Magezi's (2016:4-6) categorisation, he introduces another approach termed the 'confused approach' for some Pentecostal church Emmanuel Assemblies. These members desire to maintain their Christian faith but struggle to reconcile it with Balobedu death and mourning rituals. They seek biblical guidance in navigating these rituals, leading the researcher to propose a biblical counselling model based on Magezi's approach.

The first step in applying Magezi's approach involves categorising unbiblical and unbeneficial death and mourning rituals for Emmanuel members.

Unbiblical-unbeneficial pre-death and mourning rituals:

Upon the confirmation of an individual's passing by two elders from the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South, the family proceeds to inform other immediate family members and in-laws who reside separately from the deceased. Upon their arrival, the messenger conducts several rituals: (1) sprinkling water on the face of the recipient of the news, (2) instructing them to spew saliva before delivering the sombre message, (3) assigning a person to cleanse the room where the individual passed away using water infused with specified herbs, (4) *performing ho phasa* rituals, which involve offering snuff and pouring cold water with maize meal while communicating with ancestors, (5) applying ash wax to tint the windows, (6) providing daughters-in-law with matching head coverings to create a uniform appearance and (7) seeking guidance from an indigenous healer to determine the cause of death. If the message is conveyed via phone, the messenger follows the rituals outlined in point 2.

In cases of unnatural deaths such as road accidents or homicides, additional rituals are observed: (1) utilising specific tree branches and herbs from the indigenous healer to guide the deceased's spirit from the place of death to their burial site, known as *ho hoha lešaša*, (2) constructing a temporary shelter outside the compound to house the coffin overnight before the burial and (3) prohibiting mourners from spending the night with the coffin in the shelter, as is customary for natural deaths.

For childless adults, specific rituals are performed, including the insertion of a burning piece of firewood into the deceased's anus on the evening preceding the burial, symbolising their childlessness. During the burial ceremony, a family member may verbally chastise the deceased for their lack of offspring as the coffin is lowered into the grave.

Unbiblical-unbeneficial burial mourning rituals: The following are mourning rituals that are not in accordance with biblical teachings and may not provide beneficial support for the grieving process:

- At the gravesite, for both natural and unnatural deaths, a man traditionally scoops soil using a spade or shovel and stands beside the grave. Mourners then grab handfuls of soil and throw them into the grave while speaking specific words. Additionally, utensils such as knives, a water-filled calabash, spear, goat skin, Adrian plants, plates and cups are placed in the grave to accompany the deceased.
- At home, the first-born child of the deceased lies down covered with a blanket to allow individuals carrying the coffin to pass over him. This leaves a section of the child's skull uncut, resembling a mat, while the other section is fully shaven. This style, known as '*o thekha kheodo*', is said to support a child suffering from malnutrition.

Unbiblical-unbeneficial post-burial rituals: The following are post-burial rituals that are not aligned with biblical teachings and may not offer beneficial support during the mourning process:

- Following the burial, death and mourning customs involve washing hands in a water basin placed at the gate upon returning from the graveyard, as well as brewing *bjalwa bja tlhoni*, a traditional beer made from leftover porridge after the mourning meal.
- In the early morning hours after the burial, bereaved family members engage in widowhood rituals at the river, overseen by an indigenous healer or the matriarch of the bereaved. These rituals include: (1) teaching the widow how to lament and express her grief, (2) piercing her genitals with a sharp cane peel and (3) jumping over a boiling clay pot containing herbs.

As previously mentioned, after the designated mourning period, members of the bereaved family gather to participate in a cleansing ritual led by an indigenous healer. Two rituals are observed: the first is for children 6 months after the burial and the second, occurring 12 months after the burial, involves: (1) steaming the entire family, covering them with

blankets as they inhale vapours from hot stones placed in water mixed with herbs, (2) shaving their hair, (3) cutting and piercing parts of their bodies and inserting herbs to address matters related to death, (4) removing their mourning attire and (5) appointing a replacement husband for the widow, who is instructed to engage in sexual activities according to the prescription of the indigenous healer to avert *makhuma*.

In preparation for the conclusion of the widowhood mourning period, the widow participates in various activities, including purchasing a traditional doek and t-shirts for the matriarch.

The second step in applying Magezi's approach is to categorise biblical and beneficial death and mourning rituals for Emmanuel members.

Beneficial death and mourning rituals for Emmanuel members: The practice of washing the deceased's body, embalming it, anointing it with sweet-smelling spices and ointments and dressing it in clean clothes is commendable and aligns with scriptural principles. Similarly, sharing the news of someone's passing, offering mutual support and preparing for the burial place are also essential practices that resonate with Scripture. Additional mourning rituals that hold significance include: (1) remaining with the person on their deathbed, anticipating any final instructions from the deceased and (2) viewing the remains of the deceased either in a hospital or at home on the night preceding the burial day.

Beneficial burial rituals for Emmanuel members: A respectful and dignified burial ceremony entails several key components: (1) carrying the coffin to the grave in a solemn procession, (2) singing songs or hymns to offer comfort to the grieving family and attendees, (3) placing the coffin into the grave with reverence, (4) covering the coffin with soil as a symbol of closure and respect for the departed and (5) expressing gratitude to the community members for their support and assistance throughout the funeral proceedings.

Beneficial post-burial rituals for Emmanuel members: The Balobedu people of Bolobedu South gather annually to participate in the *ho phasa* ritual, during which they also visit the graves of their ancestors to familiarise descendants with the burial sites. This occasion serves as an opportunity to recount stories about their shared history, including business endeavours, problem-solving techniques and life lessons. This practice bears similarity to the tradition of erecting tombstones and monuments, signifying the conclusion of burial rites as depicted in scriptures. Beyond its symbolic significance, the *ho phasa* ritual holds value because departed relatives may have imparted notable skills that surviving members can revive or apply in their own lives.

The third step in applying Magezi's approach is to respond to the confused approach.

Responding to the confused approach of Emmanuel members: Pre-burial rituals: One of the significant rituals

observed among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South involves sitting near the deathbed to listen to the final instructions of the deceased. Participants from Morutjie, Relela and Motupa emphasise the honour bestowed upon those privileged to receive these instructions, as they are regarded akin to the deceased's last will. Some individuals from Morutjie and Motlhomeng mention that these instructions may include the whereabouts of hidden treasures, as elderly individuals often chose to conceal their wealth rather than deposit it in banks.

Participants from Relela and Motupa note that during this time, people not only offer blessings and voice grievances against adversaries but also seek reconciliation and pronounce forgiveness. It is believed that leaving unsettled matters may cast a shadow on the afterlife journey.

Another important ritual involves viewing the deceased. Once the funeral undertakers place the coffin in the designated room the night before the burial, the eldest uncle of the bereaved family confirms the identity of the deceased by allowing the undertakers to open the coffin's lid. Immediate family members are then invited to view the deceased, accompanied by the matriarch of the family, who also guides the deceased's children, especially minors, through the process, whispering to them that their parent has passed away and will no longer be seen.

For members of the Emmanuel community, this time of viewing provides an opportunity for emotional support, akin to the period of mourning experienced by the sons of Jacob after the death of their father. While Emmanuel members may not practice embalming, it is important for them to have this time to view the deceased before burial, as it facilitates acknowledgement of the reality of death.

Treating the deceased with dignity and respect remains paramount among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South. Thus, bathing, anointing with ointments and dressing the deceased in clean attire are customary practices.

Hastily burying the deceased without proper viewing may hinder the healing process for bereaved members of the Emmanuel community. A study conducted by Makgahlela et al. (2021) among the Northern Sotho-speaking people highlights the significance of death and mourning rituals in the healing journey, particularly through the act of viewing the deceased, which helps the bereaved confront their pain and find healing. Additionally, the study underscores gender-specific practices during the viewing process, reflecting the care accorded to women, consistent with the notion of women as 'weaker vessels' deserving of special consideration as per scripture.

Burial rituals: When a person passes away, it is customary and humane to ensure they receive a proper burial, a practice observed in various instances throughout the Bible. Emmanuel members, while recognising the inevitable decay

of the body, still hold to the principle of treating the deceased with respect. According to Berg (2017), women who supported Jesus' ministry took on the responsibility of burying him according to Jewish customs, despite the lack of dignified burial rites for crucified individuals during that time. This tradition of proper burial aligns with the practices of New Testament believers, exemplified in the burial of Stephen (Acts 8:2).

While the Bible does not specify whether the deceased should be carried with their heads facing a particular direction, the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South adhere to the custom of positioning the head in the direction of the pallbearers. This practice symbolises the reverence and dignity accorded to the deceased; tradition Emmanuel members are encouraged to uphold.

The burial process serves not only to honour the deceased but also as a sober reminder for Emmanuel members of the transient nature of earthly life. It prompts reflection on the promises of the afterlife as mentioned in the Bible, fostering a contemplation of eternal truths.

However, certain death and mourning rituals observed among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South may not align with biblical teachings and are not advisable for Emmanuel members to emulate. For instance, practices like lying down covered with a blanket for pallbearers to pass over, and the traditional hair-cutting style called *o thekha kheodo*, lack biblical precedent and may not contribute positively to the grieving process. Additionally, the inclusion of utensils and other items in the grave to accompany the deceased, reflecting anticipation of activities in the afterlife, contrasts with the biblical teaching that there is no work beyond the grave (Ec 9:9–10).

Post burial rituals: The post-burial death and mourning rituals found among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South, such as washing hands in the water mixed with an herb in a basin placed at the gate for those returning from the graveyard to remove bad luck, conflict with the teaching that God protects the believers.

Emmanuel church forbids the drinking of alcohol. Thus, the brewing of *bjalwa bja tlhoni* (a traditional beer made from the left-over porridge after the burial) is not necessary for Emmanuel members to observe.

As alluded to earlier that the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South wear mourning clothes after the burial, for Emmanuel members researcher will discourage them from following the practice as it is not recommended in the church era. According to 1 Peter 2:9, Christians have joined the royal priesthood of the kingdom of heaven where Jesus is the chief high priest. Just as God forbade Ezekiel the prophet (Ezk 24:17) to relinquish his office after the death of his wife, so shall be the case of Emmanuel members.

The practice of appointing a replacement husband is also a prerogative of the bereaved family. Although the practice is witnessed among Balobedu people of Bolobedu South and is almost like the one found in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Baloyi (2016:201–217) argues that this practice deprives the widow of her freedom of choice; dehumanises and subjects her to men's authoritarian rules, insecurity and exposes her to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

The second step in formulating a biblical counselling model for Emmanuel members is to apply Scott and Lambert's (2012:157–180) counselling steps.

Applying Scott and Lambert's three steps

Scott and Lambert (2012:157–180) assert that effective counselling involves addressing three essential components: the physical, mental and spiritual states of individuals, often likened to the body, soul and spirit. Pastors, elders and deacons are positioned as instruments through which counselling sessions are organised and conducted to facilitate these three steps. They impart the word of God to those in mourning and advocate its application in their circumstances. Additionally, they intercede for bereaved families, seeking the intervention of the Holy Spirit, who serves as both the great teacher and counsellor, providing complete healing. Scott and Lambert argues that achieving the desired outcome of healing and assurance necessitates the counsellee's knowledge of God, acceptance of His word and embrace of biblical teachings regarding humanity and its problems.

Counselling aims to help individuals identify problems and explore potential solutions (Lambert 2016:3), ultimately striving to restore a sense of equilibrium in life disrupted by challenges encountered. From a biblical perspective, humanity's problems stem from the rupture in their relationship with God (Gn 3:8–11), resulting in weakened connections between individuals and God, as well as among themselves.

Similarly, when death occurs, it disrupts the relationship between humans and God, prompting profound existential questions and emotional turmoil. Therefore, for Emmanuel members to experience complete healing from the impact of death, it is imperative to address their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The researcher must examine how the confusion stemming from death and mourning rituals affects their relationship with God, their overall welfare and their communal ties. It is essential to address the holistic needs of individuals (Scott & Lambert 2012:162), recognising that practical theology aims to assist individuals in navigating life's challenges while engaging with the world for the sake of advancing the gospel. This involves aligning beliefs and actions with coherent explanations for the meaning behind them (Swinton & Mowat 2016:5).

For instance, if the deceased served as the family's primary provider, their passing would disrupt the family's ability to meet basic physical needs. Contemplating how to navigate life without this foundational support pillar generates worries that cloud logical thinking, thereby affecting mental

well-being. When physical needs are unmet and the mind is overwhelmed with concerns, it can lead to spiritual distress.

Addressing the physical needs: In addition to warding off *makhuma*, an ailment traditionally believed to be transmitted through sexual intercourse or exchanging food with widows or individuals from a funeral, the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South perform death and mourning rituals with the aim of safeguarding members of the bereaved family from illnesses, opening doors to employment opportunities and enhancing their business prospects. The researcher advises Emmanuel members to explore means of generating income and to rely on Jesus for their well-being. Female members of the Emmanuel community are encouraged not to neglect their personal hygiene and appearance, contrasting with the practice observed among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South during mourning periods, where the wife of the deceased refrains from bathing until the morning of the burial day.

Addressing the psycho-social aspects: The participants express that members of the bereaved family often grapple with numerous questions following the death of a loved one, such as the cause of death, arrangements for burial, financial concerns, loss of moral support and navigating life without the deceased. They describe a sense of psychological confusion and burden among the bereaved.

To aid Emmanuel members in addressing these questions, the researcher will remind them that human mortality stems from both natural and unnatural occurrences (Ec 3:1–2). Drawing from examples like Jesus and Stephen, who were buried by surviving loved ones, Emmanuel members are encouraged to support the bereaved family in the burial process. This support may involve participating in existing burial societies or establishing new ones that offer financial and moral assistance during times of death and mourning.

Additionally, providing moral support to the bereaved is crucial. Jesus demonstrated the importance of familial care by entrusting his mother to the disciples whom he loved (Jn 19:26–27). Similarly, Paul exhorted believers to share each other's burdens (Gl 6:2).

Emmanuel members are encouraged to focus on scriptural teachings that invite Christ into the stages of grief and loss that cloud the mind. Jesus's admonition against worry (Mt 6:33) serves as a reminder to entrust concerns to Him, as echoed in 1 Peter 5:7, which assures believers that Christ cares for them and invites them to cast their anxieties upon Him.

Addressing the spiritual aspects: Among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South, one of the activities performed by the elder aunt is *ho phasa*, which involves invoking the presence of ancestors. Participants note that the Balobedu people regard their ancestors as mediators possessing powers that should be revered and honoured. *Ho phasa*, while not exclusively tied to death and mourning rituals, is observed at

least once a year as part of the broader ritual practices to demonstrate ongoing reverence and reliance on ancestors for safety and security in life.

For Emmanuel members, the researcher advises fellow believers to remind bereaved family members of Jesus's role as the perfect sacrificial lamb of the Passover, who deemed people from the fear of death (1 Cor 5:7). There is no need for intermediaries, as Jesus serves as the sole mediator between humanity and God (1 Tm 2:5). Just as Jesus instructed his disciples not to fear people but to revere God, who holds power over both flesh and spirit (Mt 10:28), members are encouraged to serve and fear God alone, trusting in His ability to save and protect them from all things.

Psychological support

This section further emphasises the importance of providing psychological care, as included in Scott and Lambert's three steps approach. Both immediate and extended members of the bereaved family require psychological support, highlighting the understanding that pastoral care operates within the community context (Kiriswa 2002:25).

In Balobedu culture, upon the occurrence of death, family members, including the extended family, offer support by staying with and sleeping alongside the bereaved family members throughout the burial preparations and for several days after the burial. This practice aims to help the bereaved handle loneliness and the stress of losing a loved one. Additionally, steaming rituals are performed to help family members release stress and cope with their loss. *Bolebadja*, an herbal concoction given to children who have lost parents, is believed to help them quickly move on from the deceased.

To assist Emmanuel members in Bolobedu in coping with loneliness and the stress of bereavement, the researcher suggests refraining from the practice of steaming and giving *bolebadja* to children. Instead, Blanton's approach (2019:1–20) can be employed, focussing on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Mindfulness-based stress reduction involves engaging in meditation and scriptural reflection rather than yoga, as well as participating in fellowship prayer groups and Bible study programmes to keep minds focussed on scriptural passages and reduce idle mental moments. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy combines cognitive behavioural therapy with mindful practices to help individuals manage depression symptoms by changing thought patterns and focussing on present circumstances without self-judgement. Similarly, bereaved family members in Emmanuel in Bolobedu South are encouraged to avoid blaming themselves or others for the death of their loved one and to accept the irreversibility of the situation rather than dwelling excessively on future concerns.

Promoting the model in the Emmanuel Assemblies

The primary objective of this article is to develop a biblical death and mourning counselling model aimed at aiding Balobedu Christians affiliated with Emmanuel Assemblies in

coping with familial loss. Consequently, the researcher intends to compose an official letter addressed to the leadership of Emmanuel Assemblies, communicating the findings of this study. Following the presentation of the study's outcomes, the researcher will formally propose that the leadership consider integrating the model into Emmanuel's pastoral care and faith formation initiatives. This request will be substantiated by the following four key points:

1. No existing tool: Emmanuel Assemblies lacks a framework for dealing with the death and mourning customs of the Balobedu community in Bolobedu South. Typically, when officiating a wedding, a pastor relies on a manual for guidance on appropriate procedures. The suggested model aims to aid pastors and congregation members in understanding and addressing the death and mourning rituals specific to the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South.
2. A model for pre and postburial rites: The model outlines a comprehensive list of death and mourning rituals categorised into those performed before, during and after the burial process. Each item in the list is designed to be self-explanatory, enabling pastors to follow along and offer appropriate biblical responses to their congregation members. Additionally, the model offers a comparison between unbiblical and unbeneficial rituals versus biblical and beneficial ones, facilitating a clear understanding for both pastors and members. In essence, it functions as a troubleshooting guide with a corresponding solution manual, streamlining the process of navigating through these rituals in accordance with biblical principles.
3. Reducing confusion among believers: In addition to streamlining the pastor's tasks, the model will help reduce confusion and uncertainty among members of Emmanuel in the event of a death. Members will be able to support each other even without the direct involvement of pastoral caregivers, thereby further disseminating Emmanuel's teachings on death within the Balobedu community of Bolobedu South.
4. Professional counselling training for members and pastors: The researcher will emphasise the necessity for the leadership of Emmanuel Assemblies to contemplate sending certain members and pastors for professional counsellor training. This initiative aims to help members who require counselling following a family death, thereby enhancing the support system within the community.

Conclusion

This article examines the observations made regarding death and mourning rituals practised among the Balobedu people of Bolobedu South, covering pre-burial, burial and post-burial practices. It utilises Magezi's seven approaches as a framework to distinguish between unbiblical and unbeneficial rituals and those that are biblical and beneficial. The aim is to help members of Emmanuel navigate death and associated mourning rituals with clarity, avoiding confusion. Additionally, the chapter aligns with Scott and Lambert's three steps approach to addressing the needs arising from

death and mourning rituals. Finally, the article discusses how the proposed model aims to gain acceptance within Emmanuel churches and the motivating factors behind its submission.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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