



Optimizing Strategies for Family Pastoral Counseling in Local Church Contexts

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		Abstract
Received:	07 July 2025	<p><i>This study explores the strategic optimization of family pastoral counseling within the context of KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa, a local church facing increasing pastoral challenges. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research employed field observations, interviews, and documentation to uncover the current state of counseling practices. Findings revealed three core issues: the absence of a structured system for counseling delivery, insufficient counseling competence among church leaders, and a lack of emotional safety for congregants seeking help. Counseling was often reactive, undocumented, and reliant solely on pastoral availability, without support from elders or deacons as mandated by church governance. Moreover, counseling literacy was minimal, and trust barriers due to gossip or judgment further discouraged congregants—particularly women and youth—from seeking support. These findings underscore the need for systemic reform, including scheduled pastoral visits, competency-based training, and the cultivation of safe, confidential spaces within the church. By addressing these gaps, local churches can transform pastoral counseling into a redemptive ministry that strengthens family units and enhances spiritual growth.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

Pastoral counseling plays a critical role in strengthening the spiritual relationship between believers and God. Through biblical-based guidance, pastors and church leaders are expected to assist individuals and families in understanding and applying principles of faith in their daily lives. This spiritual formation fosters the maturity of Christian families in facing contemporary life challenges (Nendissa, 2024:39). In the Christian family context, pastoral counseling also serves to help resolve interpersonal conflicts and build relational harmony. By offering guidance grounded in the teachings of Christ, pastoral assistance enables families to make wise decisions and overcome potential relational difficulties (Pane & Hutagaling et al., 2023:604).

Despite its importance, the practice of pastoral family counseling within the KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa congregation has not been implemented optimally. Church leaders and council members—who are supposed to be at the frontline of pastoral care—face multiple challenges such as limited time,

inadequate counseling methods, and reliance on conventional approaches. These methods, such as brief visits, prayer gatherings, or verbal advice, often lack systematic counseling frameworks. As a result, family relationships grow distant, communication becomes fragmented, and expressions of love and forgiveness fade. Over time, this weakens not only familial harmony but also spiritual connectedness with God, as members begin to perceive the church as incapable of addressing their real struggles—causing some to disengage from church life altogether.

According to the **Church Order of KGPM**, several church offices are responsible for pastoral care. Deacons, based on Article 1 Clause 6, are assigned to provide shepherding through household visits while maintaining confidentiality as members of the church council. Elders, as described in Article 20 Clause 7, are tasked with guiding members especially in preparation for marriage. Meanwhile, pastors (gembala), as stipulated in Article 24 Clause 11, bear a broader responsibility encompassing pastoral ministry, acts of compassion, and justice. These regulations demonstrate that pastoral counseling is not solely the duty of pastors but involves collaborative efforts with deacons and elders within their respective responsibilities.

Given this reality, churches are urged to develop a more structured, contextual, and responsive model of pastoral counseling that reflects the current needs of Christian families. The church must allocate designated time for scheduled counseling sessions, revisit outdated methods, and shift toward holistic counseling approaches that address spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions. Safe spaces for members to share their struggles—free from judgment—must be cultivated. By doing so, the church will not merely function as a place of worship but as a sanctuary of healing and restoration for wounded families.

The lack of optimization in pastoral counseling processes demands strategic improvements that can effectively support families. Thus, this study aims to analyze and propose a set of strategic recommendations for optimizing family pastoral counseling practices in the KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa congregation.

Effective pastoral counseling requires continuity and intentionality. In reality, however, pastoral visitation is often sporadic and limited to specific groups—such as new church members—despite the availability of numerous strategies to maintain its effectiveness (Pura, 2023:161). Therefore, pastoral accompaniment must be seen as an ongoing, inclusive effort that targets the broader congregation.

Previous studies support the need for optimizing family pastoral counseling. For example, Yelicia and Krido Siswanto (2022), in their study titled “*Pastoral Ministry Strategies as an Effort to Foster Congregational Spiritual Growth at GKII Bukit Moria Kasongan*,” found that pastoral counseling was effectively implemented as part of the shepherd's strategy to enhance spiritual maturity within the church community. Similarly, Siringoringo (2024) explored the challenges of pastoral accompaniment, emphasizing the tension between

intimacy with God, family responsibilities, and congregational service. His qualitative approach provided valuable insights into the inner struggles experienced by pastoral caregivers.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the strategic optimization of family pastoral counseling within the local congregation of KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa. As noted by Bogdan and Guba (in Suharsaputra, 2021:22), qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behaviors, aiming to understand complex realities in natural settings. The process did not involve statistical tools but rather engaged in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of contextual data to reflect the social and spiritual dynamics of the research environment.

The field research was conducted in Tumumpa Dua, Tuminting District, Manado City, focusing on the KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa congregation. Supplementary literature research was also carried out at the IAKN Manado Library and the researcher's private collection. Field observation began in June 2025 and continued until the completion of the research process. The primary instrument in this study was the researcher themselves, who determined the research focus, selected informants, conducted data collection, analyzed the results, interpreted findings, and drew conclusions based on the observed and documented realities (Mamik, 2015:55).

The data for this study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data included field observations, structured interviews, and documentation from direct interactions with church leaders, elders, and congregation members. Literature on pastoral family counseling was also considered primary due to its direct relevance to the study theme. Secondary data were collected from supporting documents and previous research related to the topic (Sugiyono, 2010:308).

Data collection techniques comprised four key methods. The literature review was conducted through academic references, theological books, and journals. Participant observation was used, wherein the researcher directly engaged in church activities to observe behavior and interactions (Afdhal et al., 2023:116). Structured interviews were conducted with church leadership using prepared questions and aided by voice recorders and cameras. Documentation was used to analyze existing records and written materials relevant to the research focus (Setiawan, 2018:61).

The data analysis process followed four key steps as outlined by Affifudin and Saebani (2009:145). First, raw data were collected from field and literature sources. Second, the data were reduced to extract essential information while discarding irrelevant content. Third, the reduced data were structured and presented systematically to facilitate interpretation. For this, the researcher utilized Nvivo 12 Plus, a qualitative data analysis software. The steps included importing data in text, audio, or video formats; creating and organizing nodes or

categories; conducting both manual and automatic coding; performing various queries (e.g., matrix coding, word frequency); and visualizing findings through graphs, models, and word clouds. Finally, all data were interpreted and conclusions were drawn based on validity and consistency, ensuring that all findings reflected the real conditions in the field (Sugiyono, 2011:165).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study employed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures (Sugiyono, 2010:270). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged observation, increased accuracy, triangulation (data sources, methods, and timing), analysis of negative cases, use of authentic references, and member-checking. Transferability was addressed by presenting thick descriptions to enable applicability in similar settings. Dependability was established by maintaining consistent research procedures, and confirmability ensured that the findings were the result of the data, not researcher bias.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lack of Structural System in Family Pastoral Counseling

Field observations and in-depth interviews with church leaders at KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa revealed a crucial deficiency in the church's approach to family pastoral counseling: the absence of a well-defined and structured system. Most pastoral counseling activities are carried out reactively, triggered only by urgent crises such as illness, marital conflict, or bereavement. This method of addressing family issues only as they arise severely limits the potential for ongoing spiritual guidance and emotional support. Pastoral interactions often occur sporadically, with no regular schedule, and most interactions are informal and unstructured. As a result, pastoral counseling is seen more as a "last resort" rather than a proactive, sustained ministry that supports families through every season of life.

One church elder expressed this limitation candidly:

"We only go when there's a big issue. We don't have a program to visit families regularly or track what they need."

This statement highlights a systemic issue at the heart of the church's counseling framework: the lack of an institutionalized, intentional model for pastoral care. The absence of a planned approach to counseling means that critical family issues are often left unaddressed until they escalate into crises. The reactive nature of this pastoral care means that families receive assistance only when the problem has already reached a breaking point, leaving them vulnerable during the most critical times.

This reactive approach also hampers the sustainability and depth of the support provided. As Pane and Hutagalung et al. (2023:604) have pointed out, pastoral counseling should go beyond merely resolving conflicts; it should also foster spiritual growth, helping families to make decisions that are rooted in biblical wisdom and Christ-centered values. However, when counseling is not systematically integrated into the church's routine practices, these opportunities

for growth and long-term transformation are missed. Without a regular, scheduled process of pastoral care, the guidance provided to families is inconsistent and often superficial.

In addition to the lack of scheduling, the absence of formal documentation further complicates the situation. Interviews with church leaders and the review of church records revealed that pastoral care notes are rarely recorded or formally documented. This is a significant gap, as proper documentation is essential for tracking the progress or regression of families in their spiritual journeys. Without records of past counseling sessions, pastoral counselors lack the ability to evaluate how a family is progressing, whether the issues discussed in previous sessions have been resolved, or if there are recurring problems that need further attention. The failure to document these interactions results in a lack of accountability and makes it difficult for pastoral leaders to follow up in a meaningful way.

This lack of documentation also creates an environment where the feedback loop for pastoral care is practically non-existent. With no written records or system for revisiting past sessions, counselors are left to rely on their memory, making the process of pastoral care vulnerable to oversight and inconsistency. Furthermore, the absence of documentation prevents effective coordination among the pastor, elders, and deacons, who are supposed to collaborate on providing pastoral support. Without clear records, the pastoral team is unable to assess whether their counseling efforts are making a positive impact on the congregation or whether adjustments need to be made to the counseling approach.

The situation described is in direct contrast to the expectations set out in the Church Order of KGPM. According to Article 1.6, deacons are responsible for shepherding the congregation through regular visits to households, while Article 20.7 emphasizes the role of elders in providing counseling, especially in matters of marriage. Article 24.11 places a broader pastoral responsibility on the pastor, including pastoral care and justice. These guidelines clearly outline the roles and responsibilities for each member of the church leadership team. Yet, despite these clear directives, in practice, the burden of pastoral care often falls solely on the pastor. This imbalance of responsibility creates a leadership bottleneck and leads to burnout, as the pastor struggles to meet the diverse needs of the congregation alone.

The absence of a collaborative system also makes pastoral care more reactive than proactive. This imbalance in responsibility and lack of structure place significant emotional and spiritual pressure on pastors, who often face burnout due to the heavy demands of managing the pastoral care of a growing congregation. Siringoringo (2024) aptly notes that without structural support and balanced delegation of pastoral duties, pastors risk emotional exhaustion and a loss of the intimacy required for effective ministry. The pressure to fulfill all pastoral responsibilities alone also leads to a reduction in the quality of care provided to families. When pastors are overburdened, their ability to offer thoughtful, personalized care diminishes, as they are left trying to juggle too many tasks without sufficient resources or support.

A formalized structure for family pastoral counseling, one that includes scheduled visits, systematic documentation, and regular check-ins, is crucial for the long-term health of both the congregation and the pastoral team. Without such a system in place, families are left without the guidance they need to navigate the complexities of modern life. Establishing a more organized approach to pastoral care would allow families to receive consistent support throughout all seasons of life, not just during times of crisis. A structured system would also ensure that families have access to spiritual guidance that addresses both immediate needs and long-term growth.

Furthermore, the implementation of structured pastoral counseling would help alleviate the burden on pastors by distributing responsibilities more evenly among the church leadership. By giving deacons and elders more defined roles in providing pastoral care, the leadership team as a whole would be better equipped to meet the needs of the congregation. Siringoringo (2024) highlights that collaborative efforts within church leadership, where roles are clearly defined and supported, significantly reduce the emotional strain on individual pastors and improve the overall effectiveness of pastoral care.

In conclusion, the lack of a structural system for family pastoral counseling at KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa represents not only a logistical flaw but also a spiritual and organizational vulnerability. The church must implement a more systematic approach to pastoral care that includes scheduled counseling, clear documentation, and collaborative leadership. This will ensure that families receive the sustained, proactive care they need to thrive spiritually and emotionally. Moreover, by addressing this systemic issue, KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa can move toward a more holistic and effective pastoral ministry that supports the growth of families in a way that is consistent with the teachings of Christ and the expectations of the church's governance structure.

Deficiency in Counseling Competency and Training

One of the most pressing issues identified during the fieldwork at KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa is the lack of counseling competency among pastoral leaders. Although most of the pastors and elders exhibit a strong understanding of biblical texts and theology, their practical counseling abilities remain limited. This includes essential skills such as active listening, empathy building, and handling emotional distress. Through interviews, many leaders admitted that they often feel unprepared to handle real-life problems within families, especially when those problems involve psychological trauma, abuse, or unresolved grief. The absence of formal training in these areas makes pastoral counseling shallow and at times even counterproductive.

One deacon honestly stated:

“We know how to pray with them and share verses, but sometimes we don’t know what to say when they cry or when couples fight in front of us.” This quote reflects the pastoral gap between spiritual intention and practical execution. While theological content is essential, it is insufficient in navigating complex relational dynamics without psychological and emotional awareness.

According to Nendissa (2024:39), pastoral counseling should not only convey biblical truths but also provide a safe emotional space where individuals can process their pain and receive guidance. This integration of theology and emotional intelligence is at the heart of transformational care.

The consequences of this competence gap are tangible. Some congregants shared that they felt more burdened than helped after receiving pastoral attention. A few expressed concerns that their vulnerability was met with judgment rather than compassion. Pura (2023:161) echoes this sentiment, arguing that in many churches, pastoral visits are often reduced to ceremonial acts—formal, impersonal, and lacking in emotional resonance. When church leaders are not trained in basic counseling ethics and methods, they may inadvertently minimize or misinterpret the struggles shared by members, which risks deepening the hurt rather than healing it.

Another crucial issue is the lack of an institutional framework for counseling education within the congregation. Unlike preaching or theological study—which are regularly emphasized and supported—the development of pastoral counseling skills is often neglected or viewed as an optional soft skill. This cultural undervaluation of counseling within church leadership training is problematic. It reflects a deeper misunderstanding of what pastoral ministry entails: not only preaching the Word but also tending to the wounded hearts of God’s people. The identity of a pastor as a “shepherd” is incomplete without the capacity to care for both the spiritual and emotional well-being of the flock.

The situation becomes even more concerning when considering that many congregants today face multidimensional stressors—from financial hardship to mental health challenges and family breakdowns. In such contexts, a pastoral team that lacks basic competency in counseling cannot meet the needs of the people effectively. This competency gap not only compromises the credibility of pastoral care but may also discourage members from seeking help from the church altogether. This is particularly dangerous in an era where churches are expected to be sanctuaries for healing, not just places for liturgy.

To overcome this, the church must begin investing intentionally in the training and development of its leaders. As Siringoringo (2024) asserts, pastoral counseling should be viewed not just as a gift but as a discipline to be cultivated—through workshops, mentoring, and even academic certification when possible. Collaborative programs with Christian counseling institutions can be initiated to provide hands-on training in listening skills, conflict mediation, crisis intervention, and trauma-informed care. Such initiatives will not only enhance the quality of pastoral engagement but also signal to the congregation that the church takes their emotional and relational well-being seriously.

In conclusion, bridging this competence gap is not an optional luxury—it is a theological necessity. The failure to equip pastoral teams with the skills to handle the emotional complexities of congregants undermines the very essence of pastoral ministry. If the church is to reflect the compassion of Christ, then it must be willing to train its shepherds not just to preach truth, but also to hold space for

pain. Only then can family pastoral counseling become a life-giving and redemptive ministry in the context of the local congregation.

Absence of Safe Emotional Space within Congregation

One of the most profound findings in this study is the absence of a psychologically and spiritually safe space within the congregation for members to open up about their personal struggles. During interviews, several members—especially women, youth, and newlyweds—expressed deep apprehension about sharing sensitive issues with church leaders. The fear of being misjudged, gossiped about, or even spiritually reprimanded has created a culture of silence within the congregation.

One young mother shared her painful experience:

“I once talked to a church elder about my marriage issues, and the next week people were whispering about it. That was the last time I ever opened up.”

This anecdote underscores a systemic breach of trust that profoundly affects the effectiveness of pastoral care. Such experiences render the pastoral counseling process inherently unsafe. Instead of finding refuge in the church, individuals feel exposed and vulnerable—not because of their confession, but due to the lack of discretion and empathy from leaders or fellow congregants. Pura (2023:161) warns that when confidentiality is broken, or when counseling is colored by judgmental attitudes, congregants will withdraw emotionally from the church. This withdrawal creates not only emotional isolation but also spiritual disconnection, as the church—meant to be a healing community—becomes a place of emotional risk rather than safety.

A significant contributor to this issue is the culture of “spiritual performance” that prevails in many churches, including KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa. In such an environment, there is an unspoken pressure to maintain an image of spiritual strength, holiness, and composure at all times. Members are reluctant to admit weakness or brokenness out of fear that doing so would tarnish their reputation or invite criticism. This spiritual facade results in suppressed emotional pain and unspoken wounds. As Nendissa (2024:39) argues, true spiritual maturity involves the ability to acknowledge weakness and receive grace, not pretending that struggles do not exist.

Ironically, this pressure to perform can be especially suffocating for those who are in greatest need of care—families in crisis, individuals facing mental health challenges, or youth navigating identity and faith. When these groups perceive that honesty will be punished with exclusion or gossip, they opt for silence, leading to internalized shame and delayed healing. The lack of a safe emotional container in the church discourages vulnerability, which is essential for both relational intimacy and spiritual growth.

Addressing this deficiency requires intentional leadership transformation. Emotional safety will not emerge spontaneously—it must be cultivated deliberately by pastors, elders, and deacons. Church leadership must model vulnerability themselves, openly sharing their own struggles in appropriate settings to normalize authenticity. They must also be trained in empathic listening,

nonjudgmental posture, and confidentiality protocols. As Yelicia and Siswanto (2022) suggest, churches that foster environments of grace, rather than fear, are better positioned to nurture mature and resilient believers.

Furthermore, pastoral counseling must be reframed as a sacred space, not a disciplinary tribunal. Confidentiality should be both taught and enforced as a spiritual value, not merely a professional standard. The church should provide safe zones—whether in small groups, counseling rooms, or private pastoral sessions—where people can share without fear of repercussions. Without these reforms, counseling efforts will be cosmetic at best and damaging at worst.

For the congregation of KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa, this transformation is not optional—it is essential. Without emotional safety, no structure or skill will yield long-term fruit. Programs and techniques are meaningless if people do not feel safe enough to engage honestly. Emotional security is the soil in which meaningful change and spiritual renewal can take root. The congregation must be retrained to view brokenness not as failure but as the beginning of healing—a space where the grace of God meets the realities of human pain.

Ultimately, the church is called to reflect the heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep and creates a safe pasture for them to lie down (John 10:14; Psalm 23:2). To embody this vision, pastoral counseling must become more than a ministry—it must become a culture. A culture where honesty is honored, pain is met with compassion, and every voice—no matter how broken—is welcomed without fear. Only then can the church truly become a spiritual home for all who seek refuge within its walls.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that family pastoral counseling in KGPM Bukit Sion Tumumpa suffers from three interrelated deficiencies: (1) the absence of a structured system that causes pastoral care to be reactive and inconsistent; (2) a significant gap in counseling competency among pastoral leaders, limiting the effectiveness and depth of emotional support; and (3) the lack of emotionally safe spaces within the church, which discourages members—especially women and youth—from seeking help. These structural, skill-based, and relational gaps undermine the pastoral mission of the church and call for urgent reform. Strategic improvements—including the development of institutional frameworks, skill-building programs, and a culture of trust—are critical to transforming pastoral counseling from a ceremonial activity into a redemptive ministry that heals families and strengthens the local church body.

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