

Ecclesiastico-pastoral care for social security grant holders in South Africa



Author:

Christina Landman¹ 

Affiliation:

¹College of Human Sciences, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Christina Landman,
christina.landman2@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 13 Sept. 2023

Accepted: 24 Oct. 2023

Published: 22 Feb. 2024

How to cite this article:

Landman, C., 2024, 'Ecclesiastico-pastoral care for social security grant holders in South Africa', *In die Skriflig* 58(1), a3017. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3017>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article aims to address the gap in research on ecclesiastical and pastoral care for congregational members dependent on government grants from the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). It emphasises the impact of the dire socio-economic circumstances of congregants, and the role it plays in the life of the ordained pastor of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), navigating through the dynamics on their daily realities. The primary question addressed is: What amount of care is possible from the side of the church and the pastor to deal with SASSA related problems experienced by congregants? It is based on two types of data: firstly, five semi-structured interviews conducted with five women, three of them mothers who receive a Child Support Grant, and two grandmothers whose teenage daughters receive this grant. A second data set consists of recollections by a pastor who ministers in a community where the only income of most of the inhabitants is SASSA Grant related. Seven stories are told of pastoring needs related to SASSA Grant holders. Applying Narrative Therapy as method, data was analysed and nine themes emerged: (1) The church acknowledging and managing the needs of mothers; (2) the church providing a 'haven' for young mothers harassed by the father of the child; (3) pastoring domestic unrest among older grant holders; (4) pastoring congregants who are scammed out of a SASSA Grant; (5) supporting congregants who escape domestic violence through SASSA; (6) the church co-ordinating between significant others; (7) pastoring honour and shame; (8) protecting the elderly; and (9) pastoring conflicting cultural expectations vis-à-vis the SASSA Grant. This article concludes with a summary of and recommendations on ecclesiastico-pastoral care for SASSA Grant holders.

Contribution: This article emphasises the importance of a multi-dimensional, non-theoretical approach in providing insight into the reality of ecclesiastical-pastoral care of congregants – care that extends beyond spiritual well-being to the livelihoods of vulnerable communities with various socio-economic needs, particularly those solely dependent on government grants.

Keywords: SASSA Grants; SASSA Grant holders; ecclesiastical care for SASSA Grant holders; pastor and SASSA Grant holders; pastoral care; communities and SASSA Grants.

Introduction

Aim

The aim of this article is to tell the stories of congregants in a peri-urban residential area who are dependent on government grants from the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) as their only income. A narrative representation is provided of those congregants' lived experiences. Their everyday realities are voiced through the eyes of their ordained pastor of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). How the church and the pastor engage with them, is part of their stories and focuses on how these engagements and sharing hardships impacts the pastor.

The primary question addressed is: What amount of care is possible from the side of the church and the pastor to deal with SASSA related problems experienced by congregants? The information was gathered from two sets of data: the first set are five semi-structured interviews conducted with five women, three being mothers who receive a Child Support Grant, and two grandmothers whose teenage daughters receive this grant. A second set are the recollections by the pastor from this congregation, consisting of seven stories told of pastoring needs related to SASSA Grant holders. Data was analysed by applying Narrative Therapy as method and from this analysis nine themes emerge that are important to consider for ecclesiastical-pastoral care: (1) The church acknowledging and managing the needs of mothers; (2) the church providing a 'haven' for young mothers harassed by the father of the child; (3) pastoring domestic unrest among older grant holders; (4) pastoring congregants who are scammed out of a SASSA Grant; (5) supporting

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

congregants who escape domestic violence through SASSA; (6) the church co-ordinating between significant others; (7) pastoring honour and shame; (8) protecting the elderly; and (9) pastoring conflicting cultural expectations vis-à-vis the SASSA Grant.

The article concludes with a summary of and recommendations on ecclesiastico-pastoral care to consider in assisting SASSA Grant holders.

Background

SASSA distributes government grants to South African citizens who qualify in terms of a set of requirements. Social security grants are payable monthly, as revised on 01 April 2023, (SASSA 2023a) and include among others:

- Older Persons Grant to people residing in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) between 60 and 74 years old: R2080 (\$100), and R2100.00 for persons older than 75 years (\$109) (SASSA 2023b).
- Disability Grant: R2080 (\$100).
- Child Support Grant: R500 (\$25).
- Care Dependency Grant: R2080 (\$100).
- Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) to persons between 18 and 60 with no income: R350 (\$17).

This article views SASSA Grants positively. The grants are an effort to transform the gap between poor and rich. Percentage wise the grants make only a small contribution to transformation, but they make a huge difference to the lives of poor people in South Africa.

Research population and methodology

Research population

The research population of this study is drawn from a peri-urban community – previously known as a ‘township’ – where a far majority of the people are dependent on SASSA Grants. In racial terms, the people residing in this ‘township’ are mainly ‘brown’.

The community in which this congregation is situated, suffers heavily from poverty and drug abuse. Actually, as mentioned above, the only income of a majority of the inhabitants of this community is a SASSA Grant, according to oral sources approached by the pastor.

According to the Democratic Alliance (DA), there is between 50% and 70% unemployment in this ‘township’. A few people have small jobs (*skoppies* [temporary jobs]) which will earn them around R250 per day. However, when the pastor asked members of the church council, who have been living in this community for decades, what their estimation of the unemployment in the ‘township’ was, they judged it to be around 90%.

The older people in this ‘township’ are of high moral fibre. Families are strong. However, the young people are faced

with unemployment, drug abuse and hopelessness, and are not always free to be moral.

Five interviews were held with three mothers who receive SASSA Child Support Grants as well as with two grandmothers whose (unmarried) teenage daughters receive grants for their children. The interviews were done according to a semi-structured questionnaire, the matter of consent was explained to the interviewees, and they signed the forms thereafter. This was done to give voice to grant holders themselves. The participants were selected randomly according to their availability.

This is followed by a second set of data, namely seven recollections by the local pastor on situations in the congregation that were SASSA related and required ecclesiastical (including pastoral) care. The pastor thus engages in self-interviewing in remembering and choosing relevant stories. ‘Self-interviewing’, as a methodological concept at present, refers mainly to questionnaires sent to interviewees which they have to fill out electronically. To be mentioned here is the work of Judith Lessler and James O’Reilly who, since the 1990s, have developed methods for audio-computer-assistant interviewing. Of special interest is their work on self-interviewing when sensitive issues, such as drug abuse, is at stake (Lessler & O’Reilly 1997:366). However, in this article ‘self-interviewing’ refers to the pastor narratively interviewing herself on her experiences with congregants who receive SASSA Grants, which in itself, is a very sensitive issue. Electronic interviewing is unusable among this research population, as very few people own personal computers, and in the few cases where they have appropriate cell phones, data is usually not available.

Of paramount importance regarding the pastor’s self-interviewing is the issue of changing the identifiable details of the ‘interviewees’ to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and not to be recognised by their peers.

Methodology

The pastor’s pastoral approach is based on the tenets of Narrative Therapy as developed in the 1980s by Michael White and David Epston (Morgan 2000:9; White & Epston 1990). This type of counselling or ‘storied therapy’ (White & Epston 1990:77) aims at deconstructing the problem saturated story into a preferred alternative story. Following a narrative inquiry, the researcher and participants establish a relationship where the latter function as co-researchers. The researcher uses words as data producing an auto-ethnographical reflection of their engagement and process (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr 2007:1–15; Landman & Mudimeli 2022:2). In this study the pastor and congregants are co-producers of shared stories.

The process followed is summarised by the author as the MEET process, which is an acronym for:

- Mapping the past, identifying the previous skills of the counselee.

- Externalising the problem so that the counselee is not to internalise the problem.
- Empowering the counselee against the problem.
- Thickening the alternative story that emerges, in this case through the involvement of the ecclesiastical structures.

The stories narrated here are not 'success stories', but 'travelling with one another' and 'learning from one another' stories.

Literary review and unique contribution

The social aspects of SASSA Grants

A variety of articles have been published in the past decade on the social aspects of SASSA Grants. A few of these articles will be mentioned here to indicate, among others, that where 30% of South Africa's population received SASSA Grants in 2015, in 2023 it is 47%. These statistics indicate the importance of this grant for the poor.

In 2016, Natasha Thandiwe Vally wrote an article in which she indicated how wrong deductions, wrongful cancellations, and long waiting periods for the grants to be paid out, lead to immense insecurities in the South African social security system. She also indicated that in 2015, a total of R16.9 million in grants were paid out per month, which includes roughly R1 million for disabled people, R3.1 million for pensioners, and R11.9 million for child support. The latter constituting the vast majority (71%) of the grant payout.

In 2015, it is stated that almost 30% of the South African population received SASSA Grants (Vally 2016:965). However, this is not nearly adequate to assist the poor, needy and less abled. Already in 2014 Miriam Altman, Zitha Mokoman and Gemma Wright wrote an article in which they asked for a change in policy so that SASSA Grants also be paid out to young people in light of high levels of poverty and unemployment. South African youth between 15 and 24 years of age make up almost 20% of the population. They 'experience extremely high levels of unemployment and poverty' and are in dire need of financial support (Altman, Mokomane & Write 2014:347). Patel (2012:106) has previously indicated what Child Support Grants, established in 1998, have contributed to the reduction of poverty in Soweto, one of South Africa's largest 'black townships'. Stewart Ngandu and Shirin Motala provide an overview of 'Ten years of the SASSA: The journey 2006–2016', stating that 'by 2016, the SASSA had completed a decade in existence, delivering R126 billion in grants to 16991634 beneficiaries in the 2015/2016 financial year' (Ngandu & Motala 2021:98).

Finally, Lena Gronbach, Jeremy Seekings and Vayda Megannon indicated in 2022 that there are now 47% of the South African population receiving SASSA Grants. Whereas in 2015 and 2016, R16.9 million in SASSA Grants were distributed. In 2020, because of the SRD Grant of R350 monthly which was instituted due to the coronavirus disease

(COVID-19), 'the government reached over 30 million South Africans with cash-based relief measures' (Gronbach, Seekings & Megannon 2022:1).

Ecclesiastical care for SASSA Grant holders

The only research that could be found dealing with ecclesiastical care for (brown) SASSA Grant holders, is that by Jacobus Carnow. He published the results of his doctoral thesis in 2018 in an article with his supervisor, Prof. Christo Thesnaar, under the title 'A theologically-pastoral examination of the socio-economic situation of the brown welfare pensioner in the Redeemed African Methodist Church'. Carnow acknowledges that the current poverty of brown welfare pensioners is due to the lack of educational and job opportunities during *apartheid* as well as the Group Areas Act (36 of 1966) which forced people to live according to race. His proposals for the church to care for welfare pensioners are varied, interesting and useful. Firstly, the church as a 'community-enabling community' (Jenson 2006:71) should invite civil society organisations to assist in elder care. This includes the municipality and all its resources, educational entities which can teach the elderly new skills, people who can assist in establishing vegetable gardens with the elderly, and whoever can stand together to make the community inclusive, also of the elderly. Secondly, Carnow and Thesnaar (2018:6) suggest an 'ecclesia-economy programme' in which the whole congregation shares groceries, space, skills, et cetera with older people.

Unique contribution

The focus and contribution of this article slightly differs from that of Carnow. Although the structural care that the church can give to the poor is explored, the emphasis is on pastoral care to congregants who receive SASSA Grants and who, additionally or related to the grants, find themselves in problematic situations. Also, this study is not restricted to pensioners. Furthermore, the themes for ecclesiastical and pastoral engagement here are not theoretical, but are extracted from the stories of the SASSA Grant holders themselves.

Consequently, five interviews with mothers, a substitute mother and grandmothers are described here to set the scene on the value of and the community's dependence of SASSA Grants – albeit only Child Support Grants. Following that, seven stories of SASSA Grand holders are told, together with the support given to them by the church and the pastor.

Data gathering, analysis and discussion

Recollection stories of ecclesiastical care to SASSA Grant holders

The main part of this article consists of seven self-reviews by the author, who as an ordained pastor in the URCSA, ministers in a 'brown township' – now rather referred to as a non-racial peri-urban area. The pastor tells the stories of her pastoral

engagement in seven cases where congregants experienced stress and trauma vis-à-vis their SASSA Grants. The themes will be presented with a short discussion of the findings.

The impact of receiving a SASSA Grant: Interviews

Interviews

The interviewees (Table 1) as well as the recollections by a pastor, who ministers in this community, represent the stories shared of pastoring needs related to SASSA Grant holders. Upon analysing the information gathered, nine themes emerged on the need for ecclesiastical (including pastoral) care, and discussed separately.

The other interviewees are described narratively in each theme's interview section.

Theme 1: The church acknowledging and managing the needs of mothers

Interviewee 1: Johanna is the primary caregiver of her daughter's two small children. Her daughter gives her R1000 (two times R500 Child Support Grant) every month, although the daughter sometimes holds some of the money back for herself and her new boyfriend. Johanna herself does not gain from the two grants, and her main aim is to look after the children. She is frustrated that she cannot contribute financially to the children's upbringing, because 'nobody wants to employ a woman of 54' (P1).

During the interview, Johanna expressed her concern for mothers who, in order to provide for their children's growing needs, borrow money from the 'loan sharks' against their SASSA cards. They have to leave the cards with the money lenders, and their debt increase at a very high interest rate (25% to 50%). She is also concerned about non-South Africans who get the grant – and she even claims that people come over the borders to South Africa to get the grant.

Johanna has registered for the church's outreach that provides disposable nappies for needy mothers. She is not a regular churchgoer, but her church receives diapers from a donor and distributes them among mothers who do not have an income besides the SASSA Child Support Grant. By asking mothers to register for receiving the nappies, the church becomes aware of where the need is, and how to manage mothers' needs – also as far as their other needs are concerned – even when the mothers are not regularly visiting or even members of this church.

TABLE 1: A depiction of the interviewees of theme 1, theme 2 and theme 9.

Identifier	Pseudo name	Parent type	Age	Nationality	Total number of dependants in care
P1	Johanna	Grandmother	54	Coloured	Two
P2	Thelma	Mother	43	Coloured	Seven
P3	Leslie	Single mother	35	Coloured	Five
P4	Mary	Grandmother	Not disclosed	African	Two
P5	Anna	Mother	Not disclosed	African	One
P6	Caroline	Widowed mother	Not disclosed	African	Three

Interviewee 2: Thelma, a mother, receives four Child Support Grants for four of her seven children. The oldest child is over 18 and therefore does not qualify for the grant anymore. As far as the youngest two children are concerned:

[I]t has become too humiliating nowadays to apply for a Child Grant. They question you as if you are a criminal, and always require more and more documentation in order not to give you the grant. (P2)

She points out that all children in this 'township' receive a Child Support Grant, and that it is not a shame at all. On the contrary, there is great happiness when an application for this grant is successful.

Thelma's husband is unemployed, and so is she, although she sometimes has a *skroppie*. As travelling fees are very expensive, she uses almost all the Child Support Grant for the children to travel to and from school. The rest of the money she gives to them little by little as they need it. She is not like some of the other mothers who give the whole grant to a child to spend according to his or her own discretion.

She would really have appreciated something from the church as well, in cash, but is thankful for the nappies.

Interviewee 3: Leslie, a single mother, gets a Child Support Grant for two of her five children. She works as a cleaner at the hospital.

Leslie uses the Child Support Grants to pay her water bill, which, if combined, is only enough for that. Sometimes the grants are late and that creates a crisis, for the municipality does not wait for her to pay. Going again and again to fetch her SASSA Grants makes her feel inferior; also, to apply for younger children for a grant is degrading nowadays.

'Why is the church not helping?' (P3), is the question troubling her. The church to which she belongs, does not seem to have a system at all to detect and manage the needs of mothers.

Theme 2: The church providing a 'haven' for young mothers harassed by the father of the child

The following two interviews were with (African) grandmothers whose teenage daughters are receiving the SASSA Child Support Grant.

Interviewee 4: Mary's daughter fell pregnant from a boyfriend at school. He terminated the relationship with her daughter when he found out she was pregnant. Also, his parents said that the pregnant girl could not prove that the baby was his. Mary and her daughter struggled to get the Child Support Grant, but in the end they succeeded.

With the grant secured, the father of the baby came to where she and her daughter lives with the baby to claim half of the grant. Mary was not there. When the daughter objected, he became aggressive. She screamed and the neighbours came to help her. However, he keeps returning on SASSA Grant days, and she and her daughter feel very insecure.

Although she supports her daughter fully, Mary expresses a variety of concerns about schoolgirls falling pregnant. She is concerned that girls, after they have given birth, do not go back to school. They say they can now look after themselves, because they get the Child Support Grant which, we should remind ourselves, is R500 per month.

Mary is furthermore concerned about schoolgirls who give birth and then 'throw the baby away at the grandmother and eat the Child Support Grant with a new boyfriend'.

Mary expresses her anger at 'people with good money' who also stand in the (SASSA) line, which '... is not right'.

Mary also complains about the price of transport, which seems to be one of a mother's greatest expenses:

Why can't we get the transport cheaper? It is now four years that the trains are not going. The buses are cheaper, but they have disappeared. The taxis fight with the buses. The taxis are expensive. The *tsotsis* [young peri/urban criminals] rob us on the taxis. What must we do? (P4)

Mary criticises the government who 'want everything for themselves while the people suffer'. She expresses her belief that it is only the church that can help her, her daughter, her granddaughter, and the general situation in the country. She will pray, and God will help her.

Interviewee 5: Anna, the mother of a teenage girl who recently gave birth, tells the same story, and expresses the same concerns as Mary, the previous interviewee. Anna informed:

'Girls get pregnant and the fathers leave them. When the grant comes, the fathers want it and follow the girls to the ATM to grab the money. The police are not helpful. They say, "You wanted him, now you complain".' (P5)

Anna summarises her story as follows:

After my daughter got the grant, she brought the baby to me to raise, without giving me the grant. Then she got another baby. She and the boyfriend eat the double grant and I have to raise the two children on my small income. SASSA does not want to put the children on my name so that I can get the grants. (P5)

Apart from the fact that she does not receive the grant money from her daughter, Anna is also concerned that her daughter's present boyfriend drinks a lot, is unemployed and beats her daughter on grant day to get the grant money. 'Not all girls are bad', she says, 'some want to look after the baby and go back to school. It is only the boyfriends. Eish! They are rubbish nuisance.' It is because the boyfriend takes the money that she, the grandmother who is raising the babies, gets nothing, she says.

Like Mary, Anna expresses anger towards the government who take all the money, and then say they cannot help the people - 'No, that is not right!', she says.

Anna consequently expresses her hope and trust in the church as the only organisation that can provide a 'haven' for grandmothers and mothers that are harassed by boyfriends.

The above interviews emphasise the everyday realities of these mothers and grandmothers' lives - that receiving a grant often causes secondary challenges and almost endangering those women. The assistance by government might offer some relieve, but it does not consider other challenges. A holistic approach is required from various stakeholders, such as the private sector and the transport industry, public sector, such as social, health, and police services.

Theme 3: Pastoring domestic unrest among older grant holders

Antie Suurpap and Oom Kosie: Antie Suurpap (73-year-old) is a colourful figure who does not hold back to tell others what the problem is with them. She makes no secret that her husband of 50 years irritates her. One of the things that drives her out of her mind is that he and she do not share their SASSA Grants. Each gets R2080 per month and with that everyone buys his or her own groceries.

The first time the pastor visited them, she knocked on the door that is always open, and loudly said: 'Hello, anybody here? I am looking for coffee!' That day the pastor learned a lesson in pastoral ministry - not to ask for coffee on home visitations - not at Antie Suurpap's house, nor at any house - because there simply may not be any.

In Antie Suurpap's case, it was the middle of the month and she had already used all her coffee and milk. Oom Kosie puts his coffee and milk under his side of the bed so that she cannot get it. Antie Suurpap is now embarrassed, because she cannot make the pastor the coffee she has asked for. It increased the conflict between her and her husband.

The next time the pastor visited Antie Suurpap and Oom Kosie, she took some sachets with a mixture of coffee, milk, and sugar with her. That was a huge mistake. Antie Suurpap was deeply hurt, and she voiced this to the pastor in no uncertain terms.

From then on, whenever the pastor comes visiting, Antie Suurpap insists that the pastor drinks coffee, even when the pastor does not want any.

The pastor now brings a slab of chocolate with her every time she visits Antie Suurpap. They share the chocolates and if Antie Suurpap wants to impress the pastor, Oom Kosie also gets a piece.

However, it turns out the SASSA Grants are only the tip of the iceberg. Oom Kosie came to visit the pastor and pointed out the terrible things his wife said to him and his deceased parents, and that it was breaking him. This made him shout horrible things back to her. He told how, as a young man, he was in love [*verlief*] with her, but during the time of

engagement she had two *voorkinders* [children with other men], while she was still underaged and in the orphanage. One was with a teacher at the orphanage.

The pastor then paid them a pastoral visit, because their constant fighting was not only affecting them both deeply, but it has become a public cause of concern. The sessions took up a lot of time. However, eventually the two of them externalised 'saying hurtful words' as the problem that keep them captive in a problem saturated relationship. When Antie Suurpap heard how in love Oom Kosie was with her as a young woman, she was empowered to deconstruct the hurtful discourse towards discourse of respect. During a prayer they held hands and cried.

The pastor naively thought that the decade long marriage unrest was put to rest. However, the next week Antie Suurpap came to the pastorie to borrow R200 from the pastor for pre-paid electricity. She complained that Oom Kosie did not buy electricity from his SASSA Grant last month. The electricity will only last till the next morning. The pastor gave her the R200 without expecting it back.

Two hours later Oom Kosie came to the *pastorie* [parsonage] to borrow R200 from the pastor for electricity. He complained that Antie Suurpap did not buy electricity from her SASSA Grant last month. The electricity will only last till the next morning. The pastor gave him the R200 without expecting it back.

Indeed, the pastor had to acknowledge, the marriage feud has not been settled because of the pressing poverty and the fact that the SASSA Grant is not enough to cover basic costs such as electricity. The pastor then called in their children – two of them now being identified by Antie Suurpap as only hers and not Oom Koos' – to assist in providing for the basic needs of their parents, and to thicken the couple's alternative story of better cooperation which was attained in the previous pastoral session. However, the children warned the pastor that they have been giving them money, but that Antie Suurpap gives the money which she borrows from the pastor to her grandchild who uses it for drugs.

The outcome of counselling is often a fluctuating process, full of ups and downs, the pastor reminded herself. Further, counselling is always threatened by a lack of money. The conflict caused in intimate relationships by the spending of SASSA money is an ongoing pastoral care situation and cannot be 'solved' in a single session.

Theme 4: Pastoring congregants who are scammed out of a SASSA Grant

Demie and the Kenyan promises: Demie was a nurse at a private hospital in town. She was loved and respected. Demie had been married for almost 20 years and has two children with her husband. However, he constantly consumed large amounts of liquor and drugs. Last year he died. For Demie, this was a huge loss although he brought her pain and embarrassment. Being alone does not go well with Demie.

She then had a boyfriend, but it was an ill-suited relationship, and he broke up with her. The boyfriend told her that she was clingy and needy and that he could not deal with that. Demie then injected herself with insulin in a suicide attempt. She survived, spending months in hospital. She lost her job because she was found to be unsuitable to work with patients. This attempt also left her (slightly) brain damaged.

Demie now receives a disability grant of R2080 per month. She and her two daughters live with her sister and her family. The circumstances are crowded and difficult.

Demie is lonely and fell victim to a scam of some man in Kenya. She sends him her grant money every month. He promises to send her 'packages' and even a Mercedes, which never materialises. He also promises to marry her in June this year. Her sister takes away her phone and her SASSA card. In some way or another she always gets a new phone and keeps on sending her grant money to her 'boyfriend' in Kenya.

The sister brought Demie to the pastor for counselling. Together the pastor and Demie identifies externalised 'losses' as the problem that holds Demie captive in unhealthy relationships. They compiled a list of expenses which Demie agreed to cover instead of sending her money out of the country. These include paying for her daughters' toiletries and saving money for a dress for her daughter's matric farewell dance.

Two weeks later, Demie came to the *pastorie* again. She asked the pastor (who is a registered marriage officer) to marry her and her new boyfriend from England on a specific date soon. Indeed, Demie was proud that she left the Kenyan man who took her money, for a rich man in England who has invited her and her daughters to come and stay with him in England after the marriage. The pastor played along with the happy story but said that she as marriage officer could not marry somebody who did not have a South African identification number. Demie lost interest in the conversation and left, after accentuating that she did not give this man any of her SASSA money, because he has his own oil business.

The next day Demie's sister came to tell that Demie has indeed sent all her SASSA money to this new 'boyfriend' and was looking for somebody who will indeed marry the two of them.

It became clear that counselling only is not going to save the situation. The pastor set out to empower Demie's sister to go to SASSA with the required documentation in order to have the SASSA Grant paid to her as her already registered legal guardian.

A letter from the psychiatrist from the state hospital is needed. Sitting in a long cue, not knowing if you will be served, will be required from Demie's sister. Also, Demie's sister has to go to SASSA's offices to get everything done, sitting in the long cue yet again. She finds it difficult to get off from work to attend to this.

From the above it is evident that pastoral counselling is not adequate to resolve this situation. It requires enabling and educating congregants in acquiring and complete the relevant SASSA documents to ensure grant payments. It further involves public health care services, such as the psychiatrist at the government hospital.

Theme 5: Supporting congregants who escape domestic violence through SASSA

Estie's R350: Estie and her husband have been married for 35 years. Most, if not all these years, were marked by abuse and embarrassment. Estie's husband is a heavy drinker. He verbally and physically abused her and the children. The children now have jobs and have left the house.

Since COVID-19, Estie qualifies for SRD Grant of R350 per month. This has now empowered her to leave her husband. She has moved in with one of her children, and the R350 is enough to buy her some personal things. This is not enough for a divorce, and she does not want to go to Legal Aid, because 'they always want to bring us together again'. This problem remains unresolved.

Estie's husband now approaches the pastor for counselling. He wants the pastor to assist him in getting help for his drinking problem and get his wife back.

The pastor arranged a counselling session for both, where Estie stated that she was not going back to him, giving quite some serious reasons why not. Her husband did not defend himself against this, but only said that there were good times too and that she should concentrate on that.

The husband then suggested that they should spend a trial period of two weeks living together. He wants to spoil her and show that he has changed. Estie refuses. She feels that she now has the means to look after herself. The pastor feels that sending a woman back to an abusive situation is both unwise and illegal. Although they both agreed that the externalised problem is 'heavy drinking', they have not yet been able – or willing to – stand up against the problem.

The reality is that additional professional services required, are more than often unavailable, limited and under-resourced. This results in congregants reverting to the church and the pastor for assistance as well as interventions and an ongoing pastoral care process.

Theme 6: The church co-ordinating between significant others

Oom Valie: Oom Valie lives with his second wife, Antie Sussie, in impoverished circumstances. They both receive an Older Person Grant of R2080 per month. Her daughter from a previous marriage also lives with them who gets the R350 grant per month.

Antie Sussie has reached her wits' end. The daughter keeps on stealing her SASSA money for cigarettes or extorting it

from her. Her husband, Oom Valie, had a brain operation. He was on his children's medical aid and the operation was done in a private hospital. After COVID-19, his children had to remove him from their medical aid because of their own financial situation. Their car, which they have left for Antie Sussie to take him to the state hospital, was repossessed. His medicine has lapsed; so, he needs medicine, another operation and specified care.

Again, counselling is helpful, but not enough. The financial issues, such as the spending of the SASSA Grants, can be dealt with through counselling, but is complicated by the fact that the daughter has cerebral challenges and Oom Valie struggles to talk and can hear almost nothing.

The church council got involved and, firstly, took turns to provide transport to the clinic or hospital for medicine and medical care. Secondly, they met with the other children to engage and empower them in the caring for their parents.

The hospital scheduled a further brain operation for Oom Valie, but because this hospital cannot perform such an operation, he was referred to a state hospital 100 km away. Through cooperation between members of the church council and the family, the operation became a reality and was successful.

Assisting congregants is a process facilitated by the pastor and church and, in particular, with the elderly, it calls for the efforts of various role players in a community.

Theme 7: Pastoring honour and shame

Rosie and Piet: Piet is a 60-year-old man of colour. He married a black woman, Rose, in a traditional marriage. They both have children from previous relationships. Rose (45-year-old) has a secretarial job, and Piet receives an Older Person Grant.

After a few months, Rose left Piet. She discussed this with the pastor. She said that the reasons why she was leaving Piet were the following: (1) He is not circumcised as expected from her people; and (2) he earns only an Older Persons Grant. For her it is humiliating, because he cannot provide for her.

Piet came to see the pastor. He told the pastor that she had to order Rose to come back to him, because the Bible tells a wife to stay with a husband. Also, he is a man of honour and pride. His wife must listen to him.

The pastor called them both for counselling. Piet, a proud man, knelt down in front of Rose and told her that he loved her, and that he missed her. She agreed to go back.

The next Sunday at church Piet reported that Rose had left him again. She sent him a WhatsApp message that there was a surprise waiting for him. When he went to the hospital to have himself tested, he tested HIV positive. The situation

became even more difficult to handle, because both were church council members. The pastor now had to guide the church council on how to church-orderly deal with the situation, well knowing pastorally how being thrown off the church council would affect Piet's health. Also, the pastor must remind herself that gender abuse may go both ways, acknowledging women's role in abuse against men, even when a woman feels that a man is not manly enough to provide for a woman.

In the meantime, the pastor walked a pastoral road with Piet – Rose was no longer available for counselling – until his lonely death because of AIDS related complications.

From the above it was realised that counselling SASSA also means counselling honour and shame, both from the man's and the woman's perspective. As pastor, it is imperative to deal with these matters with sensitivity and respect.

Theme 8: Protecting the elderly

Oom Johannes: Oom Johannes is half-blind. He is very old and does not know how to withdraw money. His children take his SASSA card, draw his money, and give him only a small portion.

The pastor arranged to go with Oom Johannes to the ATM and draw his money for him. However, the children physically prevented the pastor from doing so. The pastor called in the church council to assist. The children, who are church goers, albeit irregularly, consequently withdrew from church and threatened to throw their father out of the house if he would put his foot in church again.

The pastor tries to pastorally stay in contact with Oom Johannes who is infinitely saddened by the situation.

New solutions need to be found for matters of this nature, which is not an isolated one. However, the mandate of church and pastor is often limited and need to be handled with caution.

Theme 9: Pastoring conflicting cultural expectations

The pastor takes the place of Caroline's deceased mother: Caroline is an African woman who stays with her mother and children in the 'Coloured township'. She was married to a Coloured man, but he died some time ago. Caroline and her three children are dependent on her mother's Older Persons Grant. When Caroline's mother died, the grant was automatically terminated – and she and her children were left destitute.

Caroline approached the pastor for counselling. The pastor focused on Caroline's loss of her mother as only an emotional loss. She did not, as a priority, deal with Caroline's loss as a financial one.

However, when Caroline came for the next session, she brought her mother's jersey with her and gave it to the pastor. The pastor politely – and with joy – accepted the gift.

The pastor then learned that, according to Caroline's culture, the pastor becomes Caroline's mother on acceptance of the jersey, as she said:

'You are now my mother. You must now please pay the children's school fees. It is long outstanding.' (P6)

The pastor discussed the situation with the church council and included the lending of money to congregants in her presentation. The church council decided to ask the congregation through the Finance Ministry to direct financial pleas to the church council and not to the pastor personally. The next Sunday the Chair of the Finance Ministry explained this decision to the congregation. This led to the embarrassment of people who did not want to come to church out of honour and shame. Also, it is not possible for the church council to lend money to members, as they are dependent on contributions of congregants who themselves are very poor.

In order to address these relevant challenges, new ecclesiastico-pastoral solutions need to be investigated. It further highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional, non-theoretical approach in providing insight into the reality of ecclesiastico-pastoral care of congregants. This care extends beyond spiritual well-being to the livelihoods of vulnerable communities with various socio-economic needs, particularly those solely dependent on government grants.

Conclusion

In the above representations, stories were told of people living in a community which is almost entirely dependent on SASSA Grants. Although the grants are indispensable, they also create problems in terms of how they should be spent, for not ever being enough, people being scammed out of it or robbed, and issues of honour and shame accompanying the grants. The question was asked what amount of care is possible from the side of the church and the pastor to deal with SASSA related problems experienced by congregants.

The problems experienced and the possibilities for ecclesiastico-pastoral intervention, showed at least nine faces, extracted as themes from the stories: (1) The church acknowledging and managing the needs of mothers; (2) the church providing a 'haven' for young mothers harassed by the father of the child; (3) pastoring domestic unrest among older grant holders; (4) pastoring congregants who are scammed out of a SASSA Grant; (5) supporting congregants who escape domestic violence through SASSA; (6) the church co-ordinating between significant others; (7) pastoring honour and shame; (8) protecting the elderly; and (9) pastoring conflicting cultural expectations vis-à-vis the SASSA Grant.

From the above, in addressing the primary question – What amount of care is possible from the side of the church and the pastor to deal with SASSA related problems experienced by congregants? – three directives can be formulated. The first observation is that in very few of the cases in the above-

mentioned narratives a definite solution could be offered in terms of ecclesiastico-pastoral care. However, SASSA care – as all care – should be seen as an ongoing process even when there are obvious setbacks. Counselling, mediation and support by insiders and outsiders should be rigorously continued by the role players in the congregation.

Secondly, the obvious should be remembered, and that is that poverty cannot be counselled with counselling being the only form of care. Ecclesiastico-pastoral care is multi-dimensional and cannot only be directed towards the mind of the counselee, but also needs to address his or her physical and financial position– even when the church’s resources are limited.

Thirdly, the problems surrounding SASSA Grants seem to be very personal, and questions of honour and shame are continuously at stake. Thus, it becomes difficult for the church council and pastor to involve either the community at large or outside organisations. However, this needs to be addressed, and ways should be found for SASSA Grant holders in need to be honourably connected with the wider society as well as with organisations that give aid to people in need such as municipality resources and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), as suggested by Carnow and Thesnaar (2018:6).

This article emphasises the impact of the dire socio-economic circumstances of congregants and the role it plays in the life of the ordained pastor. Navigating through the dynamics of their everyday existence, a shared reality is created focusing on the role the pastor and church plays and are allowed to play within a set mandate. It further highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional, non-theoretical approach in providing insight into the reality of ecclesiastical-pastoral care of congregants. This care extends beyond spiritual well-being to the livelihoods of vulnerable communities with various socio-economic needs, particularly those solely dependent on government grants.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Tanya Pieterse, a PhD student, who conducted two interviews (interview 4 and interview 5) and put it at the disposal of this research article.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author’s contributions

C.L. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.^a Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article’s results, findings, and content.

References

- Altman, M., Mokoman, Z. & Wright, G., 2014, 'Social security for young people amidst high poverty and unemployment: Some policy options for SA', *Development Southern Africa* 31(2), 347–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2013.873346>
- Carnow, J. & Thesnaar, C., 2018, 'A theologically-pastoral examination of the socio-economic situation of the brown welfare pensioner in the Redeemed African Methodist Church', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a19>
- Clandinin, D.J., Pushor, A.D. & Orr, A.M., 2007, 'Navigating sites for narrative inquiry', *Journal of Teacher Education* 58(1), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106296218>
- Gronbach, L., Seekings, J. & Megannon, V., 2022, 'Social protection in the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons from SA', Centre for Global Development Policy Paper 252, 1, February.
- Jenson, R.W., 2006, 'Anima Ecclesiastica', in R.K. Soulen & L. Woodhead (eds.), *God and human dignity*, pp. 59–71, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Landman, C. & Mudimeli, L.M., 2022, 'The spiritual experiences of women victims of gender-based violence: A case study of Thohoyandou', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(3), a7528. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7528>
- Lessler, J.T. & O'Reilly, J.M., 1997, 'Mode of interview and report of sensitive issues: Design and implementation of audio computer-assisted self-interviewing', *NIDA Monograph* 167, 366–383. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e495622006-018>
- Morgan, A., 2000, *What is narrative therapy?*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Columbia.
- Ngandu, S. & Motala, S., 2021, 'Ten years of the SASSA: The journey 2006–2016', *Social Security Review* 2021, 98–115.
- Patel, L., 2012, 'Poverty, gender and social protection: Child Support Grants in Soweto, South Africa', *Journal of Policy Practice* 11(1–2), 106–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2012.625344>
- South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), 2023a, *Social Grants*, viewed 04 September 2023, from <https://www.sassa.gov.za/SitePages/HomePage.aspx>
- South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), 2023b, *Older Persons Grant*, South African Government, viewed 04 September 2023, from <https://www.sassa.gov.za/SitePages/Older-Persons-Grant.aspx>
- Vally, N.T., 2016, 'Insecurity in South African Social Security: An examination of social grant deductions, cancellations, and waiting', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42(5), 965–982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1223748>
- White, M. & Epston, D., 1990, *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.