

A Pastoral Care Approach to Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: A Theological Reflection Informed by a Relational View of the Trinity

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is both a moral transgression and a criminal offence, with consequences that reverberate throughout the child's life and across the family, the community, and the nation. In Ghana, CSA is documented as pervasive across social institutions, including faith communities, yet it has received comparatively little sustained theological attention. This article develops a theological-pastoral response to CSA in the Ghanaian context, drawing on a relational understanding of the Trinity. Using Holland and Henriot's pastoral circle as an integrative method, the study situates practical theology in conversation with trinitarian doctrine to transform ecclesial praxis and Christian spirituality in relation to CSA. It argues that a relational doctrine of the Trinity provides a robust theological foundation for both a pastoral anthropology of children and an ecclesiology grounded in mutuality, equality, and interconnectedness – one capable of flattening entrenched power gradients and redirecting power towards life-giving ends among persons of equal worth.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Child theology, Faith community, Pastoral care, Relational Trinity

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Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) constitutes a global public health crisis whose effects are pervasive, cumulative, and frequently lifelong for survivors, families, and the wider society.^{1,2} Scripture itself situates such violation within the register of sin, affecting "both spirit and body" (1 Cor. 6:18), a position broadly mirrored in Ghanaian civil law, where CSA is classified as a criminal offence. The scholarly literature on CSA, however, has developed unevenly. Sociological, economic, and anthropological analyses have

¹ Prakash B. Behere and Anweshak Mulmule, "Sexual Abuse in Children," *Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 10, no. 2 (2014): 96–119.

² John Wihbey, "Global prevalence of child sexual abuse," *Journalist's Resource*, 15, no. 4 (2011): 25–30.

proliferated chiefly within Western contexts,^{3,4} and even where pastoral-theological engagement with CSA exists, it remains overwhelmingly shaped by Western frameworks and case material.^{5,6} Within Ghana specifically, existing scholarship has interrogated the phenomenon through socio-cultural, psychological, and political lenses, leaving its theological dimensions comparatively unexamined.^{7,8}

This lacuna is significant, since African theological anthropology offers a distinctive vantage point from which to interpret the abuse of children. Mtata situates child abuse within “the social position children have occupied in the hierarchy of the construction of personhood in African thought,”⁹ a formulation consonant with Reynaert's broader observation that child abuse is fundamentally an abuse of power.¹⁰ On this reading, the hierarchical ordering of personhood that has historically structured African ecclesial and theological reflection is not incidental to the problem of CSA but constitutive of it: as Mtata contends, “a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology.”¹¹ Mtata further observes that the marginalisation of children within African communitarian ethics is “sometimes rationalized by using the language of ‘care’ and ‘protection’ while the real value of childhood is not recognised.”¹² An insight that helps explain why perpetrators of CSA are so often precisely those figures like parents, teachers, and church volunteers entrusted with a child's care.

Mtata extends this analysis to argue that a hierarchical construction of personhood marginalises not only children but “all those considered as not being fully human, such as the physically or mentally disabled or those considered different,”¹³ concluding that

³ Behere and Mulmule, “Sexual Abuse in Children,” 96–119.

⁴ Wihbey, “Child Sexual Abuse.”

⁵ Lisa Rudolffsson, “Abused, Ashamed, and Alone: Experiences of Shame Among Victims of Sexual Abuse” (PhD diss., Örebro University, 2015).

⁶ Lisa Rudolffsson and Inga Tidefors, “Shame and Sexual Abuse: A Pastoral Care Perspective,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 67, no. 4 (2013).

⁷ Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Josephine Beoku-Betts, Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, and Mary Osirim, “Women’s and Gender Studies in English-Speaking Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Gender & Society* 18, no. 6 (2007).

⁸ Kevin Lalor, “Child Sexual Abuse in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28, no. 4 (2004): 439–460, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2003.07.005>. (PubMed)

⁹ Kenneth Mtata, “Child Theology and the African Context,” in *Building from the Rubbles: Theological Reflections on the Global Financial Crisis and Other Essays* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2009).

¹⁰ Didier Reynaert, “Power and Children’s Rights: An Analysis,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Children’s Rights Studies*, ed. Wouter Vandenhoe, Ellen Desmet, Didier Reynaert, and Sara Lembrechts (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹ Mtata, “Child Theology and the African Context.”

¹² Mtata, “Child Theology and the African Context.”

¹³ Mtata, “Child Theology and the African Context.”

African theology can only adequately serve children and other vulnerable persons once it has confronted this hierarchical inheritance.¹⁴ Because CSA is, by definition, a violation enacted within relationship, a theological response is best grounded in a doctrine that takes relationality as its starting point: the relational Trinity. This article accordingly develops a theological pastoral response to CSA in Ghana through a relational reading of trinitarian doctrine. It proceeds by outlining the relational view of the Trinity that undergirds the analysis, surveying the empirical landscape of CSA in Ghana, describing the study's methodology, and presenting findings organised around a trinitarian pastoral anthropology of children and an account of the church as a healing community, before concluding with implications for pastoral practice.

A Relational View of the Trinity

Relationality names the web of interdependence within which human existence unfolds. Ackermann argues that human beings are “shaped and nurtured” by the quality of their relationships with others, so that community-mindedness itself becomes generative of growth and development.¹⁵ Desmond Tutu makes a cognate theological claim, observing that persons are “made for complementarity,” endowed by God with distinct gifts precisely so that they might depend on one another within a network of relationships to express their humanity fully.¹⁶ Building on this relational anthropology, a relational view of the Trinity holds that the communion obtaining between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is not merely a speculative datum of doctrine but a pattern that should characterise the life and ministry of the Christian community. Following LaCugna,¹⁷ Tanner,¹⁸ and Venter,¹⁹ this article conceives the Trinity as a communion of mutual love, equality, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness. For LaCugna, the doctrine expresses “the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another”²⁰ – a formulation that positions the abuse and hoarding of power in human society as the direct inversion of the relational quality intrinsic to the Godhead. This reconception has shifted trinitarian theology away from an abstract and largely mystical

¹⁴ Mtata, “Child Theology and the African Context.”

¹⁵ Denise M. Ackermann, “A Voice Was Heard in Ramah: A Feminist Theology of Praxis for Healing in South Africa,” in *Claiming Our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, ed. Denise M. Ackermann, Elna Mouton, and Riet Bons-Storm (Stellenbosch: EFSA, 1998).

¹⁶ Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree, *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management* (Randburg: Knowledge Resources, 1995), xiii–xv.

¹⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹⁸ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Rian Venter, “Trinity and Ethics: An Overview of a Recent Debate,” in *Trinity, Doxology, and Community*, ed. Rian Venter (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2012).

²⁰ LaCugna, *God for Us*.

inheritance toward a constitutively practical doctrine, situating everyday Christian existence at the very centre of trinitarian reflection.

The ecclesial implications of this shift have been developed extensively. Volf, engaging Ratzinger's trinitarian ecclesiology, contends that the entire life of the faith community – its structures no less than the daily texture of Christian spirituality – ought to be rooted in trinitarian communion, such that congregational practice becomes a visible enactment of trinitarian belief.²¹ Zizioulas advances a still stronger claim, describing the church as *imago trinitatis*: not merely an organisation but a mode of being that must take on the relational “flesh” of God's own being.²² Volf, commenting on Zizioulas, insists that ecclesial communion can be adequately understood only through sustained critical engagement with the communal pattern disclosed in the life and teaching of Christ.²³ The deployment of a specifically doctrinal resource in this study reflects a conviction that practical theology and Christian doctrine are inseparable. As Miller-McLemore observes, “practical theology refers to an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in everyday life”²⁴ – an activity that properly draws on both the priority of Scripture and the retrieval of doctrinal tradition. This is especially apt in the African context, where the doctrine of the Trinity functions as what Sakupapa terms an “ecumenical discourse,”²⁵ one whose emphasis on communal life resonates closely with African communitarian ethics.²⁶ Bitrus sharpens this convergence further, arguing that a relational Trinity stands in direct opposition to the patriarchal forms of dominion that often typify African communal life, such that an authentically African communalism is, properly understood, a trinitarian communalism.²⁷

²¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

²² John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

²³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

²⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

²⁵ Teddy C. Sakupapa, “The Trinity in African Christian Theology: An Overview of Contemporary Approaches,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75 no. 1 (2019): a5460, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5460>.

²⁶ Sakupapa, “The Trinity in African Christian Theology.”

²⁷ Ibrahim S. Bitrus, “The Trinity and Human Society: An African Perspective,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017).

Child Sexual Abuse in the Ghanaian Context

CSA is not a marginal phenomenon within Ghanaian society. The Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560) defines a child as any person below the age of eighteen, while the statutory age of sexual consent remains sixteen; sexual activity involving a child below this threshold therefore constitutes CSA under Ghanaian law. UNICEF estimates that approximately 90% of Ghanaian children have experienced some form of abuse²⁸ – physical, emotional, sexual, or neglect, while a related UNICEF costing exercise placed the annual national expenditure attributable to child abuse at between GH¢926 million and GH¢1.442 billion.²⁹ A comprehensive nationwide study conducted by the Ghana Health Service in partnership with UNICEF identified CSA as a serious public health problem and documented child marriage as a further, closely related form of CSA occurring across all surveyed regions, with girls as young as nine betrothed to and sexually engaged by adult men.³⁰ Complementary school-based research corroborates the scale of the problem: in a descriptive and exploratory survey spanning four of Ghana's then 110 districts, drawing on responses from 490 pupils, 116 parents, and 49 headteachers, 11.2 per cent of participating children reported having been victims of rape or defilement, with 92% of victims identified as female.³¹ A subsequent study examining the period of the COVID-19 lockdown found that 32% of surveyed adolescent girls aged thirteen to nineteen had experienced sexual abuse during that period.³² Notably, Kpalam and Ahiataku report that CSA is no less pervasive within churches than within Ghanaian society at large,³³ with several studies implicating Christian religious leaders as perpetrators and media reports identifying church leadership as, in some instances, an obstacle to the fight against CSA rather than an ally within it.³⁴ Taken together, this body of evidence points

²⁸ UNICEF, *Situation Analysis of Children in Ghana* (Accra: UNICEF Ghana, 2018).

²⁹ UNICEF, *Study on the Economic Impact of Violence Against Children in Ghana* (Accra: UNICEF Ghana, 2015).

³⁰ Ghana Health Service, *National Study on the Health Sector Response to Child Abuse in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Health Service, with support from UNICEF, 2018).

³¹ Anthony Agu, Andrews Brown, Maimuna Adamu-Issah, and Angela Duncan, "Child Sexual Abuse in Ghanaian Public Schools: A Descriptive and Exploratory Study," *African Journal of Social Work Studies*, 122.

³² E. Owusu-Addo et al., "Prevalence and Determinants of Sexual Abuse among Adolescent Girls during the COVID-19 Lockdown and School Closures in Ghana: A Mixed Method Study," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 135 (2023): 105997.

³³ Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam and Eva Ahiataku, "An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 7 (2023): 304–317, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2023976>.

³⁴ Emmanuel Nii-Boye Quarshie et al., "Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse in Ghana: A Media Content Analysis of Survivors, Offenders, and Offence Characteristics," *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 4 (2022): 3028–3054, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01430-3>.

to a persistent and, in places, worsening crisis that existing governmental and civil-society interventions have not yet been able to contain.

Methodological Framework: The Pastoral Circle

This study adopts the Pastoral Circle developed by Holland and Henriot,³⁵ an approach to practical theology emerging from the traditions of contextual and liberation theology and oriented explicitly toward context-sensitive action and change.^{36,37} Holland and Henriot conceive of practical theology as an ongoing, integrative process binding together pastoral praxis, hermeneutics, and theological reflection within the life of the church, and they identify four constitutive moments: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning.³⁸ The moment of insertion, or what Cochrane et al. call “beginning in the context,”³⁹ attends to the lived experiences, feelings, and perceptions of individuals and communities as the primary data from which theological reflection proceeds.^{40,41} Applied here, this moment highlights the complexity of CSA in Ghana, as documented across a decade of scholarship calling on all stakeholders, including faith communities, to institute concrete protective measures.⁴² The second moment, social analysis, seeks to identify the causes, contributing factors, and consequences of the phenomenon under study, including the specific role and influence of the church within the community.⁴³ The third moment, theological reflection,

³⁵ Joe Holland and Peter J. Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

³⁶ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2006).

³⁷ Brian Macallan and H. Jurgens Hendriks, “Practical Theology and Philosophy: Working from a Distinctly Trans/postdisciplinary Approach,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012).

³⁸ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

³⁹ James R. Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Robin Petersen, *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991).

⁴⁰ Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

⁴¹ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

⁴² Anthony Agu, Andrews Brown, Maimuna Adamu-Issah, and Angela Duncan, “Child Sexual Abuse in Ghanaian Public Schools: A Descriptive and Exploratory Study,” *African Journal of Social Work Studies*, 122; Kevin Lalor, “Child Sexual Abuse in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28, no. 4 (2004): 439–460, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2003.07.005>. (PubMed) ; Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam, “Applying Integrated Theology to Child Protection in the Church of Pentecost in Winneba Municipality in Ghana” (Master’s Thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2019).

⁴³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); H. Jurgens Hendriks, *Studying Congregations in Africa* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2004); Brian Macallan and H. Jurgens Hendriks, “Practical Theology and Philosophy: Working from a Distinctly Trans/postdisciplinary Approach,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012).

undertakes to interpret the analysed context “in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teachings, and the resources of tradition,”⁴⁴ in this study, that reflection proceeds specifically through the doctrine of the Trinity, with particular attention to its relational articulation. The fourth and final moment, pastoral planning and praxis, is the point at which the faith community discerns and restates the will of God for its present context,⁴⁵ synthesising the preceding three moments into a concrete pastoral response. This final moment, elaborated below, generates the practical pastoral care strategies with which the article concludes.

Discussion: Trinitarian Foundations for Pastoral Care

The discussion that follows corresponds to the pastoral circle's culminating moment of planning and praxis,⁴⁶ addressing what a pastoral response to CSA grounded in a relational Trinity might entail. Because a theological anthropology of children directly shapes the church's pastoral praxis toward them (Matt. 5:13–16), the discussion proceeds in two movements: first, toward a trinitarian pastoral anthropology of children; second, toward an account of the church as a healing community capable of responding pastorally to CSA.

Pastoral Anthropology of Children Informed by the Trinity

How might a relational paradigm of the Trinity inform the theological status accorded to children? Moltmann offers a productive point of entry through the concept of *imago Trinitatis*: because human beings are created in God's image, and that image is irreducibly trinitarian, they are called to enact that relational image within their earthly communities.⁴⁷ Moltmann grounds this claim in Jesus's high-priestly prayer “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21, ESV), reading it as a summons into a fellowship with Christ that believers are called to embody in the shape of their communal life. On this account, believers are not merely instructed to imitate the trinitarian relationship from without; they are constituted within it.^{48,49}

⁴⁴ Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis*.

⁴⁵ James R. Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Robin Petersen, *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991).

⁴⁶ Cochrane, de Gruchy, and Petersen, *In Word and Deed*.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985).

⁴⁸ Mark S. Medley, *Imago Trinitatis: Toward a Relational Understanding of Becoming Human* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*.

This theological claim carries direct implications for the status of children. Ecclesial practice too often implies, whether explicitly or through neglect, that children bear an inferior image relative to adults—an implication that a trinitarian anthropology cannot sustain. Both children and adults are created in the singular image and likeness of the Triune God (Gen. 1:26; 2:7), and Moltmann resists any reduction of the *imago Dei* to a mandate for dominion over creation, insisting instead that it extends to *imago Trinitatis*: the relationality of Father, Son, and Spirit “represented in the fundamental human communities and manifested in them through creation and redemption.”⁵⁰ It follows that “if the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community—the community of the sexes and the community of the generations—has the same designation.”⁵¹ Read against this claim, the residual notion of ‘rule’ within some interpretations of the *imago Dei* helps to explain the persistence of dominative power over those judged inferior, including children, and correspondingly the difficulty of cultivating a relational space for all creation analogous to that within the Trinity itself. The faith community, called by the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit into a fellowship that LaCugna describes as one of “primacy of equals,”⁵² is thus properly a community of persons who share, without remainder, in the one image of God—a community whose vocation is to construct relational spaces of safety for all its members, including its most marginalised and vulnerable.^{53,54}

Dillen's work on relational anthropology offers a further resource for integrating this trinitarian claim into a workable theology of childhood.⁵⁵ Dillen identifies two dominant paradigms in the literature on children—a ‘liberationist’ emphasis on child participation and a ‘care’ emphasis on child protection—and argues that these need not stand in opposition but can be held together within a relational anthropology that places “the dignity of both the child and the parent centrally,” viewing them as “interconnected in a relation of give and take from the beginning.”⁵⁶ This interconnected mutuality mirrors the communion internal to the Trinity, and Dillen grounds it theologically in a doctrine of creation as an “interconnected web of relationships” rather than “a fixed hierarchical

⁵⁰ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*.

⁵¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*.

⁵² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991).

⁵³ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1994).

⁵⁴ Dirk J. Smit, “Trinity, History—and Discernment?” *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 53, nos. 3–4 (2012): 337–352, <https://doi.org/10.5952/53-3-4-273>. (NGTT)

⁵⁵ Annemie Dillen, “Can Parents and Children Be Friends? A Relational-Theological Exploration of the Asymmetry and Mutuality Between Parents and Children,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 24 (2011): 199–216.

⁵⁶ Dillen, “Can Parents and Children Be Friends?” 199–216.

ordering” in which persons occupy a static ontological rank.⁵⁷ The resulting model is one of asymmetry rather than hierarchy: adult and child occupy different positions and differing configurations of power, yet both retain equal dignity within their interconnected relational space. Children thereby enter the pastoral relationship as both vulnerable and agentive—capable of giving as well as receiving. As Dillen concludes, honouring both the asymmetry of the relationship and its capacity to shift in balance over time, together with the underlying mutuality of giving and receiving, is essential to respecting the dignity of both parties in parent-child and pastoral relationships alike—a formulation that closely mirrors the asymmetry-within-mutuality that characterises a relational Trinity.⁵⁸

Moltmann’s account of trinitarian personhood reinforces this claim: because the Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and the Spirit within both, “each Person receives the fullness of eternal life from the other.”⁵⁹ Each divine person, in other words, exists in orientation toward the flourishing of the others—a pattern closely allied to the African relational maxim of *Ubuntu*, “I am because of you.” Read alongside Moltmann’s subsequent account of “friendship in freedom”⁶⁰ as the epitome of humanity’s liberating relationship with God, this suggests that children should be understood not merely as objects of adult protection but as full participants in the community of friends constituted by Christ, entitled to experience that friendship in freedom.⁶¹ Bunge, drawing on Psalm 127:3—“Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him”—extends this claim by insisting that children are simultaneously bearers of the divine image and gifts entrusted to families and societies, a dual status that calls for an environment in which children and adults hold one another in mutual respect and delight.⁶²

Altogether, these resources yield a pastoral anthropology in which children are understood as bearers of the same imago Trinitatis borne by adults, entitled to the same dignity and respect accorded to any person created in that image. While adults retain a God-given responsibility to guide and nurture children toward spiritual maturity, this responsibility confers no ontological superiority within the body of Christ; indeed,

⁵⁷ Dillen, “Can Parents and Children Be Friends?” 199–216.

⁵⁸ Dillen, “Can Parents and Children Be Friends?” 199–216.

⁵⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.

⁶⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁶¹ Manitza Kotze and Carike Noeth, “Friendship as a Theological Model: Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and the Trinity,” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53, no. 1 (2019): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i1.2333>.

⁶² Marcia J. Bunge, “Child, Children,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

children are elsewhere presented in Scripture as models of faith from whom adults themselves have something to learn. Such an anthropology supplies a compelling theological rationale for building faith communities in which every member is accorded a dignity rooted in the image of the Triune God – communities within which power is correspondingly more likely to be exercised in life-giving ways among persons of equal worth. Because pastoral care is, at its root, a communal undertaking in which the whole community cares for its members and extends that care outward to the wider society, holding fast to this anthropology is indispensable to eliminating the abuse and dehumanisation of children within Ghanaian society.

The Church as a Healing Community for CSA

A community, minimally defined, is a group bound by shared cultural norms, values, and often geographical proximity. Within Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, children are characteristically understood in relation to family and community rather than as isolated individuals, and the raising of children is correspondingly conceived as a properly communal task. This orientation toward connectedness and collective unity is expressed across the continent through concepts such as Ubuntu among Zulu-speaking communities of southern Africa and *biakoye* among the Akan of Ghana – both naming an African worldview of humanness inseparable from collective life.⁶³ Capturing Ubuntu as the idea of living up to the full human potential is a potential this article locates theologically in relationship with the Triune God, in whose image and likeness humanity is created. Mbigbi and Maree similarly describe Ubuntu as “collective unity for survival in the face of deprivation and poverty,”⁶⁴ while Mbiti captures the same emphasis when he observes that in traditional African life “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporate... the community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual to depend on the corporate group.”⁶⁵

A healing community, on this account, is one in which such relational mutuality is fully realised. Lartey situates the pursuit of healthy, dignity-affirming communities within the broader project of postcolonial pastoral care, arguing for creativity, innovation, and improvisation grounded in indigenous African communitarian ethics as the basis for a pastoral care and healing that extends beyond the individual to the whole community,

⁶³ Kpalam, “Applying Integrated Theology.”

⁶⁴ Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree, *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management* (Randburg, South Africa: Knowledge Resources, 1995), 78.

⁶⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).

undertaken by the whole community.⁶⁶ It should be stressed, however, that communal life in Ghana is not automatically life-affirming; instances of violence and injustice persist within African communities notwithstanding their communal ethos. What determines whether a given community is life-giving is therefore not communalism as such but the specific character and internal structure of that community's relationality – and it is precisely here that a relational Trinity offers a thicker theological foundation for shaping faith communities toward the promotion of healing and well-being for all their members, including children.

A healing community, so conceived, is one in which children and adults inhabit a relational space rooted in the trinitarian primacy of equals rather than the primacy of one member over another – a space in which every member feels safe and at ease in the presence of others.^{67,68} It is simultaneously a community of mutual care, in which wounded members both receive and extend healing, and in which human dignity is upheld across all its relationships.⁶⁹ Structures built along such trinitarian parallels stand in explicit contrast to structures organised around domination and dehumanisation, which Moltmann treats as fundamentally foreign to the participatory life internal to the Trinity. How, then, might the church become such a healing community for children who have survived sexual abuse? Smit describes the faith community as an interpersonal organism committed to the restoration of relationship both with God and among its members, observing that the New Testament contains roughly ninety-six 'one another' texts that give this commitment concrete ethical content.⁷⁰ The church, on this reading, is an extension of the covenant of peace accomplished through Christ in the power of the Spirit – a community fashioned, in Pembroke's phrase, on parallels of the relationality that stands at the centre of trinitarian doctrine.⁷¹ The resulting theological structure is triadic: a community (the Trinity) ministers healing through a community (the church) to a community (the world), such that the Triune God brings healing to abused children specifically through the mediating agency of a community of believers living in healthy

⁶⁶ Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013).

⁶⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁶⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁶⁹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁷⁰ Smit, "The One and the Many," 11–12.

⁷¹ Neil Pembroke, *The Art of Listening: Dialogue, Shame, and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

relationship with one another. This theological logic grounds the practical pastoral care strategies developed in the section that follows.

Practical Pastoral Care Strategies for Ghanaian Churches

Pastoral care, understood as God's caring activity enacted through human communities, can be conceptualised in relation to CSA as comprising both proactive strategies aimed at preventing abuse and reactive strategies aimed at responding once abuse has occurred.⁷² On the basis of the preceding theological analysis, six mutually reinforcing strategies are proposed for churches operating within the Ghanaian context. First, churches should adopt contextual, child-centred theological frameworks that explicitly affirm children as bearers of the image of the Triune God. Kpalam rightly observes that without a clear theological vision of children, faith communities cannot reform the spirituality and praxis needed to respond holistically to children's needs; such a framework is a precondition for challenging the socio-cultural and ecclesial practices that dehumanise children and thereby enable abuse.⁷³

Second, faith communities should develop and implement formal child protection policies that establish clear safeguarding procedures, accountability mechanisms, and sanctions for perpetrators. The Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560) obliges all institutions to act in the best interests of children and to institute pragmatic protective measures; given the documented prevalence of CSA in Ghana, churches are correspondingly well placed to integrate child protection into pastoral ministry through intercessory prayer with and for children, advocacy against harmful socio-cultural norms, and the deliberate promotion of children's participation in their own protection.

Third, training church leaders in child protection should be an explicit component of pastoral strategy. Leaders require formation not only in the theological conviction that protecting vulnerable children flows directly from belief in the Triune God, but also in the practical scope of child abuse within their communities, in relevant national law and policy, and in appropriate reporting protocols – training that equips them for effective pastoral ministry of protection rather than inadvertent complicity through silence or ignorance.

⁷² Lartey, *Pastoral Theology*.

⁷³ Ebenezer T. Kpalam, "A Pastoral Response to Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: An Interdisciplinary Study Informed by a Relational View of the Trinity" (PhD diss., North-West University, South Africa, 2021).

Fourth, churches should embed advocacy within their pastoral care strategy, extending beyond general awareness-raising to sustained prophetic engagement with the cultural, social, and institutional practices that place children at risk. Sermons, Bible study groups, community forums, and public campaigns can each be deployed to challenge norms that enforce silence around sexual abuse and heighten children's vulnerability, while church leaders can advocate directly for the enforcement of child protection law, support survivors and their families, and collaborate with schools, traditional authorities, and community leaders to build child-safe environments. Fifth, churches should actively empower children as agents in their own protection, equipping them with age-appropriate knowledge and skills to recognise, resist, and report abuse—a strategy consonant with the theological claim, developed above, that children are participants and not merely objects within the pastoral relationship.⁷⁴ Sixth, and finally, churches should pursue strategic partnerships with state agencies and specialist child protection organisations—including, in Ghana, the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service, the Department of Children, and the Department of Social Welfare—to secure a coordinated, multisectoral response to CSA. Effective ecclesial safeguarding, in other words, cannot be pursued in isolation from the wider protective architecture of the state.

Conclusion and Implications for Pastoral Practice

This article has argued that a pastoral response to CSA within Ghanaian faith communities should be rooted in the theological conviction that the Trinity ministers healing to sexually abused children through a community of believers living in and through healthy relationship. Relationality, as the central motif of trinitarian doctrine, ought correspondingly to constitute the defining mark of this community; the healthy relationships cultivated within it, and extended outward to a hurting world, become the medium through which the brokenness occasioned by CSA is addressed. Faith communities in Ghana are accordingly invited to understand themselves as healing communities—a new community created by the Father through the Son to live in the power of the Spirit, and thereby drawn into participation in the trinitarian life itself, becoming a community of compassionate believers through whom the Triune God brings healing, restoration, and peace to a hurting world. On this account, the church is not merely an institution but a community of believers called to a mode of life consistent with the nature, will, and purpose of the Trinity.

⁷⁴ Annemie Dillen, "Can Parents and Children Be Friends? A Relational-Theological Exploration of the Asymmetry and Mutuality Between Parents and Children," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 24 (2011): 199–216.

It is recommended, first, that faith communities in Ghana, working from this relational understanding of the Trinity, develop their own contextual child theologies and child protection policies capable of informing concrete programmes and interventions aimed at bringing healing to children who have suffered abuse and dehumanisation, both within faith communities and in the wider society. Second, further empirical research is recommended into the specific structures, policies, and programmes that different church denominations across diverse Ghanaian communities have developed, or have yet to develop, in response to CSA—research that would allow the theological framework advanced here to be tested against, and refined by, the concrete practice of Ghanaian churches.

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