

Pastoral counseling in Christian schools: A hidden force in shaping professional teachers' roles beyond the classroom

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual well-being and mental health have become increasingly important issues in modern life, which is often marked by stress and uncertainty. Pastoral counseling emerges as an integrative approach that combines Christian spiritual values, psychological principles, and counseling techniques to holistically support individuals. This article aims to map the development and global trends in pastoral counseling research through a bibliometric analysis of 1,848 Scopus-indexed publications from 1970 to 2025. The study adopts the PRISMA approach for data screening and uses the VOSViewer application to visualise the results. Findings reveal a significant increase in the number of publications, with major contributions from the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, as well as leading authors such as Seward Hiltner and Lindsay B. Carey. Institutions like the University of Pretoria were also noted as active contributors in this field. Collaboration and keyword network analysis show that key emerging themes include spirituality, empathy, emotional healing, and responses to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study affirms that pastoral counseling is a dynamic, multidisciplinary field that adapts to the evolving needs of society and remains relevant in shaping transformative pastoral care practices. This article is expected to serve as both an academic and practical reference for further research and the implementation of pastoral counseling across various socio-religious contexts.

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1. Introduction

Inner well-being and spiritual strength are fundamental needs for every individual navigating a life full of challenges. This well-being reflects a harmony among spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions that are interconnected, enabling individuals to find meaning, peace, and resilience in the face of life's various crises (Fallo et al., 2025). In a spiritually healthy society, human relationships are built upon love, forgiveness, and deep concern for one another (Astrid et al., 2025). Spiritual well-being is not merely the absence of suffering; it also encompasses the presence of hope, faith, and a sense of connection to something greater than oneself (Faren & Tumanggor, 2021; Gavina et al., 2025). Therefore, cultivating and maintaining spiritual balance is a shared responsibility of individuals, families, religious communities, and social institutions to realise a holistic and meaningful life for all (R. Y. Siahaan & Ndona, 2024).

As time progresses, global society faces increasing life pressures due to existential crises, rising mental health disorders, and the erosion of spiritual and relational values. In this context, pastoral counseling emerges as a strategic approach that provides spiritual accompaniment, heals inner wounds, and restores both personal and transcendent relationships (Puasa et al., 2025; Sinaga & Simatupang, 2024). This approach is applied not only within church ministry but also widely utilized in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other community institutions (M. Siahaan, 2023; Simatupang & Suprabowo, 2025). The primary goal of pastoral counseling is to assist individuals in facing life's suffering and to guide them toward holistic and meaningful recovery (Tamba et al., 2025).

Pastoral counseling integrates Christian faith principles, psychological theories, and counseling techniques to create a safe space for spiritual exploration and emotional healing. Through this approach, individuals are encouraged to process their crisis experiences, reconstruct the meaning of suffering, and strengthen their relationships with God and others (Sirang et al., 2024; Riung et al., 2024). With the growing awareness of the importance of integrating spirituality and mental health, academics and practitioners alike have shown great interest in exploring the effectiveness and methodological approaches of pastoral counseling in various settings (Santoso & Herman, 2024; Tadung et al., 2024). This development illustrates that pastoral counseling is a multidisciplinary field that remains relevant amid the dynamics of modern life (Patandean et al., 2025).

Despite its recognized importance, there has been no comprehensive bibliometric study that maps the global development and trends in pastoral counseling research. Most existing bibliometric analyses still focus on general topics related to spirituality in psychology (Aldilla, 2025), the relationship between religion and mental health (Novianti, 2023), and the role of faith in crisis intervention (Nesimnasi, 2024). It remains unclear to what extent the field of pastoral counseling has evolved scientifically, who the main contributors are in academic publications, how cross-country and inter-institutional collaborations are structured, and what key topics are being addressed in current research. Understanding this scientific landscape is crucial for shaping the future direction of knowledge and practice in pastoral counseling (Batistič & Laken, 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to analyse global trends in research on pastoral counseling through a bibliometric approach. This approach allows for the identification of publication patterns, scientific collaborations, and thematic evolution based on quantitative data from academic publications (Donthu et al., 2021; Öztürk et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature and provide an empirical foundation for the further development of pastoral counseling practice and research. The main objective of this study is to offer a comprehensive mapping of global research on pastoral counseling, including publication trends over the years, contributing authors, the most active countries and institutions, dominant topics, and the dynamics of scholarly collaboration formed over the past decade.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This study employs a bibliometric analysis method to evaluate and interpret data from a large volume of research findings published in scientific journals, enabling researchers to identify patterns, trends, and interconnections among topics within a specific field based on publication metadata. Data visualisation from this analysis provides a clearer picture of the dynamics of research development, such as trends in popular themes, collaborations between authors or institutions, and the distribution of publications over a defined time span. To ensure transparency and systematic procedures in the research process, this study adopts the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) model guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), which describe the workflow stages in detail, starting from the identification of data sources, the selection of relevant literature, and the screening of articles based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process helps to maintain the quality and validity of the bibliometric analysis conducted, and the PRISMA flow is illustrated in Figure 1.

The PRISMA diagram in Figure 1 outlines four main phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification phase, all records from the Scopus database were collected using selected keywords. In the screening phase, duplicate and irrelevant records were

removed. The eligibility phase involved assessing the full-text articles based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, 1,848 articles were deemed eligible and included in the final analysis.

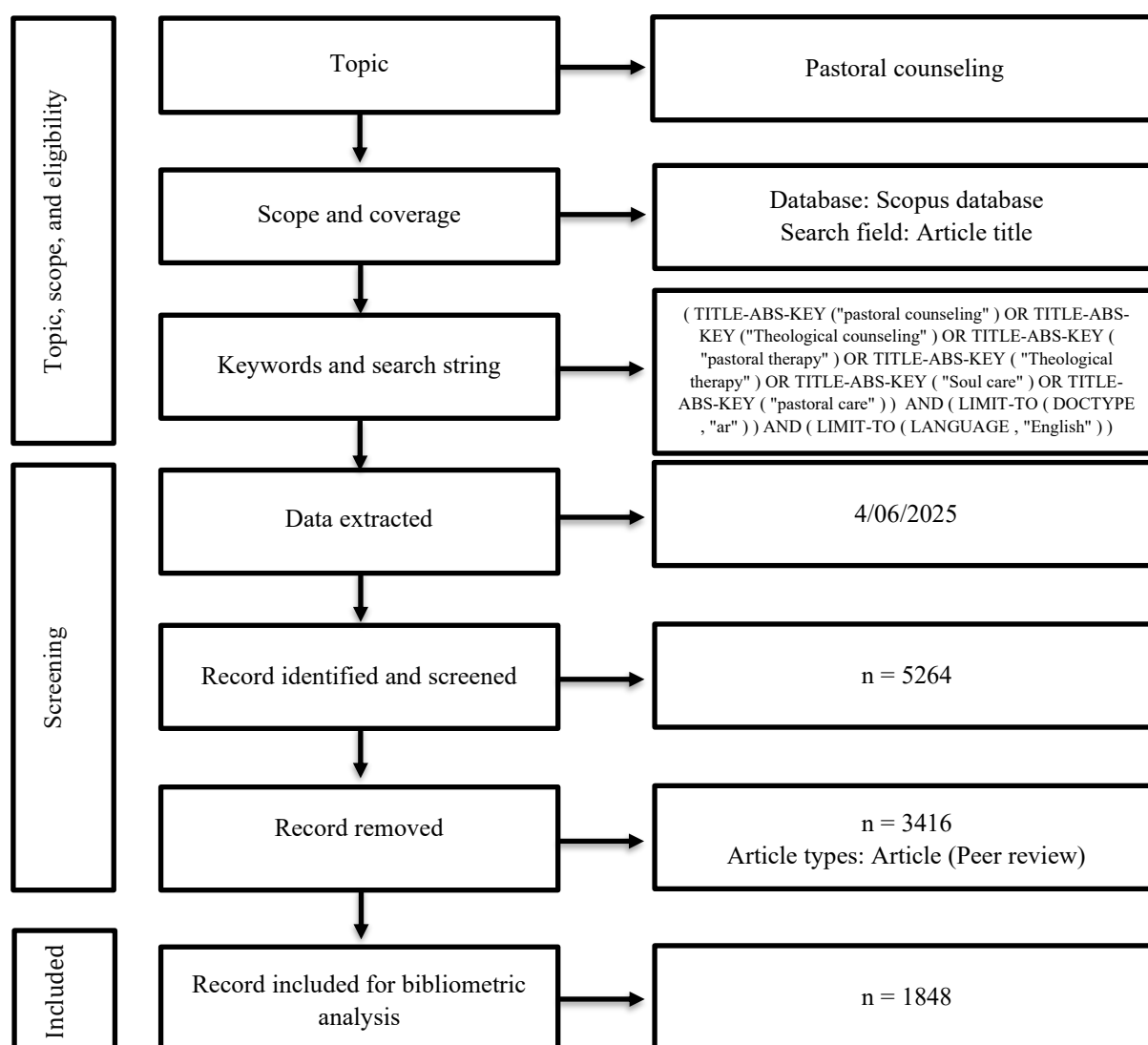


Fig. 1. PRISMA diagram

2.2. Data extraction

Relevant article publications that align with the research objectives were identified through the Scopus database, with a limitation to only include scholarly works that had undergone a peer-review process, specifically articles, in order to ensure the validity and credibility of the data sources being analyzed. Articles that had not gone through peer-review, such as editorials, article review proofs, and brief communications between authors and editors, were excluded from the research data. After the selection process was completed, a total of 1,848 articles were independently chosen for further analysis in this bibliometric study.

2.3. Data collection tools

We collected data from research findings related to peace education that were published in Scopus-indexed journals during the period of 1970 to 2025, considering that these journals had undergone a rigorous peer-review process, which ensures the quality and reliability of their content. Scopus was chosen because it includes a wide range of scientific publications, such as journals, conference proceedings, book chapters, and books, and covers various academic disciplines, making the gathered data richer and more representative of the diverse approaches in pastoral counseling. In

addition, Scopus provides comprehensive metadata, including information about authors, institutions, countries of origin, co-citations, and research network mapping, which strongly supports bibliometric analysis. In the search process, we used keywords such as pastoral counseling, theological counseling, pastoral therapy, theological therapy, soul care, and pastoral care to identify articles relevant to the focus of this study.

2.4. Research procedure

This study applies a bibliometric approach through systematic stages that begin with clearly defining the research objectives as the main guideline. Next, the criteria for the data to be used were determined, including the selection of the Scopus database as the primary source due to its reliability in providing scientifically validated indexed articles. The data search process was conducted using keywords such as pastoral counseling, theological counseling, pastoral therapy, theological therapy, soul care, and pastoral care. The retrieved articles were then filtered based on inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure their relevance and quality. The data that met the criteria were subsequently analyzed using VOSviewer software version 1.6.16 to visualize patterns and trends in the available research literature.

2.5. Data analysis

This study employs bibliometric analysis with the assistance of VOSviewer software version 1.6.16, which is capable of providing in-depth visual representations to facilitate the interpretation of the resulting bibliometric maps. The software enables the identification of relationships among key elements such as keywords, authors, and publication sources in a visual format. The data retrieved from the search were exported to Microsoft Excel for compilation, correction, and selection in order to ensure their accuracy and relevance. The analysis results were then presented in the form of images, graphs, and tables, while the final visualization of the bibliometric maps was processed again using VOSviewer to produce outputs that are informative and easy to interpret.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Research trends in pastoral counseling

Research publications on pastoral counseling have grown significantly in line with the increasing needs of society. We used Scopus data to track the publication trends of research related to pastoral counseling. Figure 2 illustrates the trajectory of research publications on pastoral counseling.

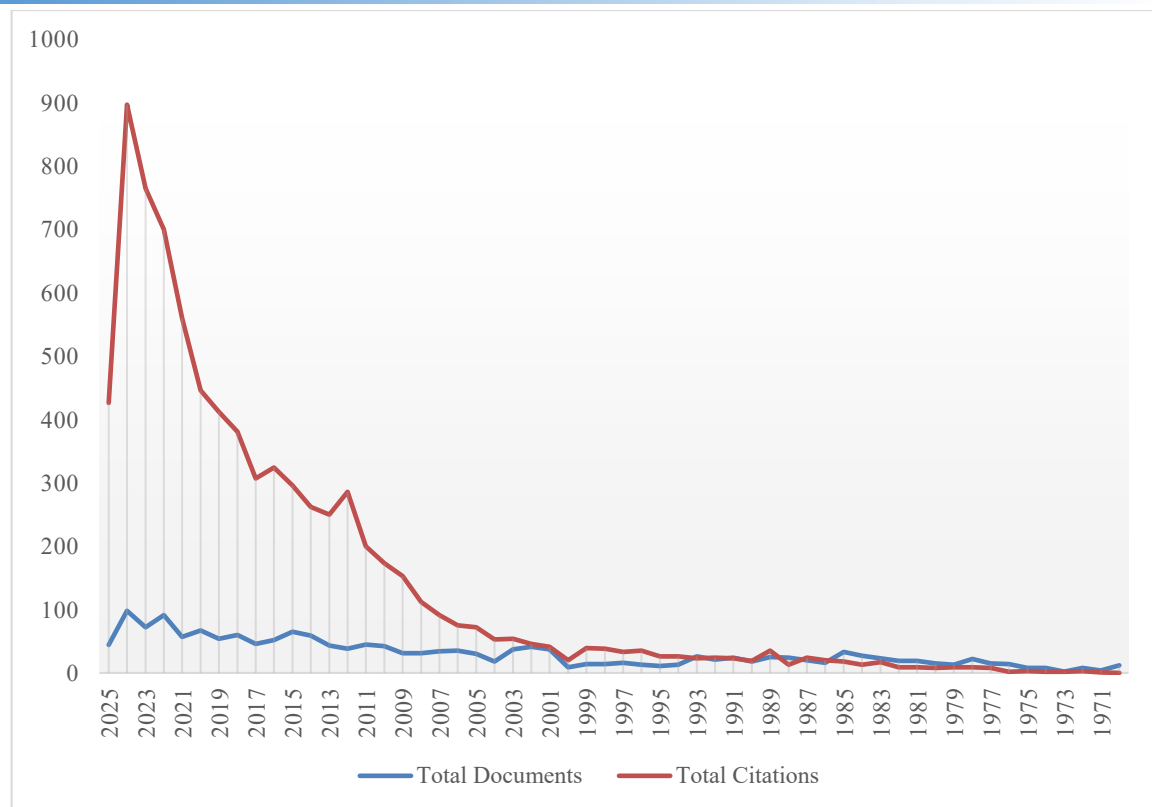


Fig. 2. Pastoral counseling publication trends

Based on Figure 2, it is evident that research publications on pastoral counseling have shown a consistently increasing trend in recent years. This increase indicates growing attention from the scientific community toward the topic of pastoral counseling, in line with the rising awareness of the importance of integrating spirituality and mental health in addressing the challenges of modern life. The surge in publications may also reflect the response of academics and practitioners to the increasingly complex needs of society concerning inner and spiritual well-being, as well as the recognition of pastoral counseling as a strategic approach to supporting individuals and communities. This positive trend suggests that the field of pastoral counseling is a dynamic and relevant area of research with sustainable growth potential in the future.

3.2. Contributing authors in pastoral counseling research

Author contribution analysis is a crucial aspect in understanding the research landscape of a particular field, as it identifies the most influential and productive individuals. These authors not only contribute to the production of scientific works but also often serve as pioneers in developing new theories, methodologies, and research directions. Through the number of published documents and the citations received, we can measure the impact and reach of their contributions to scientific advancement. Table 1 presents a list of authors who have contributed to the publication of research on pastoral counseling.

Table 1. Top ten contributing authors in pastoral counseling

Author	Number of Documents	Number of Citations
Seward Hiltner	17	9
Ryan Lamothe	16	28
Vhumani Magezi	12	64
Donald Capps	10	20
Maake J. Masango	9	34
Peter Lang	8	50
Kirk A. Bingaman	7	31
Robert Perske	7	4
Lindsay B. Carey	6	84
Yolanda Dreyer	6	16

Table 1 presents a list of authors who have made significant contributions in terms of the number of documents and citations related to the topic. Based on the data, Seward Hiltner and Ryan Lamothe stand out as the most productive authors, with 17 and 16 documents respectively. However, Lindsay B. Carey holds the highest citation impact, with 84 citations from 6 documents, indicating that his work is highly relevant and frequently referenced by other researchers in the field of pastoral counseling. Vhumani Magezi also demonstrates a high citation count (64 citations from 12 documents), confirming his role as an important contributor to the development of the literature.

The difference between the number of documents and the number of citations shows that productivity (number of publications) does not always correlate directly with influence (number of citations). Authors such as Lindsay B. Carey and Vhumani Magezi, although not having the highest number of publications, have produced works that resonate deeply and make a significant impact within the scientific community of pastoral counseling. We analyzed the network mapping of authors involved in publications on pastoral counseling, which is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 presents a visualization of the co-authorship network among authors who contributed significantly to the field of pastoral counseling. Pastoral Counseling is a unique form of counseling that uses spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for healing and growth. It is provided by certified pastoral counselors, who are not only mental health professionals who have had in-depth religious and theological training as well. Pastoral counseling is a branch of counseling in which psychologically trained ministers, rabbis, priests, imams, and other persons provide therapy services (Da Costa et al., 2019).

The network reveals various interconnected clusters, with some authors forming strong collaborative ties across different institutions and countries. These collaborations reflect a shared interest in the development of pastoral counseling as an interdisciplinary field and highlight the importance of scholarly cooperation in producing impactful research outputs.

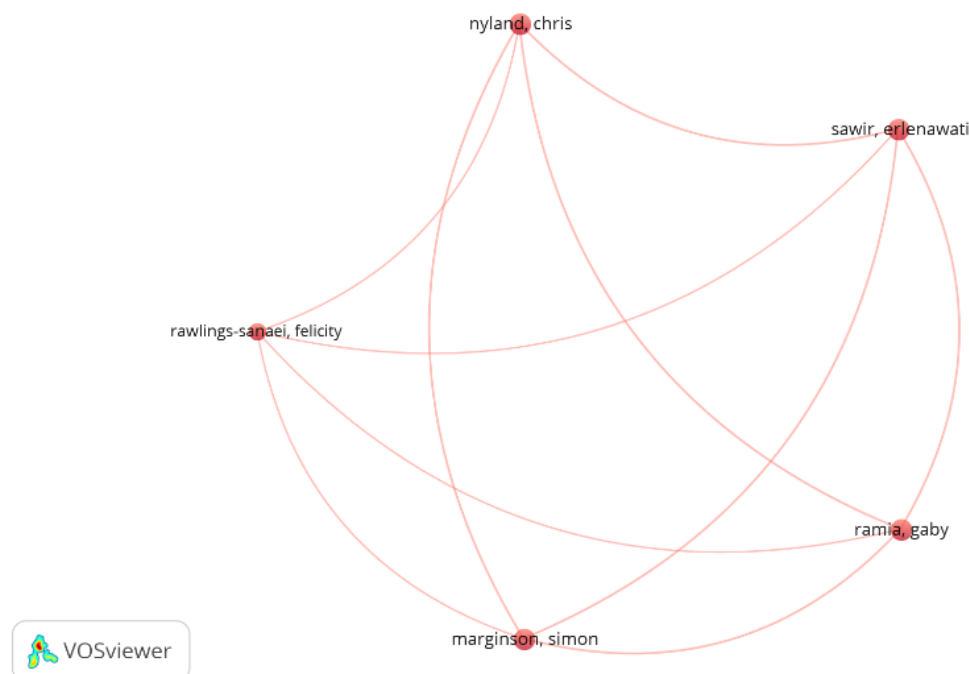


Fig. 3. Co-authorship network among top-contributing authors

The analysis in Figure 3 is based on co-authorship analysis using authors as the unit of analysis, with a minimum occurrence of 2 out of 2,336 entries, and 246 keywords meeting the threshold to form a collaboration network dominated by a single major cluster. Authors such as Simon

Marginson, Chris Nyland, and Gaby Ramia show strong connections, each with three documents and a total of 570 citations, indicating a high academic impact. The involvement of other authors such as Erlenawati Sawir and Felicity Rawlings-Sanaei also strengthens this network. These findings confirm that research on pastoral counseling tends to grow through close collaboration among authors who complement each other in both productivity and scholarly influence.

In the context of pastoral counseling, collaboration among experts is essential to enrich both spiritual and psychological perspectives in addressing life crises. Studies show that pastoral counselors play a strategic role in accompanying individuals to find meaning and healing through faith-based and empathetic relational approaches (Lake et al., 2024; Mewo et al., 2024). Although the analysis reveals a strong collaborative network among certain authors, many other researchers continue to work independently. This finding suggests the need to encourage broader collaboration so that the development of pastoral counseling as a scientific discipline can become more integrative, cross-contextual, and responsive to spiritual challenges in the modern era.

3.3. Contributing affiliations in pastoral counseling research

The following analysis presents the contributions of researcher affiliations in the field of pastoral counseling. Institutional affiliations play a vital role in supporting and fostering the development of high-quality research in this area. Table 2 provides an overview of the institutions that are most active in supporting research on pastoral counseling.

These affiliations reflect the institutional capacity and strategic commitment to advancing pastoral counseling as a scientific discipline. Many of the top-contributing institutions are universities with strong theological and counseling faculties, which provide both academic resources and platforms for interdisciplinary collaboration. The presence of institutions from various continents also indicates the global relevance of pastoral counseling and the growing need for contextualized approaches in different cultural settings. Moreover, these institutions often serve as research hubs that not only produce scholarly publications but also influence curriculum development, policy discussions, and practical applications within pastoral ministry and counseling services (Sirang et al., 2024).

Table 2. Top ten contributing affiliations in pastoral counseling

Affiliation	Number of Documents	Number of Citations
University Of Pretoria, South Africa	14	115
University Of Strathclyde, United Kingdom	2	78
Boston University, United States	2	64
Monash University, Australia	2	45
University Of York, United Kingdom	3	37
University Of Sheffield, United Kingdom	3	31
University Of Strathclyde, United Kingdom	2	28
Edith Cowan University, Australia	2	28
Loyola College In Maryland, United States	2	28

Based on Table 2, it's evident that institutional contributions to pastoral counseling research are quite diverse, both in terms of the number of documents and the citations generated. The University of Pretoria, South Africa, demonstrates significant dominance with the highest number of documents (14) and the most citations (115), establishing it as a leading institution in pastoral counseling research. Several institutions from the United Kingdom and the United States also show notable contributions in terms of citations, despite having fewer publications, such as the University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom (78 citations from 2 documents), and Boston University, United States (64 citations from 2 documents). This indicates that research from these institutions has substantial impact and is frequently referenced in the scientific literature. Other institutions, such as the University of York (3 documents, 37 citations) and Monash University (2 documents, 45 citations), also contribute significantly, highlighting the wide geographical scope of research in this field. The differences in citation counts among institutions reflect variations in the level of influence and reach of the research produced by each affiliation. We also analyzed the affiliation network map in pastoral counseling publications, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

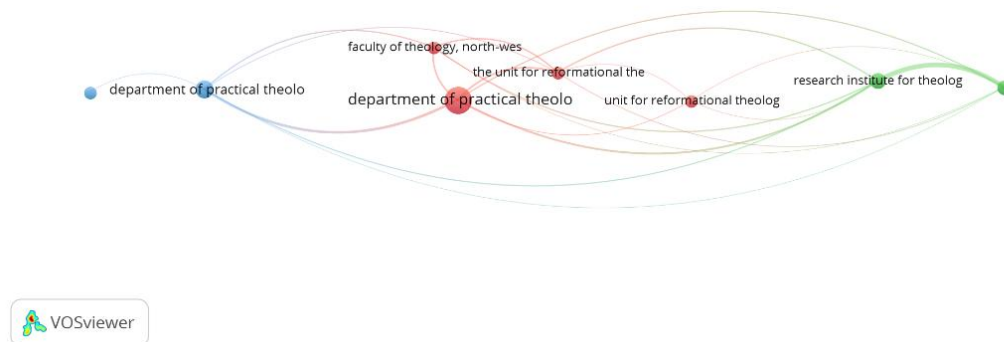


Fig. 4. Bibliographic coupling network among top-contributing organizations

The analysis in Figure 4 is based on bibliographic coupling with organizations as the unit of analysis, requiring a minimum occurrence of 3 out of 2,139 identified entities, with 21 keywords meeting the threshold. The results reveal three major clusters in the bibliographic coupling network among institutions. These clusters are dominated by South African institutions such as the University of Pretoria and North-West University, which form strong linkages centered on practical theology and social reform. Additionally, connections with institutions like Union Presbyterian Seminary in the United States suggest a transcontinental influence within the knowledge base of pastoral counseling, although with weaker link strengths in certain nodes.

3.4 Countries contributing to pastoral counseling research

This section presents the contributing countries and the patterns of international collaboration in publishing research on pastoral counseling. The number of countries involved and the extent of their collaboration serve as key indicators of the importance of pastoral counseling as an effort to promote global spiritual and mental well-being, as well as to foster cross-cultural understanding in pastoral care at the international level. Table 3 provides an overview of the top ten contributing countries.

Table 3. Top ten countries contributing to pastoral counseling

Country	Number of Documents	Number of Citations
United States	705	2,214
United Kingdom	374	2,177
South Africa	147	453
Australia	127	1,795
Germany	41	82
Canada	39	155
Netherlands	33	108
New Zealand	29	146
Poland	25	23
Hongkong	16	98

Table 3 shows that the United States is the leading country in pastoral counseling research, both in terms of the number of documents (705) and citations (2,214), reflecting its significant dominance and influence in the field. It is followed by the United Kingdom with 374 documents and 2,177 citations, indicating a similarly strong role in the development of pastoral counseling literature. Although Australia has a smaller number of documents (127), it ranks third in total citations (1,795), suggesting that its publications have considerable impact and relevance among researchers. South Africa also makes a substantial contribution with 147 documents and 453 citations, affirming its role as a key research hub outside of Western countries.

The noticeable discrepancies between the number of documents and citations across countries highlight that a high publication volume does not always correlate with high citation impact, and vice versa. For example, although Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands have fewer documents compared to the top three countries, their citation counts suggest the presence of relevant and influential research. The diversity of countries represented in this list underscores the global nature of pastoral counseling research and the importance of diverse perspectives in addressing spiritual and mental challenges across cultural contexts. The collaboration patterns among countries in pastoral counseling publications are further illustrated in Figure 5.

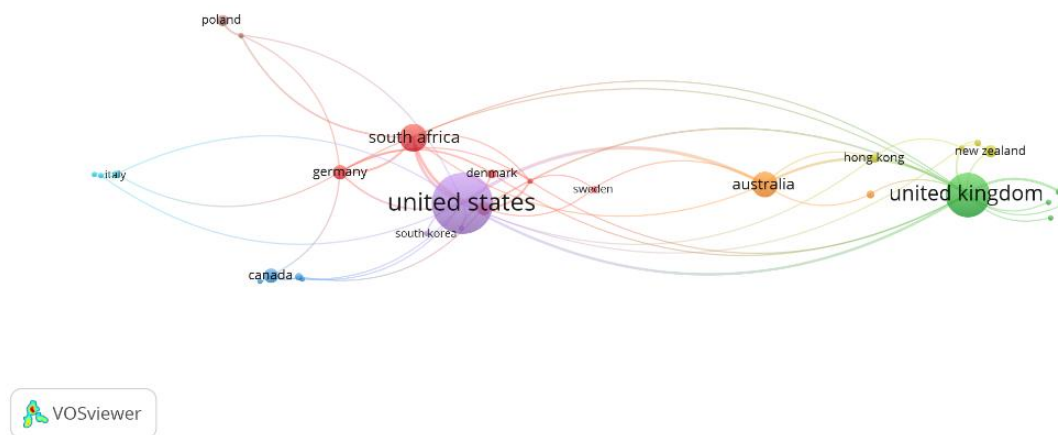


Fig. 5. Co-authorship network among top-contributing countries

These findings emphasize that pastoral counseling is not confined to specific regions but is a globally recognized area of academic and practical relevance. The variation in citation impact across countries also indicates differing levels of visibility, dissemination, and integration of pastoral counseling into broader mental health and spiritual care frameworks. Furthermore, the presence of both Western and non-Western countries among the top contributors reflects an encouraging trend toward intercultural dialogue and knowledge exchange in this field. Such diversity enhances the richness of perspectives and strengthens the potential for collaborative innovations in theory, methodology, and application (Siahaan, 2023). To further understand how international partnerships are structured, Figure 5 presents the co-authorship network among countries involved in pastoral counseling research.

The analysis in Figure 5 is based on a co-authorship analysis using countries as the unit of analysis, with a minimum occurrence threshold of 5 out of 89 identified countries, and 33 keywords meeting the inclusion criteria. The collaboration network among countries in pastoral counseling research, as illustrated in Figure 5, reveals several clusters and strong interconnections. The United States appears as the central hub of collaboration (the largest node), with extensive links to Canada, Germany, Denmark, and South Africa. The United Kingdom, which represents the second-largest node, also emerges as a key hub and closely collaborates with Australia, New Zealand, and several European countries. This indicates the dominant roles of both nations in facilitating global research. In addition, South Africa demonstrates significant collaboration with Germany and Poland, while Nordic countries form a regional cluster that indicates internal collaboration. This shows that pastoral counseling research is becoming increasingly global. These cross-continental collaboration networks enrich the field's perspectives and foster innovation in pastoral counseling practices around the world.

3.5 Frequently emerging topics in pastoral counseling publications

Research publications on pastoral counseling have become one of the current academic trends. This trend is reflected in the increasing number of publications in this field. In this section, we present the most frequently emerging topics. This analysis is a crucial aspect for understanding the intellectual dynamics of pastoral counseling, as it allows the identification of well-established core themes while

also highlighting emerging issues that have the potential to shape the future direction of research. More specifically, Figure 6 illustrates a network map of frequently occurring keywords in pastoral counseling publications.

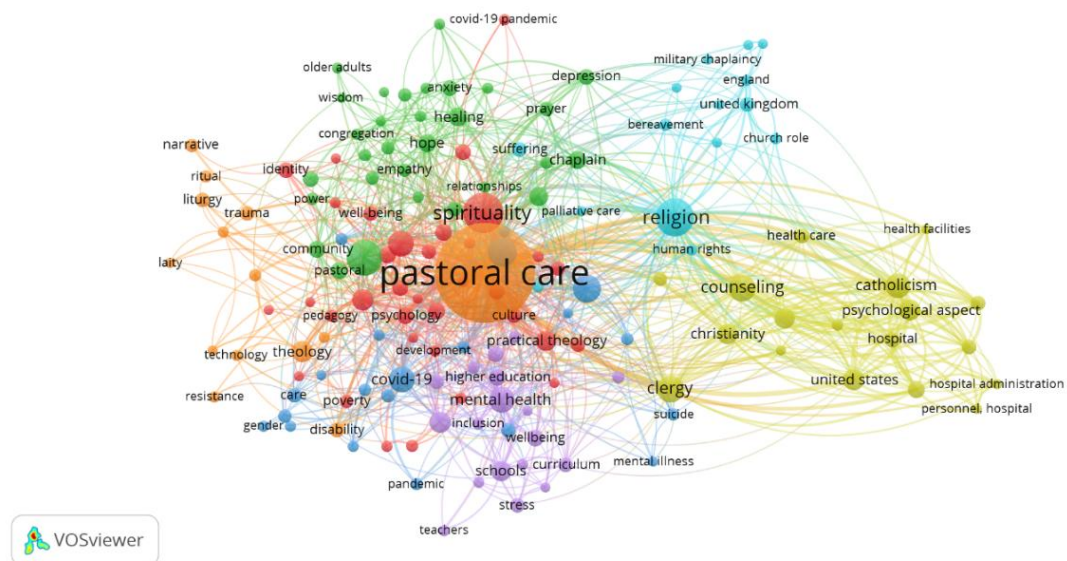


Fig. 6. Co-occurrence network of all keywords related to pastoral counseling themes

The visualization of keyword co-occurrence enables the identification of key conceptual clusters that dominate scholarly discourse in pastoral counseling. These clusters represent recurring themes that are central to the literature, such as spirituality, healing, and emotional well-being. In addition, the analysis brings attention to emerging concepts that are increasingly discussed in recent years, including mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital ministry, and the integration of pastoral care with psychological support systems (Puasa et al., 2025). Such findings reflect the ongoing evolution of the field and its responsiveness to contemporary societal needs. By mapping these themes, researchers can better understand the trajectory of academic interest and identify areas that warrant deeper investigation in future studies.

The analysis presented in Figure 6 is based on a co-occurrence analysis with the unit of analysis being all keywords, with a minimum occurrence threshold of 5 out of 3,812 identified keywords, resulting in 151 keywords meeting the criteria. The keyword co-occurrence network from the analysis reveals several dominant thematic clusters within pastoral counseling research. The most prominent central cluster revolves around “pastoral care” and “spirituality.” This cluster is closely linked to keywords such as “healing,” “hope,” “empathy,” and “community,” reflecting a strong focus on core aspects of pastoral services and inner well-being.

Another significant cluster centers on “religion” and “counseling,” which are connected to terms such as “Christianity,” “clergy,” and “hospital,” indicating the integration of religious dimensions with counseling practices in both clinical and ecclesiastical settings. Additionally, a cluster focusing on “mental health,” “COVID-19,” and “pandemic” emerges, illustrating the relevance of pastoral counseling in addressing global health crises and their impact on mental well-being.

These clusters also exhibit links to issues such as “gender,” “disability,” and “social justice,” highlighting the increasingly recognized social and ethical dimensions of pastoral counseling. Overall, the map portrays pastoral counseling as a holistic discipline encompassing theological, psychological, and social aspects, while being responsive to contemporary issues. A more detailed depiction of the current popular themes is presented in Figure 7 below.

The visualization not only confirms established areas of study but also signals shifting priorities in pastoral counseling discourse over time. The presence of contemporary terms such as “digital technology,” “trauma recovery,” and “virtual ministry” in proximity to traditional terms indicates that pastoral counseling has expanded beyond its conventional domains. This thematic integration illustrates how the field is adapting to technological advances and sociocultural changes.

The increasing engagement with themes like “grief counseling,” “youth ministry,” and “interfaith dialogue” also reflects the practical realities faced by communities and the evolving responsibilities of pastoral practitioners (Patandean et al., 2025; Puasa et al., 2025). These findings provide a foundation for identifying research gaps and encouraging interdisciplinary exploration that is both contextually relevant and spiritually grounded. To explore the chronological progression of these topics, Figure 7 presents a thematic trend analysis from 2005 to 2025.

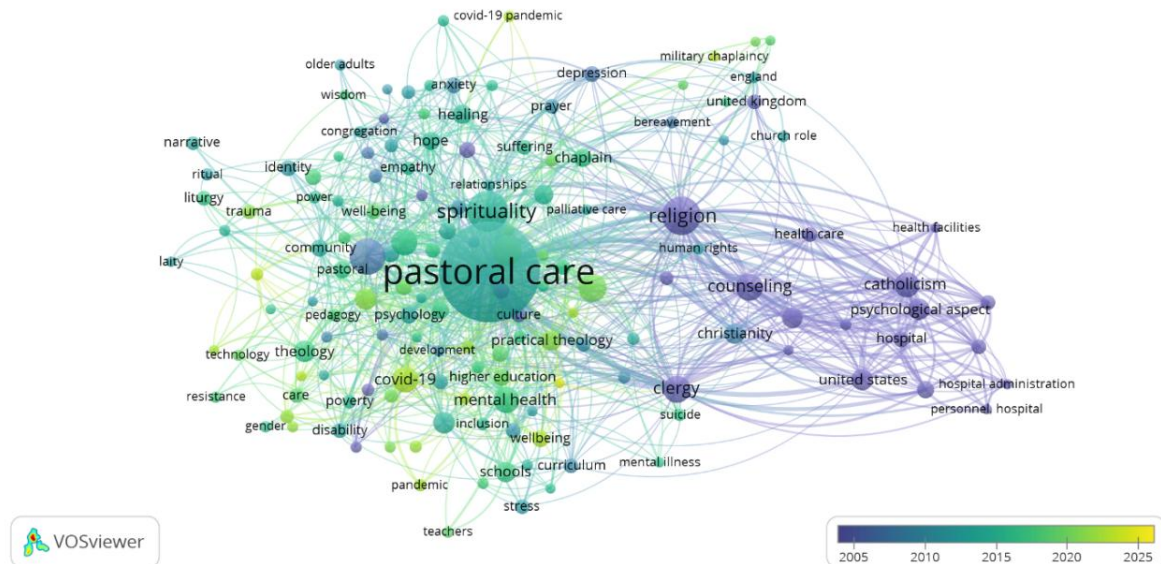


Fig. 7. Research themes from 2005 to 2025

The thematic trend analysis in Figure 7 (2005 to 2025) illustrates the evolving focus of research within the field of pastoral counseling. In the earlier period, approximately between 2005 and 2010, themes such as “Catholicism,” “hospital administration,” and “therapy” were more dominant or had older average publication years, indicating a historical foundation rooted in traditional religious and healthcare contexts. As time progressed toward more recent years, particularly between 2015 and 2025, contemporary themes began to emerge and gain prominence, including “COVID-19 pandemic,” “mental health,” “wellbeing,” “artificial intelligence,” and “technology.” This shift reflects the research community's response to global challenges as well as technological developments.

The transition from more classical and institutional themes to issues aligned with modern crises, integrated mental health, and the application of technology in pastoral care signifies a dynamic evolution in the field. The appearance of keywords such as “military chaplaincy” and “war” also highlights the growing attention to pastoral counseling in contexts of conflict and trauma. Overall, this visualization emphasizes the ongoing adaptability and relevance of pastoral counseling research in addressing the ever-changing needs of society.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that pastoral counseling plays a strategic and increasingly important role in supporting the spiritual and mental well-being of modern society, particularly within the context of Christian education. Through a bibliometric approach to 1,848 articles from the Scopus database covering the period from 1970 to 2025, this research maps trends, author contributions, institutional affiliations, countries, and dominant research themes in the field of pastoral counseling. The analysis reveals a significant increase in publications on pastoral counseling over the past two decades, reflecting growing academic interest in the integration of spirituality and mental health. Authors such as Seward Hiltner and Lindsay B. Carey, institutions such as the University of Pretoria, and countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia were identified as leading contributors. International collaboration has also strengthened, indicating that pastoral counseling is a global issue that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

In addition, key emerging themes include spirituality, emotional healing, mental health, and responses to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The evolution of topics from classical issues to contemporary themes such as artificial intelligence and social justice demonstrates the adaptability of pastoral counseling to the dynamics of the times. Therefore, this study provides a solid scientific foundation for understanding the global scholarly landscape of pastoral counseling, while also serving as a strategic reference for the development of more contextual, collaborative, and transformative practices, policies, and future research.

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Declarations

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Author contribution | : I conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript. |
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