

Reframing Pastoral Research Methodology for Theological Education: Practical, Participatory, and Action-Oriented Approaches

Mfazo Clifford Madondo

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

madondom@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract: Pastoral research methodology is reimagined for academic and ministerial formation contexts within South African theological education and the wider continent. The contention is that a reframed pastoral research methodology is necessary for African theological schools because theological knowledge, pastoral strategies, and ecclesial assumptions are historically contingent, contextually embedded, and frequently disrupted by social, economic, and cultural changes. African theological schools constitute a distinctive research context that requires methodological approaches attentive to ecclesial praxis, participation, and institutional realities. While theological schools, whether located in public universities, or operating as private seminaries and denominational colleges, constitute a significant yet under-researched sector. Meaning, despite their scales of influence, theological research and education often neglect emphasising the research methodology dimension as a site of sustained empirical research. Existing research methodological approaches maintain theological affirmations for pastoral and ecclesial good practice and lack pastoral research praxis transformation. This paper contributes to the “Practical Applications of Research Methods” track of the 25th ECRM by advancing action research and participatory methodologies suited to theological research, education and pastoral practice. It addresses a foundational but often neglected question in theological research and education: why research approach and method are essential to ministerial and theological formation beyond ecclesial “good practice.” It therefore situates theological inquiry within broader ecclesial realities in which many cause–effect relationships within ecclesial contexts comprising the interaction between economic pressures, religious participation, and pastoral sustainability, remain insufficiently empirically tested. Using theology of development perspectives, the paper reframes pastoral research methodology for theological research and education to address the “church economy,” denominational systems, and institutional dynamics. Methodologically, it integrates classic and contemporary practical theology research frameworks, including Osmer’s four tasks, qualitative and participatory designs, and phenomenological approaches and procedures to study lived religion. It highlights work-integrated learning as a legitimate site of data generation and praxis transformation consolidating current research ethical requirements under the South African and international research governance standards. The paper offers an ethically grounded step-by-step pastoral research methodology template tailored to African theological schools, ministerial formation, and ecclesial contexts.

Keywords: African Theology, Ecclesial, Epistemology of Practical Theology, Pastoral Research Methodology; Participatory Action Research in Religion, Theological Education, Theological Schools

1. Introduction: Why Pastoral Research?

Theological schools in Africa in recent times have become a big business that goes unrecognised in research. Theological schools provide theological education as big business. This is a context covering Schools of Theology in public Universities, and in private higher education it comprise the Seminaries and Theological Colleges owned and managed by different Christian traditions and denominations. There is implicit contribution to the Practical Applications of Research Methods with an angle of Action Research and Participatory Methods in the context of African Theological Schools.

Te’eni et al., (2015), cited in Presthus & Munkvold (2016) define “Physical Theology schools and theological education are forms of business where three success components: location, location, location. Similarly, the literature suggests three success components for theological research: contribution, contribution, contribution”. Before elaborating on how to conduct excellent research, that is, the research process, we must first address why we should research. Why is it essential to conduct research? Why is it part of your degree program? Would “good practice” in and of theology not be enough? What is the meaning behind all this need for research in theological education? The answer to all these questions lies in the existing body of knowledge and expertise. We would not need further research if we knew everything about the (present and future) world. We may replace the term “the world” with “the economy,” “the industry,” “the company,” “the department,” or any other area of interest. Yet, this is not the case. Many cause-effect relationships in theological spaces and contexts are not understood well or even not yet detected at all. And sometimes, the knowledge that seemed to be sure is not anymore. For example, imagine a long-time consensual knowledge of the relationship between inflation and the growth of the GNP and its effect on the Church as an organisation.

Pastoral research links such angles of theological reflection with empirical inquiry so the Church can respond credibly to human needs in concrete contexts. In early work, Rowatt (1982) named “pastoral research” as a synthesis of phenomenological reflection and scientific method. A “right-brain-left-brain” partnership and a

blend of observing *and* doing ministry (Rowatt, 1982). This paper similarly position pastoral research as a systematic, replicable process that applies human-science methods to Church mission and care, especially in South Africa and across Africa.

Within practical theology and theology of development disciplines, scholarship affirms that robust empirical engagement, alongside theological normativity, animates pastoral work in congregations and public spaces. Recent literature emphasise qualitative researcher's role in hearing overlooked voices and deepening congregational or pastoral practice-based reflection. Theology of development and practical theology in Africa have also matured as disciplines. These are foregrounding contextual, justice-oriented, and participatory methodologies that address local realities while contributing to global debates.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Place of Research in Practical Theology

Your notes frame research as systematic inquiry to generate reliable knowledge using transparent procedures; as a science, it follows method to investigate specific pastoral problems. Contemporary handbooks echo this, urging researchers to choose designs that match questions, not methods first. In particular, Hunziker and Blankenagel (2021/2024) differentiate research *types* and design logics (single/multiple case, cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, action research, design science), each suited to distinct aims.

A widely used practical-theology scaffold is **Osmer's four tasks**: What is going on? (descriptive-empirical), Why is this going on? (interpretive), What ought to be going on? (normative), and How might we respond? (pragmatic). This framework integrates empirical, social-scientific interpretation and theological discernment for faithful action. Swinton and Mowat's text remains a standard for qualitative work in theology, detailing how interviews, ethnography, action research, and mixed methods can serve theological reflection.

3. Designing Pastoral Research

3.1 From Questions to Designs

Research design choices are commonly guided by three overarching purposes: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Exploratory research aims to clarify concepts, scope emerging issues, and generate preliminary hypotheses, making it particularly suitable for understudied or ambiguous problem areas (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). Because exploratory work emphasises flexibility and conceptual development, it often precedes more structured designs and supports sound inference by sharpening research questions (Bellamy, 2011).

Descriptive research, in contrast, focuses on systematically documenting phenomena by capturing who, what, where, when, or how often within a defined context. Its strength lies in the use of predetermined procedures that enhance consistency and replicability. Elsayed (2020) demonstrates this in cross national comparative studies, where structured data collection enables patterned observations across cases. Such designs provide foundational empirical mapping that can later inform causal inquiry.

Explanatory research seeks to test why or how phenomena occur, often through theorised causal pathways. This purpose aligns with methodological traditions emphasising inference and warrant, where researchers build arguments that link theoretical propositions to empirical evidence (Bellamy, 2011). Mixed methods scholars further argue that explanatory approaches can be strengthened by integrating qualitative and quantitative strands, enhancing the robustness of causal claims (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2012).

Together, these three purposes clarify the relationship between research design, methods, and methodology. As Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) assert, understanding these distinctions is essential for producing rigorous, coherent, and methodologically aligned research in public administration and guide design choices:

- **Exploratory**: to scope issues, clarify concepts, and generate hypotheses. It is best when the problem is broad or under-studied.
- **Descriptive**: to depict who, what, where, when or how often in a defined context using pre-specified methods.
- **Explanatory**: to test why or how phenomena occur. Sometimes modelling causal pathways.

Recent design studies help operationalise these purposes into concrete strategies. For instance, single case for in-depth exploratory understanding; cross-sectional survey for descriptive prevalence; longitudinal or multiple case for explanatory process tracing.

3.2 Core Methodological Families

Core methodological families in qualitative psychology provide foundational structures for understanding how researchers generate, interpret, and apply knowledge. Frost (2021) outlines how approaches such as grounded theory, narrative analysis, and phenomenology evolved from broader social science traditions and now serve as central frameworks for psychological inquiry. Grounded theory, for example, originated in sociology and remains attractive due to its systematic yet flexible procedures for developing theory from data (Frost, 2021).

Across disciplines, methodological families provide different logics of enquiry. Horváth (2007) contrasts conceptual, empirical, and integrative methodological approaches in design research, demonstrating how each generates different forms of knowledge. Similarly, Evans et al. (2017) highlight how methodological approaches are shaped by participant contexts, such as research involving children and young people, underscoring the need to align method with developmental and ethical considerations.

In applied fields, methodological approaches evolve to address practical research challenges. Kirkham et al. (2017) propose a methodological framework for evaluating uptake of core outcome sets, illustrating how methodological design can be adapted to enhance transparency and consistency in clinical research. Lacorte (2014) further argues that methodological approaches in second-language research now combine traditional and contemporary paradigms, reflecting a broader trend toward methodological pluralism.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that core methodological families offer structured yet adaptable frameworks, enabling researchers to select approaches aligned with research aims, epistemological positions, and participant realities.

- **Qualitative:** Illuminates meaning, practices, and contexts. It is central to practical theology and theology of development on attention to lived faith experience and applied faith in action. For instance, the employing of ethnography, interviews, focus groups, and case studies techniques and methods.
- **Quantitative:** Estimates prevalence, associations, and, where appropriate, causal effects. Recent research literature tailor quantitative rigour to theological and development questions. For instance, surveys and experiments research designs on Church and states issues.
- **Mixed methods:** This approaches sequences or integrates the two approaches, quantitative and qualitative, to capitalise on their complementary strengths for ministry problems.

4. Phenomenology in Pastoral Theology Research

Phenomenology has increasingly shaped pastoral theology. Scholars seek methods capable of attending to lived faith experience, spiritual meaning, and the relational dynamics inherent in pastoral contexts. Early work by Farley (1977) identified phenomenology as a valuable interpretive lens for pastoral care. Farley (1977) argues that phenomenology enables deeper engagement with human experience beyond doctrinal or clinical reductionism. Farley's (1977) foundational insight, that phenomenology foregrounds the subjective and existential dimensions of pastoral encounters, sets the stage for subsequent methodological developments in theological research.

Contemporary pastoral theologians have significantly expanded the role of phenomenology. Park (2014) proposes a reflexive and relational pastoral phenomenology grounded in postcolonial concerns. Her approach critiques traditional phenomenological claims to neutrality and argues for a method attentive to power, culture, and the positionality of both researcher and participants. By constructing a more relational orientation, Park (2014) contributes a framework that highlights how pastoral realities are shaped by sociohistorical forces and the mutuality of pastoral engagement.

Scholars further employ hermeneutic phenomenology to explore specific pastoral contexts. Phelan's (2022) study of gendered pastoral care illustrates how phenomenology can reveal the nuanced spiritual and relational experiences of parishioners under differing pastoral leadership styles. His research underscores how gendered dynamics influence care-receiving, theological interpretation, and relational trust. Similarly, Hessel (2015) examines pastoral burnout from a hermeneutic perspective, revealing how pastors' lived experiences of

exhaustion, identity conflict, and spiritual struggle manifest in their narratives. These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of phenomenology for uncovering complex emotional and spiritual dimensions often overlooked by quantitative approaches.

Additional phenomenological inquiries focus on vocational themes within pastoral life. Luder (2014) explores the lived experiences of pastors who left ministry, highlighting tensions between calling, theological education, and ministerial realities. Connors (2019) similarly investigates the phenomenology of calling, showing how pastors construct meaning through reflective interpretation of their spiritual experiences. These works contribute to pastoral theology by clarifying how meaning-making, vocation, and identity formation emerge through lived experience.

Phenomenology in pastoral theology also intersects with theopoetics. Zylla (2014) argues that phenomenological research resonates with theopoetic approaches that emphasise lament, embodiment, and narrative. His work aligns phenomenology with pastoral practices that value vulnerability, imagination, and the articulation of suffering. This expands the methodological toolkit of pastoral theologians by linking phenomenology with expressive and interpretive theological practices.

Pastoral transitions and ministry longevity have likewise been explored through phenomenological methods. Hester (2018) examines stress and sustainability in pastoral ministry, demonstrating how long-term pressures shape emotional resilience and vocational persistence. McLaughlin (2022) analyses spiritual and emotional dynamics in pastoral transitions, identifying how leaders navigate grief, hope, relational dislocation, and communal change. Both studies affirm the strength of phenomenology in illuminating the deeply relational and spiritual processes involved in pastoral leadership.

Overall, literature reveal that phenomenology enriches pastoral theology by offering methods capable of attending to lived faith and pastoral experiences, relationality, power, and meaning-making. Whether addressing burnout, calling, gender, lament, or transition, phenomenological approaches continue to deepen understanding of pastoral realities and support more contextually grounded theological reflection. Thus phenomenology for describing lived faith and pastoral experiences has steps of bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing. These steps are useful in pastoral care, sacramental or liturgical life, mission and spiritual experiences. Recent studies expand phenomenology dialoguing with theology, for example the phenomenology of prayer and theo-phenomenology, underscoring disciplined description and careful theological interface. When to use phenomenology:

- To re-examine “taken-for-granted” pastoral experiences, for example grief rituals, confession, and hospital chaplaincy encounters.
- To surface the essences and horizons of meaning that guide care and mission work.

Data collection in phenomenology: in-depth interviews, guided reflection journals, and carefully facilitated focus groups.

Data analysis in phenomenology: iterative coding to articulate invariant structures of experience.

5. Emerging Approaches in Pastoral Theology Research

5.1 Case Study Research

Pastoral theology research has increasingly employed case study methodology as a means of interpreting social realities and informing ministerial practice. Recent scholarship emphasises that case studies offer an analytical framework enabling pastors and theologians to meaningfully engage with the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Literature underscore how pastoral theological analysis integrates practical ministry concerns with theological reflection.

Studies affirm the value of case study methodology in pastoral theology for both analysis and formation. Zaluchu and Zaluchu (2024) emphasise its capacity to inform the church's social engagement, Schlauch (2012) foregrounds its interpretive richness for theological reflection, and Hancock (2018) demonstrates its pedagogical power in leadership development. Scholars articulate a vision of pastoral theology research that is responsive, contextually engaged, and deeply reflective. A case study is an approach that integrates theory, practice, and spiritual insight through the disciplined use of case studies. It uses single or multiple cases offering rich, contextualised understanding of ministries, programs, or congregations. Its use in practical theology and theology of development is both a *method* and a *methodology* for theory and practice integration.

5.2 Arts-Based Research Methods

The relationship between the arts and pastoral theology has increasingly attracted scholarly attention. This attention is in relation to research methodologies, interdisciplinary dialogue and the interpretation of lived faith experiences. As an emerging field, arts-based research offers creative and reflective approaches that broaden the ways theological knowledge is produced, communicated and embodied. Scholars emphasise that the arts can serve not merely as illustrations of theological ideas but as legitimate modes of inquiry that deepen understanding of faith, human experience and pastoral practice.

A conceptual feature highlighting the role of arts-based research in practical theology is the artistic expression found in theological testimony. Boursier (2021) argues that artistic expression can function as a form of theological testimony. Through creative practices such as mixed media, visual arts and narrative forms, research participants and scholars can communicate complex realities. For instance, artistic theological expression are associated with suffering, spirituality and social injustice testimonies. This arts-based research approach suggests that artistic processes enable theological reflection that is experiential and embodied rather than purely theoretical (Boursier, 2021). Thus, the art forms are a research medium through which theological insights are both generated and shared.

Another feature is the interpretive and attentive nature of pastoral theology. McClure (2008) describes pastoral theology as an “art of paying attention”. Emphasis is on theological practices that cultivate attentiveness to human experiences, suffering and flourishing (McClure, 2008). From this interpretive and attentive perspective, theological inquiry involves careful observation and interpretation of lived faith realities. Artistic research design and practices support this attentiveness because they encourage reflection, creativity and openness to multiple forms of meaning-making. Thus, the arts can expand pastoral theological research methods by fostering deeper engagement with people’s faith stories and contexts.

The literature also stresses the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue in integrating the arts with pastoral theology. Pienaar (2007) suggests that the interaction between narrative practice and artistic expression requires collaboration across disciplines. Such interdisciplinary engagement enables theological researchers to draw on insights from psychology, sociology, theology and art theory. The perspective enriches the analysis of pastoral experiences. Similarly, Szymczak (2020) highlights interdisciplinarity as a defining characteristic of contemporary pastoral theology research. The scholar argues that socio-theological research benefits from combining diverse methodological approaches (Szymczak, 2020).

Art theory also informs methodological reflection within pastoral theology. Capps (1999) argues that insights from art theory can illuminate the relationship between theology and psychology in pastoral studies. By engaging with artistic concepts such as interpretation, symbolism and creativity, pastoral theologians and researcher can better understand the imaginative dimensions of human experience. In later reflections on theological research writing, Capps (2014) notes that artistic frameworks can help shape scholarly inquiry by encouraging reflexivity and interpretive depth.

Snedden (2023) argues for the use of participatory and visual methods. For example, arts-based inquiry and Photovoice methodology can be used to explore how Christian communities embody mission and vision through symbolic storytelling (Snedden, 2023). Participatory and visual approaches demonstrate how visual and narrative forms can function as research artefacts that capture communal identity and spiritual practice.

Lartey (2002) advocates for embracing diverse cultural and artistic expressions within pastoral theology. The scholar is arguing that contemporary pastoral practice must engage plural forms of spirituality and symbolic meaning (Lartey, 2002). Graham (2017) emphasises that practical theology research continues to expand its methodological horizons in response to changing social and cultural contexts.

Overall, the literature indicates a growing recognition that the arts enrich pastoral and practical theology by offering innovative research methods, fostering attentiveness and interdisciplinary collaboration to human experiences. Arts-based research approaches therefore contribute to a more holistic and contextually responsive understanding of theology in practice. Arts-based research methods use poetry, visual arts, and autoethnography to access embodied and aesthetic dimensions of faith and to generate constructive theologies from lived faith stories.

5.3 Participatory and Youth-led Research

Literature on youth ministry increasingly emphasises the role of young people as active participants in faith communities and broader society. The youth ministry is conceived as a formative space where spiritual development intersects with civic engagement, leadership development, and social responsibility. Collectively, studies conceptualise youth-led ministry as a research framework that nurtures youth theological agency while balancing guidance from established church leadership.

A responsible citizenship and community participation research model is key in youth ministry. Aziz (2025) argues that youth ministry can function as a system of support that equips young people with moral values, leadership skills, and opportunities for civic engagement. Within the citizenship and community participation paradigm of public practical theology research, youth ministry is viewed as a research site through which young people can participate in meaningful community action and develop a sense of social responsibility (Aziz, 2025). Similarly, Damean (2025) conceptualises youth as agents of social innovation within parish contexts. The author suggests that youth-led initiatives can contribute to social and economic transformation. This perspective positions young people not merely as recipients of ministry but as contributors to community development.

Youth agency and leadership in religious and peacebuilding contexts is another core feature in theological research. Zaid (2018) supports this view using participatory action research demonstrating how youth-led peacebuilding programmes in Kenya can foster collaborative learning and community transformation. Jiménez and Robinson (2022) emphasise the importance of recognising youth as partners in leadership rather than passive followers. This work reframes youth participation as a process of empowerment that enables young people to engage in interreligious cooperation and peacebuilding initiatives. These studies underscore the value of participatory approaches that allow young people to shape the programmes and initiatives that affect them (Zaid, 2018; Jiménez and Robinson, 2022).

However, some scholars caution against uncritical promotion of youth-led leadership without adequate guidance. Sangwa (2025) offers a biblical critique of youth-first governance models. Sangwa (2025) argues that youth participation should be balanced with accountable elder leadership. Thus, intergenerational collaboration ensures both innovation and stability within faith communities. This argument reflects broader debates in practical theology about the relationship between youthful creativity and experienced leadership in church governance (Sangwa, 2025).

Youth engagement is associated with digital transformation. Kiruja and Kagema (2025) examine youth participation in online church services in Kenya. Scholars note that digital platforms have expanded opportunities for youth involvement in worship and ministry (Kiruja and Kagema, 2025). Similarly, Mutua et al. (2025) highlight the role of technology in shaping youth religious engagement in the Kenyan Catholic Church. Digital initiatives have increased youth-led participation in faith activities (Mutua et al. 2025). Studies suggest that digital spaces are increasingly important for sustaining youth involvement, particularly in contexts where traditional participation patterns are declining (Kiruja and Kagema, 2025; Mutua et al. 2025).

Scholars emphasise the need for inclusive and contextually relevant youth ministry practices (Beukes, 2021; Droegge, 2023). Beukes (2021) highlights the role of youth faith engagement in environmental activism. Droegge (2023) discusses inclusivity in youth ministry praxis. Droegge (2023) argues that churches must adopt adaptive approaches to address declining participation among young people. Beukes (2021) suggest that practical theology must take seriously the social and ecological concerns that motivate youth involvement.

Overall, the youth ministry is evolving towards a participatory and context-sensitive model that values youth agency, digital engagement, and intergenerational collaboration. Youth-led participatory and context-sensitive research approach positions youth not only as beneficiaries of ministry but also as key contributors to faith-based knowledge social transformation. Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) adopted in pastoral theology research redistributes power and co-produces knowledge with communities to address injustices. This research approach is growing in African practical theology research projects.

6. Work-Integrated Learning as Research Context

Pastoral Field Placements in parishes, schools, hospices, hospitals, substance-use clinics, community and justice organisations, work as intensive sites of research where theological students are both minister and research (Carroll, 2010). This aligns with current theological field education models in North America and beyond that require learning covenants, supervised mentoring, context analysis, and reflective case work (Carroll, 2010).

South African and global networks, for example Association of Reflective Practice in Theological Education (ARPTE), provide recommended standards and best practices for field education and supervision. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) (Clevenger, 2021), often within healthcare chaplaincy, uses action-reflection to build pastoral competence and produces rich qualitative data about spiritual care. Work Integrated Learning (WIL), when applied through various theological field education models, functions as a form of pastoral field placement. These models exemplify a pastoral–theological research context that presents largely untapped opportunities for the development of pastoral research designs.

7. Ethics in Pastoral Research

Ethical considerations are central to theological research, particularly when studies involve vulnerable populations and sensitive social issues. In theological and pastoral contexts, research ethics provide guidance for the recruitment of participants, the collection of data, and the responsible dissemination of findings. Ethical recruitment requires transparency regarding the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring that individuals are not coerced or unduly influenced. Informed consent is therefore a foundational element, enabling participants to understand the risks, benefits, and procedures associated with the research before agreeing to participate (Cannella & Lincoln, 2017).

During data collection, researchers must safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, particularly when participants disclose personal or traumatic experiences. For instance, studies examining clergy responses to domestic violence highlight the sensitivity of such research and the need to protect participants from psychological harm or social repercussions (Clato-Day, 2020). Ethical data collection also requires careful handling of interview materials, secure storage of records, and the use of pseudonyms where appropriate. Similarly, research into clergy misconduct demonstrates the importance of ethical safeguards when participants share personal accounts of institutional or pastoral failure (Krueger, 2018).

International ethical standards further guide theological research through seven core principles: value, validity, fair selection, favourable risk–benefit ratio, independent review, informed consent, and respect for participants (Bhutta, 2002). These principles ensure that research is both scientifically credible and morally responsible. Moreover, theological action research emphasises the integration of ethical reflection with practical ministry, highlighting the responsibility of researchers to disseminate findings in ways that respect participants and contribute constructively to faith communities (Rhodes, 2020). Ethical dissemination therefore involves accurate representation of participants’ voices while avoiding harm or misinterpretation.

Pastoral research in South Africa and across Africa should be benchmarked against national and international research-ethics standards for studies involving human participants across disciplines. Ethics in pastoral research intersects with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) regarding data protection and applies within faith-based or congregational contexts where health-related or social data are collected. Clergy and pastoral-care codes, such as those governing chaplains and pastoral counsellors, require strong confidentiality and clear boundaries regarding the limits of pastoral research in both ministry and research settings. Because pastoral research sites are often faith-based organisations and church communities, practical safeguards are essential. These include the use of plain-language consent forms; culturally sensitive recruitment processes; negotiated anonymity for congregations; data minimisation and secure storage; careful handling of sacred stories to prevent exploitation; and transparent dissemination plans that are co-designed with participating communities.

8. Methodological Shifts in African practical theology Post-COVID-19

Post-COVID-19 scholarship in African practical theology highlights a notable methodological reorientation that foregrounds decolonial, contextual, and public theological commitments. Within this trajectory, research approaches increasingly prioritise local agency, intercultural dialogue, and practices that contribute to social healing in African contexts. Rather than relying primarily on imported methodological paradigms, scholars advocate approaches that are responsive to lived faith realities within congregations and communities. For instance, Mthombeni (2023) explores this shift through the use of autoethnography as a methodological lens, demonstrating how reflexive and situated inquiry can illuminate the re-definition of the church during the pandemic. This approach enables researchers to examine how ecclesial identity and practice were reshaped by crisis conditions, while simultaneously foregrounding the researcher’s embodied participation in the community being studied.

Emerging reflections further propose the adoption of “moving methodologies” that remain attentive to fluid social realities and ecclesial transformations in post-pandemic contexts (Mthombeni, 2023; Cacho & Lacsa, 2025; Triplett, 2025). Such approaches incorporate participatory youth research, aesthetic forms of observation, and methodological orientations towards anticipation and transformation, while also grappling with the enduring empirical–normative tensions characteristic of practical theological inquiry (Mthombeni, 2023). These methodological developments reflect broader scholarly attempts to interpret the reconfiguration of ecclesial life marked by congregational dispersion, hybrid worship, and forms of virtual connectedness that emerged during the pandemic (Mthombeni, 2023; Cacho & Lacsa, 2025; Triplett, 2025). Consequently, practical theologians are compelled to reconsider how the church may be experienced and enacted under unprecedented conditions, prompting critical reflection on how faith practices and ecclesial belonging can be re-framed within rapidly shifting social and technological environments (Mthombeni, 2023).

8.1 Results

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Full text retrieved?	Research Question/Focus	Primary Methodology	Data Collection	Analysis Approach
C. Kaunda, 2013	No	Development and transformation of African theological education (1910-2012) to promote just and equitable Christian community	Systematic review	Electronic database searches using keywords and phrases from research question	Review of 10,821 results to select 169 primary sources
Martin, 2000.	No	action research as 'an intentional, collaborative cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting.'	Systematic review	Electronic database searches using keywords and phrases from research question	
Davis, 2007	No	'Nine cycles of planning, action, and reflection' produced a new children's program and an alternative model for adult learning	System review		
Conde-Frazier	No	frames PAR as a means to 'unite scholarship and teaching' for 'social justice'			
Hess 2001		Bring theology, psychology, media studies, and religious education into one conversation			
Brouard 2015		Theological Action Research as a tool for adult theological education and the formation of ministry students			

Study	Full text retrieved?	Research Question/Focus	Primary Methodology	Data Collection	Analysis Approach
Rhodes 2020		Theological Action Research as a tool for adult theological education and the formation of ministry students			
Berg, 2006		TAR is used to explore 'diversity' and 'disruption or deconstruction' in the learning process, while other work emphasizes insider or Freirean approaches and the role of participants as co-researchers.			
Chapman, 2019		TAR is used to explore 'diversity' and 'disruption or deconstruction' in the learning process, while other work emphasizes insider or Freirean approaches and the role of participants as co-researchers.			

8.2 Discussion

The study proposes revising phenomenological methods for pastoral theology education to include researcher reflexivity, addressing conflicts between qualitative research philosophies and theological commitments.

A quick search turned up a small but coherent literature, mostly in Religious Education, Practical Theology, and adult ministry formation. The method is usually treated less as a standalone data-collection technique than as a pedagogy of co-inquiry: Bruce Martin describes action research as 'an intentional, collaborative cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting,' and D. Davis reports that 'Nine cycles of planning, action, and reflection' produced a new childrens program and an alternative model for adult learning (Martin, 2000; Davis, 2007; Hess, 2001).

In contemporary theological education, PAR and TAR are being used to connect theological reflection with lived practice, often in explicitly contextual or justice-oriented ways. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier frames PAR as a means to 'unite scholarship and teaching' for 'social justice'; Mary E. Hess uses it to bring theology, psychology, media studies, and religious education into one conversation; and Brouard and Rhodes both present Theological Action Research as a tool for adult theological education and the formation of ministry students (Hess, 2001; Brouard, 2015; Rhodes, 2020). A 2022 theological education institution study uses TAR to explore 'diversity' and 'disruption or deconstruction' in the learning process, while other work emphasizes insider or Freirean approaches and the role of participants as co-researchers (Chapman, 2019; Berg, 2006). The recurring pattern is iterative, collaborative, and context-situated: people study their own practice, name the theological meaning of that practice, and then change curriculum, ministry, or community life in response. This is an initial search, so a more targeted pass could surface additional denominational, regional, or dissertation-level examples. Drawing from this discussion a pastoral research methodology framework is proposed.

9. A Pastoral Research Methodology Framework

A pastoral research methodology framework draws and developed from the findings and discussion above. It synthesises the planning, action, and reflection (PAR) with Theological Action Research (TAR) making one research methods tool in theological education and the formation of ministry students.

1. **Problem focus and context**
Specify the pastoral issue, community, and hoped-for change (e.g., bereavement support in township congregations). Map stakeholders and ethics pathways (REC/HREC; POPIA considerations).
2. **Framing questions with Osmer**
Descriptive: *What is going on?* Interpretive: *Why?* Normative: *What ought to be?* Pragmatic: *How should we respond?*
3. **Choose purpose and design**
Exploratory vs. descriptive vs. explanatory; match to case, cross-sectional, longitudinal, action research, or mixed-methods design.
4. **Method set**
Phenomenology (bracketing–describing lived experience), case study (thick description of congregational practice), or participatory cycles with field-education partners.
5. **Data collection and analysis plans**
Semi-structured interviews, focus groups; story-completion for sensitive themes; congregational observations; surveys where appropriate; thematic analysis, phenomenological reduction; basic statistics for surveys.
6. **Ethics and risk management**
Consent, confidentiality, secure storage, dissemination agreements, and cultural/faith sensitivities; alignment with NHREC and institutional REC.
7. **Integration and action**
Close the loop using Osmer’s pragmatic task: co-develop interventions, evaluate them, and reflect theologically on practice changes.

10. Conclusion

Pastoral research today is best understood as methodologically plural and ethically rigorous, rooted in lived faith and designed for transformation. The framework supports postgraduate supervision, ministerial formation, evidence-based ministry and African theological scholarship. By anchoring projects in Osmer’s interpretive cycle, choosing designs those fit questions, leveraging phenomenology, case and participatory approaches, and honouring both South African and international ethical norms, church leaders and students can generate knowledge that genuinely serves congregations and communities. The framework remains conceptual and requires empirical validation through action research and comparative case studies. The article advances methodological debates by providing a coherent framework for pastoral research in African theological education.

References

- Abutabenjeh, S., & Jaradat, R. (2018). Clarification of research design, research methods, and research methodology: A guide for public administration researchers and practitioners. *Teaching public administration*, 36(3), 237-258.
- Anaya Jiménez, L., & Robinson, M. R. (2022). Youth Agency in Peacebuilding: Reframing the Relationship between Youth, Leadership, and Religion. *The Ecumenical Review*, 74(5), 760-781.
- ARPTe (Association of Reflective Practice in Theological Education). (2020). *Recommended standards and best practice for theological field education programs*. <https://www.arpte.org/resources>
- Aziz, G. (2025). Youth ministry: A system of support for responsible citizenry for South African youths. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 81(1), 10618.
- Bellamy, C. (2011). *Principles of methodology: Research design in social science*. Torrossa.
- Beukes, J. W. (2021). Youth, faith and environmental consciousness in Africa: A Practical Theology research imperative. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 7(2), 1-19.
- Bhutta, Z. A. (2002). Ethics in international health research: a perspective from the developing world. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 80, 114-120.
- Boursier, H. T. (2021). *Art as witness: A practical theology of arts-based research*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Brouard, S. (2023). *Using theological action research to embed Catholic social teaching in a Catholic development agency: abseiling on the road to Emmaus* (Doctoral dissertation, Anglia Ruskin Research Online (ARRO)).

- Cacho, R. G., & Lacs, J. E. M. (2025). Contextualized Religious Materials in Cyberspace for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). *Religious Education*, 120(3), 222-238.
- Cannella, G. S., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). Ethics, research regulations. In *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Capps, D. (1999). The lessons of art theory for pastoral theology. *Pastoral Psychology*, 47(5), 321-346.
- Capps, D. (2014). Method, models, and scholarly types: Reflections on thesis and dissertation writing in pastoral theology. *Pastoral Psychology*, 63(5), 551-560.
- Carroll, L., Hamman, J., Blodgett, B. J., Ste-Marie, L., Lindstrom, J., & Drummond, S. B. (2010). *Welcome to Theological Field Education!*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Chapman, M. D. (2019). Changing the world without doing harm: Critical pedagogy, participatory action research and the insider student researcher. *Religious studies and theology*, 38(1/2), 100-116. DOI:10.1558/rsth.38715
- Chouinard, J., & Cousins, J. (2013). Participatory evaluation for development: Examining research-based knowledge from within the African context. *African Evaluation Journal*, 1(1), 9 pages. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v1i1.43>
- Cilliers, J. (Ed.). (2022). *Moving methodologies: Doing practical and missional theology in an African context*. (Reviewed in 2023). *Acta Theologica*, 43(2). <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i2.7793>
- Clato-Day, S. R. M. (2020). *Examining clergy responses to parishioners who experience domestic violence: A phenomenological study* (Doctoral dissertation, Northcentral University).
- Clevenger, C., Cadge, W., Stroud, I. E., Palmer, P. K., Haythorn, T., & Fitchett, G. (2021). Education for professional chaplaincy in the US: Mapping current practice in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). *Journal of health care chaplaincy*, 27(4), 222-237.
- Connors, T. R. (2019). *A phenomenological understanding of a calling with implications for pastoral and vocational education*. Liberty University.
- Damean, D. C. (2025). Youth as Agents of Social Innovation in Parish Social Economy. *Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition*, 28(2).
- Davis, D. (2007). Learning our way: Engaging laity through large-scale participatory action research. *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 4(1), 48-62. doi=10.1558/jate.v4i1.48
- Droege, M. W. (2023). *Growing together: inclusivity in youth ministry praxis and the challenge of mainline church attrition* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria (South Africa)).
- Dustin D. Benac, D.D. (2024). Editorial, *Practical Theology*, 17:6, 477-479, DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2024.2420145
- Elsayed, D. (2020). *Research design, methodology, and data collection*. In *Corruption in the MENA Region: Beyond Uprisings*. Springer.
- Evans, R., Holt, L., & Skelton, T. (Eds.). (2017). *Methodological approaches*. Springer Singapore.
- Farley, E. (1977). Phenomenology and pastoral care. *Pastoral Psychology*, 26(2), 95-112.
- Frost, N. (2021). *Qualitative research methods in psychology: Combining core approaches 2e*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Global Chaplains Alliance. (n.d.). *Chaplains code of ethics*. <https://www.globalchaplainsalliance.org/home/chaplains-code-of-ethics>
- Graham, E. (2017). The state of the art: Practical theology yesterday, today and tomorrow: New directions in practical theology. *Theology*, 120(3), 172-180.
- Hancock, A. T. (2018). *Pastoral training approaches in the local church: A multi-case study* (Doctoral dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary).
- Hess, M. E. (2001). Collaborating with people to study" the popular": Implementing participatory action research strategies in religious education. *Religious Education*, 96(3), 271-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/003440801317081343>
- Hessel Jr, V. E. (2015). *Phenomenological study of pastor burnout* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix).
- Hester, J. A. (2018). *Stress and longevity in pastoral ministry: A phenomenological study*. SBTS.
- Horváth, I. (2007). Comparison of three methodological approaches of design research. In *DS 42: Proceedings of ICED 2007, the 16th International Conference on Engineering Design, Paris, France, 28.-31.07. 2007* (pp. 361-362).
- Hunziker, S., & Blankenagel, M. (2021). *Research design in business and management*. Wiesbaden: SpringerGabler, 1.
- Kaunda, C. J. (2013). *"Imagining a Just and Equitable African Christian Community": A Critical Analysis of the Contribution of Theological Education Fund/Ecumenical Theological Education (1910-2012)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg).
- Kirkham, J. J., Clarke, M., & Williamson, P. R. (2017). A methodological approach for assessing the uptake of core outcome sets using ClinicalTrials. gov: findings from a review of randomised controlled trials of rheumatoid arthritis. *bmj*, 357
- Kiruja, P. K., Kagema, D. N., & Mwongera, P. K. (2025). Digital Discipleship: Investigating Youth Participation in Online Church Services in FGCK Meru South District, Kenya. *Journal of Pastoral and Practical Theology (JPPT)*, 4(1), 87-107.
- Klomp, M. C. M. (2022). Case study research in/as practical theology. *Praktische Theologie*, 57(4), 203-210.
- Krueger, M. (2018). *Clergy nonsexual misconduct in Protestant churches: A mixed methods study*. California Southern University.
- Lacorte, M. (2014). Methodological approaches and realities. In *The Routledge handbook of Hispanic applied linguistics* (pp. 99-116). Routledge.
- Lartey, E. Y. (2002). Embracing the collage: Pastoral theology in an era of 'post-phenomena'. *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 12(2), 1-10.
- Lloyd, C. E. M. (2023). Stories matter: A novel approach to exploring perceptions, discourses, and the symbolic social order in *Pastoral Psychology*. *Pastoral Psychology*, 72, 1-20.

- Luder Jr, A. J. (2014). *A phenomenological study of the call, theological education, and lived experiences of pastors who left the ministry*. Northcentral University.
- Magezi, V. (2019). Practical theology in Africa: Situation, approaches, framework and agenda proposition. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 23(1), 115–135.
- Martin, B. (2000). “Living” Education: Action Research as a Practical Approach to Congregational Education. *Religious Education*, 95(2), 151-166. DOI: 10.1080/0034408000950204
- McClure, B. J. (2008). Pastoral Theology as the Art of Paying Attention: Widening the Horizons. *International journal of practical theology*, 12(2).
- McLaughlin, C. M. (2022). *The spiritual and emotional dynamics of pastoral transitions: A phenomenological study*. Liberty University.
- Ministry Magazine. (2023). Clergy and confidentiality: Best practices for ministry. <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2023/06/Clergy-and-confidentiality>
- Mthombeni, Z. M. (2023). Beyond walls: Redefining church amidst the covid-19 pandemic, through Autoethnographic reflections. *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 9(12), 573-581.
- Mutua, J. M., Ahamed, I., & Muendo, L. K. (2025). Technological Transformation and Youth Religious Engagement in the Kenyan Catholic Church, 1997–2020. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9(9), 198.
- NIH Clinical Center. (n.d.). *Guiding principles for ethical research*. <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/nih-clinical-research-trials-you/guiding-principles-ethical-research>
- North Park Theological Seminary. (n.d.). *Contextual learning and field education*. <https://seminary.northpark.edu/academics-programs/contextual-learning-and-field-education/>
- Osmer, R. R. (2008). *Practical theology: An introduction*. Eerdmans.
- Park, H. K. H. (2014). Toward a pastoral theological phenomenology: Constructing a reflexive and relational phenomenological method from a postcolonial perspective. *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 24(1), 1–20.
- Phelan, J. D. (2022). *Gendered pastoral care: A hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experiences of parishioners*. Liberty University.
- Pienaar, H. E. (2007). *An explorative study on the interaction between the arts and narrative practise: A pastoral perspective*. University of Pretoria.
- Presthus, W., & Munkvold, B. E. (2016). How to frame your contribution to knowledge? A guide for junior researchers in information systems. *NOKOBIT, Bergen, during*, 28-30.
- Radford, C. L. (2021). Creative arts-based research methods in practical theology: constructing new theologies of practice. In *Celebrating the Past, Present and Future of British and Irish Practical Theology* (pp. 60-74). Routledge.
- Raymond R. Tjandrawinata, Andreas B. Atawolo (2025) Evolution of Spirit and Life into God's Love and the Word in the Johannine Corpus. *Journal of social research*, <https://doi.org/10.55324/josr.v4i2.2433>
- Rhodes, D. P. (2020). Theology as social activity: theological action research and teaching the knowledge of Christian ethics and practical ministry. *Scottish journal of theology*, 73(4), 340-357. doi:10.1017/S0036930620000654
- Rhodes, D. P. (2020). Theology as social activity: theological action research and teaching the knowledge of Christian ethics and practical ministry. *Scottish journal of theology*, 73(4), 340-357.
- Sakupapa, T. C. (2025). Breaking the silos: Decolonial theological education beyond the church-academy divide. *Acta Theologica*, 45(2), 308-328. <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v45i2.9844>
- Sangwa, S. (2025). Reclaiming Elder-Led Governance: A Biblical Critique of Youth-First Globalism. *Available at SSRN 5506698*.
- Schlauch, C. R. (2012). A pastoral theologian's response to the case study. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 18(1–2), 1–10.
- Snedden, E. (2023). *Voice of Vision—Crafting Christian Culture as Symbolic Stories: An Arts-based Inquiry approach to exploring how mission and vision are enacted in New Zealand Christian Schools* (Doctoral dissertation, Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington).
- South African Medical Research Council. (n.d.). *HREC – Guideline documents*. <https://www.samrc.ac.za/research/rio-hrec-guideline-documents>
- Swinton, J., & Mowat, H. (2016). *Practical theology and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SCM Press.
- Szymczak, W. (2020). Interdisciplinarity in Pastoral Theology. An Example of Socio-Theological Research. *Verbum Vitae*, (38), 503-527.
- T. K. Tee, S. Y. Chia. (2025) Methodological Insights of Action Research in Doctoral Studies within Education Disciplines: A Systematic Review. *International journal of research and innovation in social science*. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0084>
- Teddlie, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2012). Common “core” characteristics of mixed methods research: A review of critical issues and call for greater convergence. *American behavioral scientist*, 56(6), 774-788.
- Thaldar, D. (2025). The National Health Research Ethics Council 2024 Guidelines-suspended in part, legally precarious in whole. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 18(2), 37-39.
- Triplett, W. (2025, August). Digital Pulpits and Virtual Praise: Redefining Black Church Worship in the Digital Age. In *RAIS Conference Proceedings 2022-2025* (No. 0576). Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies.
- Trist, R. M. (2025). The Changing Face of Reflective Practice in the Church Today. *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 45(45).
- Turcan, N. (2023). The phenomenology of prayer and the relationship between phenomenology and theology. *Religions*, 14(1), 104.

- Van den Berg, J. A. (2006). Voeg die daad by die woord. Diensleer en teologiese onderrig. *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal= Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 47(3_4), 697-707.
- Winifred Nwabuaku Kanu, C. C. Kanu, (2025) Methodological Challenges of Fieldwork in Indigenous Communities of Africa: A Systematic Review, *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.2.3.26>
- Zaid, R. (2018). Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-Led Peacebuilding in Kenya.
- Zaluchu, S. E., & Zaluchu, F. R. B. (2024). Pastoral Theology: A Methodological Approach to Analyzing Social Cases. *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat*, 8(1), 91-101.
- Zylla, P. C. (2014). Shades of lament: Phenomenology, theopoetics, and pastoral theology. *Pastoral Psychology*, 63(5), 763-776.