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Beyond relevance: Reclaiming the vocation of the pastor in the Age of Authenticity

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Abstract

This article challenges the dominant narrative that pastoral ministry today is facing a crisis of relevance. Instead, it argues that the deeper issue is theological: the loss of confidence in divine action within a secular, disenchanted world. Drawing on Charles Taylor's A Secular Age, the article explores how modern cultural shifts, particularly the Age of Authenticity, have fragmented pastoral identity and reshaped ministry into performance, therapy, or management. Through a historical-theological lens, it traces the development of pastoral roles from the pre-modern era to the present. In response to the contemporary pressures for relevance, the article proposes the figure of "the waiting pastor", one who resists the urge to secure influence and instead bears witness to the hidden, interruptive presence of God in suffering, worship, prayer, and relationships. The article concludes that pastoral renewal lies not in innovation, but in theological fidelity and the courage to wait for God to act.

1. The contemporary crisis of the pastor

Pastoral ministry has always included tension between calling and expectation, community and individual, presence and performance. While the calling to be a pastor remains deeply significant to many who serve in this role, with scholars like Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie (2013:12) indicating that for many, being a pastor is a highly rewarding job that brings a great deal of job satisfaction, there is growing evidence that the vocation has lost coherence within the broader cultural landscape (Root 2019; Vanhoozer & Strachan 2015). The pastor, once a respected figure of spiritual authority and public trust, now operates in a fragmented world where the church's influence is waning, and the theological foundations of ministry are often obscured.

1.1 A crisis of identity

Heitink (2001:217) famously observed that "de dominee gaat voorbij". Although he later qualifies this by noting that it is perhaps only the traditional form of the pastoral office that is fading, his statement captures a widespread sense that pastors are no longer the central figures they once were. This shift is not merely about changing job descriptions but about a deeper uncertainty surrounding what it means to be a pastor in a late-modern Western world.

The crisis of identity is visible in the sheer multiplicity of roles pastors are expected to embody. Hiestand and Wilson (2016:1) write: "Pastors don't know who they are and what they are supposed to be." Sorensen (2014:5) and Vanhoozer and Strachan (2015:7) echo this concern, noting that there is now an "overwhelming variety" of images that define the modern pastor: counsellor, life-coach, CEO, content creator, spiritual entrepreneur, motivational speaker, and more. These roles are often shaped more by cultural demand than by theological reflection, leaving pastors with a fragmented sense of self. This phenomenon, which Lee and Fredrickson (2012:32) call "role overload," contributes significantly to pastoral exhaustion and vocational disillusionment. As Percy (2006:8) notes, it has become "hard to be precise about exclusive roles and tasks, and the concrete nature of clerical identity." The result is a generation of pastors who, though theologically trained and spiritually committed, often find themselves adrift, uncertain whether their vocation still holds cultural or spiritual weight.

1.2 The pursuit and pitfall of relevance

At the heart of the identity crisis facing pastors in the 21st century lies the pursuit of relevance. Far from being a peripheral concern, relevance has become the defining lens through which pastoral vocation is understood and evaluated today. As institutional churches grapple with declining membership, shrinking finances, and waning public influence, pastors are increasingly compelled to demonstrate their worth by aligning themselves with contemporary cultural norms and expectations. Root (2022:95) identifies this "crisis of relevance" not merely as one factor among many, but as the dominant narrative shaping pastoral identity in the late-modern era.

Research from Barna Group (2017, 2022a, 2022b) confirms this shift. Pastors are increasingly viewed as marginal figures, sometimes appreciated for ceremonial functions (weddings, funerals) but rarely sought out for moral or existential guidance. In the digital age, spiritual authority has been decentred; the pastor is now only one voice among many in an ever-expanding marketplace of meaning. Packiam (2022:106) notes that "the pastor is no longer the locus of authority or credibility."

To maintain influence, many pastors have adopted roles that align with late-modern culture: celebrity pastors, media moguls, entrepreneurial leaders, or therapeutic coaches. But as Willimon (2016:55–57) warns, these roles often borrow their logic from the entertainment industry or corporate management rather than from scripture or theology. Peterson (1989:1) laments this shift, arguing that pastors who abandon their calling to follow "other gods," productivity, performance, popularity – and do so at the cost of their vocational integrity.

The internet and social media intensify this crisis. As Duffy (2020) explains, online platforms democratize authority, allowing anyone with a voice and a camera to speak into spiritual matters. Popularity becomes a proxy for truth. Cheong (2022) argues that the erosion of religious authority online has created a situation in which pastors must now compete for attention rather than embody a different kind of presence. In such a world, depth and tradition are easily sacrificed for novelty and charisma.

1.3 A So[u]th African complexity

While much of the literature on pastoral identity emerges from North American or European contexts, the South African situation, particularly within the Reformed tradition, from which perspective this article is written, shares several significant parallels.1 Within the Dutch Reformed tradition (NG Kerk), the decline in membership over the past decades is stark. Schoeman (2014, 2023) reports a dramatic drop in baptised and confessing members since the 1990s, with accelerating losses in recent

1 This study primarily engages Western philosophical and theological frameworks. The author acknowledges the limitation of not directly incorporating African theological scholarship in this paper and recognizes the need for future research to dialogue with African practical theology and broader non-Western ecclesial contexts.

years. This statistical decline is not merely demographic; it signals a shift in the cultural location of the pastor. Once central to Afrikaner identity and public life, pastors now function in a pluralistic, post-Apartheid society where their voice no longer carries inherent weight. Venter (2021:43) states in this regard: "The DRC and her pastors have lost their social position of power and influence over people."

As in the global North, South African pastors face the temptation to reinvent themselves as cultural entrepreneurs, hoping to regain relevance in a society that often sees them as outdated. Yet the danger remains the same: when ministry is reduced to performance or strategy, it loses its theological heart.

2. Charles Taylor and the Age of Authenticity

The current crisis in pastoral identity cannot be fully understood without placing it within the broader *cultural shi*fts that have shaped modern Western consciousness. In particular, the work of renowned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers essential conceptual tools to understand the transformation of religious belief, identity, and authority in the late-modern era. Taylor's A Secular Age (2007) is a seminal text that explores how Western societies moved from a world in which belief in God was taken for granted to one in which belief is just one possibility among many, often contested, optional, and deeply individualised (Taylor 2007:25). His analysis, rich in historical depth and cultural nuance, provides the theological and philosophical backdrop against which contemporary pastoral ministry unfolds.

2.1 From enchantment to the immanent frame

Taylor begins his account by identifying a fundamental cultural shift: the disenchantment of the world. In pre-modern societies, the self was "porous", open to divine influence, spiritual forces, and moral order beyond the self (Taylor 2007:33–34). God, spirits, angels, and demons were not abstract doctrines but real agents in a cosmos suffused with divine presence. The church, as mediator of this sacred order, had clear authority. Pastors, in this context, were both spiritual guides and representatives of a transcendent moral universe.

However, with the Enlightenment and the rise of the scientific revolution, this enchanted worldview gave way to a new "buffered self"2 closed off from external spiritual influences and oriented toward self-determination and reason (Taylor 2007:38; see also Smith 2014:139–141). The world came to be seen in secular, naturalistic terms. This gradual cultural shift produced what Taylor calls the immanent frame: [a] constructed social space in which people interpret their lives without reference to the transcendent (Taylor 2007:539). The immanent frame is not explicitly atheistic, but it redefines belief as a choice, a personal preference among many rather than a given structure of meaning.3

This transition has enormous implications for how faith is practised and understood. Belief in God is no longer axiomatic; it must be constantly defended, reinterpreted, and justified. As Taylor (2007:25) puts it, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" The change, he argues, is not due to a loss of interest in meaning, but a reconfiguration of how meaning is constructed in the first place and refers to this phenomenon as a "secular 3" society (Taylor 2007:22).

2.2 The malaise of modernity

Despite the dominance of the immanent frame and the buffered self, turning the quest for meaning and flourishing inward, Taylor (1991) notes that many people experience a "malaise of modernity", a vague but persistent sense of dissatisfaction with late-modern life. Even as people enjoy unprecedented freedom and choice, they often struggle with fragmentation, superficiality,

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2 The "buffered self" refers to the modern individual who experiences the self as autonomous, enclosed, and sealed off from external spiritual forces (Taylor 2007:38–42).

3 It is important to note that Charles Taylor distinguishes between three meanings of secularization. "Secular 1" refers to the withdrawal of religion from public institutions (e.g., education, law, politics); "Secular 2" describes the decline of religious belief and practice. However, Taylor is primarily concerned with "Secular 3": a cultural condition in which belief in God is no longer axiomatic but is one option among many, fragile, contested, and deeply individualized. This shift marks a transformation not in the presence of religion, but in the plausibility structures that sustain belief itself (Taylor 2007:423–430).

and alienation. Heitink (2012) calls this a "stillen verlangen naar God" and Paul (2017) calls this the "secularisatie van verlangen".

This longing for something "more" creates an explosion of new spiritualities and quasi-religious practices. Taylor (2007:299) calls this the "nova effect," a cultural situation in which countless new forms of belief proliferate, each offering its own version of fullness, identity, and transformation. People stil[l] long for depth and meaning in life, but often through mostly immanent means, like yoga, mindfulness, fitness cultures, environmentalism, or therapeutic practices (Paas 2019:25). These alternatives provide meaning, but without the metaphysical commitments of traditional religion.4 Faith, however, is not discarded in this context; it is rather packaged, personalised, and made marketable. It is tailored to fit individual preferences, stripped of institutional demands, and offered as one more customizable product in the spiritual marketplace.

2.3 The Age of Authenticity

It is within this secular and pluralised context that Taylor identifies the rise of the "Age of Authenticity," beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the present. The ethic of authenticity insists that individuals must find and express their "true self," a vision of life in which personal choice, emotional depth, and inner integrity are the highest goods. As Taylor (2007:475) writes:

> It is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

The Age of Authenticity radically redefines the place of religion in society. Faith becomes one option among many for self-realisation, rather than

4 In the age of the nova effect, individuals frequently search for meaning and depth across a wide spiritual marketplace. However, these quests often remain confined to the immanent frame and give rise to what has been described as forms of immanent transcendence, experiences of awe, beauty, or connection that evoke the language of spirituality, but are grounded entirely within natural, aesthetic, or psychological phenomena. Ammerman (2013:17–18) notes that this spirituality often involves "experiences greater than the self," rooted in nature, music, or community, yet without reference to a transcendent deity. These spiritual expressions, while meaningful, typically reflect the conditions of a secular age in which transcendence is symbolically retained but functionally immanent.

a communal obligation or transcendent matter. What matters most is whether a belief system "resonates" with one's inner truth. Root (2017:101) describes this dynamic succinctly: "Whatever speaks to you is worthy of exploration and commitment, until it no longer does."5

Several key features define the Age of Authenticity. Expressive individualism becomes central. Institutions are no longer trusted to define meaning; the self becomes the final authority. Religious pluralism is normalised. Faith is no longer assumed; it is chosen, often reconfigured according to personal taste. Spirituality is disembedded from traditional structures. Belief is practiced in private, curated spaces rather than in shared communal or liturgical contexts.

For pastors, this poses a profound challenge. Their role is no longer assumed to be important. Authority must be earned, relevance negotiated. Even for those who remain within the church, the expectations of pastoral ministry are now largely shaped by consumer logic: pastors must be relatable, inspiring, non-judgmental, and able to provide personal transformation on demand.

2.4 Pastoral identity in the Age of Authenticity

The cultural dynamics of the Age of Authenticity place immense pressure on pastors to continually reinvent themselves to maintain relevance. Root (2022:87–103) contends that many pastors have internalised the logic of the Age of Authenticity, adapting to its nova-effect marketplace by marketing God as a consumable product, presenting faith as a tool for personal fulfilment, and reshaping the church into a provider of spiritual services. Within this framework, the pastor is no longer primarily a theological guide

5 The emergence of spiritual seekers reflects a central feature of late-modern religiosity, a turn toward individualized, non-institutional, and experience-driven expressions of meaning. These seekers, often described as "religious free agents," are detached from traditional church loyalties and actively pursue spiritual depth in personal, practical, and sometimes unconventional ways (Long 2001:6). As Heitink (2012:213) suggests, modern individuals have become "seekers," navigating the wide spectrum of the spiritual marketplace shaped by expressive individualism and the nova effect. Rather than abandoning faith altogether, many pursue a form of spirituality that remains within the immanent frame, marked by personal resonance and therapeutic appeal. It is within this context that the term "spiritual but not religious" emerges (Roof 1999:137).

but becomes a brand, an entrepreneurial figure whose value is measured by charisma, emotional impact, and cultural resonance.

The rise of celebrity pastors illustrates this shift vividly: individuals who attract massive audiences, promote highly curated personal brands, and often blur the boundaries between spiritual leadership and popular entertainment (Ward 2011:5). While this adaptation to the Age of Authenticity may offer relevance and relief from vocational malaise, Vanhoozer and Strachan (2015:7) caution that such pastors have, in effect, "exchanged their vocational birthright for a bowl of lentil stew."

For pastors unwilling to "sell their birthright" and fully embrace the ethos of the Age of Authenticity, the result is often a profound sense of a deep vocational unease. As Root (2019:xix) notes, many pastors feel embarrassed by their calling and uncertain whether it has any meaningful place in a world saturated by spiritual options and professional alternatives. Luben (2022:5) captures this existential dilemma in the form of a question: "What is the role of the pastor if God is not necessary, if there is no mystery to embrace, if there is no transcendence to explain?"[6]

3. A historical overview of the pastoral role

To fully grasp the contemporary crisis of pastoral identity, it is crucial to examine how this identity has evolved. The figure of the pastor has never been static. Across history, pastors have embodied different roles, shaped by shifting theological paradigms, cultural forces, and institutional needs (Bernier 2015:xi). As Taylor (2007) reminds us, our current "Age of Authenticity" is the outcome of a complex historical process. Within this evolving landscape, the role of the pastor has been continually redefined, often reacting to, and at times resisting, the dominant cultural logic of the day.

This section, drawing on Taylor's framework, traces three pivotal historical phases that culminate in the emergence of the Age of Authenticity:

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6 Vanhoozer and Strachan (2015:8–9) argue that pastors are under pressure to answer the implicit cultural question: What do pastors have to say that no one else can say or do? Without a clear theological identity rooted in divine action and the ministry of the Word, the pastoral vocation risks becoming redundant in the eyes of a secular society.

1. The Ancien Régime (pre-modern period)
2. The Age of Mobilization (modern period)
3. The Age of Authenticity (late-modern period)

Each phase is examined in terms of how pastors operated within their specific social imaginaries, and how these evolving roles have contributed to pastoral fragmentation evident today. Over time, the pastor's place in society has gradually shifted, from a central, authoritative figure to a more marginal and contested presence today.

3.1 The Ancien Régime (ca. 1500–1800)

In the pre-modern world, often called the Ancien Régime, the pastor operated within an enchanted world, where the divine was not distant or abstract but actively present in everyday life (Taylor 2007:25–33). In this context, the pastor's authority was primarily spiritual and sacramental (Bainton 2013:39). He was the intermediary between God and the community, a custodian of sacred rituals and moral order. The people believed not only in God, but also in a cosmos structured by divine presence and action.[7]

3.1.1 The Reformation and the Word-centred pastor

The Protestant Reformation redefined this role. The Reformation challenged the distinction between clergy and laity, advancing the idea of the priesthood of all believers (Bernier 2015). This levelling of religious hierarchy led to a new question: if all believers are priests, what is the role of the ordained pastor? Protestant churches answered by preserving the distinct office of the pastor, not as a mediator between God and people, but as a minister of the Word (Heitink 2001). Pastoral identity thus became rooted in the proclamation of the Word rather than the mediation of sacraments.[8] Calvin emphasised the pastor as "minister of the Word,"

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7 In such a context, there was little room for the vocational malaise that characterises the modern pastoral experience. As Taylor (2007:41–44) describes, the social imaginary of the enchanted world provided a unified sense of identity and meaning, in which the pastor's role was both respected and religiously indispensable.

8 Holifield (2005:40) notes, however, that ministers were still tasked with addressing a wide range of everyday concerns, including oaths, disputes, health, wealth, clothing, recreation, charity, and various ethical and political matters. Nevertheless, their central

someone called to interpret Scripture, administer sacraments, and offer moral guidance (Heitink 2001:29; Old 1998–2010).

3.1.2 The learned and educated pastor

From the 17th to 18th centuries, the pastor increasingly took on the role of intellectual and moral educator, especially within Protestant societies. As literacy expanded, so did the expectation that pastors would not only preach but also teach in schools, catechism classes, and civil society.[9] According to Holifield (2007), the pastor was often the most educated person in the town, a public intellectual whose influence extended beyond the pulpit.

Yet, this intellectualisation of the pastoral office also marked the beginning of a shift toward professionalisation, a subtle move away from divine dependence toward managerial and pedagogical expertise. Although still embedded in a religious framework, the pastor's authority began to mirror that of the academic or civil leader.

3.2 The Age of Mobilisation (ca. 1800–1960s)

Over time, the pastor's role transformed further. Taylor (2007:495–504) describes this era as the Age of Mobilisation, a time when religious institutions actively organised, structured, and mobilised people for collective identity and moral formation. Churches became sites of social order, political influence, and national identity.

3.2.1 The pastor as professional

With the waning of the enchanted worldview and the ascendancy of rationalism, the pastor was redefined as a practitioner of a recognised profession. As Trull and Creech (2017:20) observe, by the nineteenth century clergy increasingly identified with other professions such as law and medicine. Hiestand and Wilson (2016:45) argue that theology was no longer the queen of the sciences, and Scripture no longer universally acknowledged as sacred. In response, pastors embraced academic dress,

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responsibility remained the care of the conscience, seen as a natural faculty uniquely capable of bearing 'supernatural' testimony.

9 Heitink (2001:79) also observes in this regard: "Een predikant in het begin van de achttiende eeuw had geen studieverlof nodig, want zijn dagindeling bestond voor een groot deel uit studie."

engaged in scholarly debate, and distanced themselves from overtly religious authority. The clerical robe and pulpit came to signify professional status rather than divine significance (Smit 1945:162; Heitink 2001:126).[10]

Professionalisation brought specialisation. Pastors were no longer the sole moral and educational authorities, as roles were divided among psychologists, social workers, and educators (McLeod 2010:26). What was once a unified vocation became fragmented.[11]

3.2.2 The pastor as social mobilizer

During this era, many pastors also functioned as agents of moral reform and national identity. They rallied communities around causes such as temperance, education, abolition, or civic virtue. In South Africa, this role was particularly visible in Afrikaner nationalism, where Dutch Reformed pastors often served as cultural custodians of the Afrikaner nation and faith (see Van Coller 2007; Kruger 2014). The pastor was not just a religious leader but a figure of social mobilisation, embedded in the machinery of civil society. This entanglement of church and culture, however, carried a significant cost: the pastor became deeply bound to institutional structures and political ideologies, often at the expense of theological depth or spiritual discernment.

3.3 The Age of Authenticity (1960s–present)

The upheavals of the 1960's marked the transition from mobilisation to authenticity. The authority of institutions, including the church, began to wane. In previous eras, the pastor's identity was tethered to sacramental

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10 Wepener and Burger (2004:7) note in this regard that priestly vestments were gradually replaced by academic gowns.

11 In the Age of Mobilization, the pastor became not only a professional but also a moral exemplar. As Taylor (2007:446) notes, this was a time when ideals had to be realized through human effort rather than divine intervention, and pastors were expected to embody virtues like self-discipline and public service. In South Africa, their authority extended beyond the pulpit into schools, civic life, and welfare. Hiestand and Wilson (2015:41) highlight that in rural and settler communities, pastors often held both theological and social influence, shaping private piety and public morality. This ideal was reinforced by popular literature. Kaptein, Aalders, and Faber (1969:9) observe that novels of the time portrayed the parsonage as a peaceful, morally exemplary home: "In het ene boek wordt ons een vriendelijk, onbedreighd leven geschetst dat in de goede zin van het woord beantwoordt aan de heersende burgerlijke idealen."

authority or professional expertise. Today, these traditional sources of authority are viewed with ambivalence, if not outright suspicion.[12] As Taylor (2007:484) notes, religion now must "speak to me," and make sense "in terms of my spiritual development."

This has resulted in a significant functional redefinition of pastoral ministry. As Root (2019:12) observes, pastors are increasingly expected to become facilitators of emotional well-being, providers of therapeutic support, and architects of meaningful experiences. Their value lies less in theological formation or sacramental mediation, and more in their ability to offer personal insight, motivational content, and pragmatic solutions to everyday challenges. Preaching, accordingly, often becomes pragmatic in tone, offering life advice, coping strategies, or moral encouragement rather than proclaiming the Word of God. This homiletic shift is indicative of the broader move from proclamation to relevance (Hiestand & Wilson 2016:62).

Remaking the pastor as a religious manager or spiritual brand, particularly in a climate where institutional distrust is high and religious authority must be constantly re-earned, comes at a cost. Root (2019:xxxi) names this dynamic as a core feature of our secular age: a "hollowing out" of the pastoral vocation, in which the core commitment to divine action has become questionable, even among those who serve within the church. What remains is a functionally secular role, shaped more by cultural scripts of performance, relevance, and therapeutic utility than by theological depth.

3.4 From vocation to fragmentation

This brief historical survey highlights how the role of the pastor has shifted from mediator of divine presence to moral educator, to institutional manager, and finally to cultural performer. As Heitink (2001:217) notes, the modern pastor is no longer defined by a clear set of expectations, but by

12 Holifield (2007:254) shows, from the American context, that thousands of pastors experienced how cultural shifts radically transformed their ministries. Pastors who had begun their work in the 1940s discovered, three decades later, that it felt as if they were living in an entirely different world. These changes undermined previously unquestioned assumptions and contributed to a growing sense of a crisis of relevance. Heitink (2001:255) captures this crisis poignantly: "Het is niet alleen 'het hemels baldakijn' dat gescheurd is, ook het vloerkleed waarop ze staan wordt langzaam onder hun voeten weggetrokken."

an ambiguous, often contradictory, set of demands. The result is what Root (2019) calls a "sick calling", a vocation that still holds deep promise, but one that is constantly destabilised by the surrounding cultural currents.

4. The crisis of relevance and the eclipse of divine action

As stated earlier, contemporary discussions about the future of the pastorate are often dominated by the language of relevance. Declining church attendance, societal marginalisation, and the rise of individual spirituality have led many pastors to question their purpose and utility in a rapidly secularising world. Root (2022:96) identifies this widespread concern: "It's not difficult to convince church leaders that they stand before a crisis. But it is hard for the crisis not to be understood as a crisis of relevance."

4.1 The functional displacement of God

Root (2022:102) warns that the pastor's desperate pursuit of relevance often leads to the functional displacement of God. As divine action fades from view, the church turns to the pastor for vitality, vision, and meaning. In this system, God becomes a product to be marketed: "Making God into a product," Root (2022:103) explains, "allows us to put the church and its God-product back into the centre of our lives, which achieves relevance."[13] Yet this God-product cannot act. It is passive, conceptual, and ultimately irrelevant to actual divine transformation. In such a model, the church loses its ability to bear witness to a living, interrupting God.

4.2 Relevance as a symptom, not the cause

Root (2022:98) insists that the real crisis is not a lack of relevance but the loss of expectation that God still acts. He writes: "We feel this crisis of relevance deeply. But if we go deeper, beyond the loss of relevance, we can spot the real crisis" (Root 2022:98). Root and Bertrand (2023:88) summarise the theological heart of the matter:

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13 Conradie (2009:177) states that with the vast variety of church "products" available on the market, one can browse for a church like in a shopping mall, looking for one that understands your feelings: "There you can enjoy a bit of 'Pick & Pray.'" Caring for people's spiritual needs, in this way, becomes just another form of therapy, another strategy to satisfy consumers.

> The real crisis is encountering a living God … We've become so focused on the crisis of decline that we deny or push aside the crisis that we are broken and sinful people, a weak church, who are called to wait for the God who is God to act in our midst.

To misidentify the crisis is to malform the pastoral vocation. As Root and Bertrand (2023:88) conclude: "It would be a shame, a deep waste, and a major malformation, even a disobedience, to be possessed by the wrong crisis." Pastors who surrender their theological inheritance for a "bowl of relevance" lose more than cultural capital; they forfeit the chance to participate in God's ongoing work in the world (Vanhoozer & Strachan 2015:1).

5. The waiting pastor as theological response

In response to the deep crisis of divine action in late modernity, a renewed pastoral identity is needed, one not shaped by innovation or entrepreneurial relevance. While many good models for ministry exist, they often fall short in addressing the complexity of the Age of Authenticity.[14] As Root and Bertrand (2023:13) rightly observe, "If you want a healthy church," and we might add, a healthy pastor, "you are going to need to imagine a cure that doesn't depend on the secular age."

Within this cultural moment, there is a profound space for the emergence of "the waiting pastor." This figure embraces the discipline of waiting amid the tensions and uncertainties of late-modern society, taking seriously the real crisis of divine action by embodying it with humility and hope.

In this context, the image of the waiting pastor offers a timely and theologically grounded alternative: not a posture of resignation or nostalgic retreat, but one of deep, anticipatory faith. It is a vocation marked by attentiveness to the God who is Wholly Other, who still acts, speaks, and reveals, often in hidden and unexpected ways. In contrast to the pressure for anxious productivity and attempts to achieve relevancy, the waiting

14 These models include the pastor as poet (Barnes 2009), the pastor as public theologian (Vanhoozer & Strachan 2015; Hiestand & Wilson 2016), the pastor as wounded healer (Nouwen 1979), the pastor as shepherd (Jefferson 2006), and the pastor as storyteller (Rimmer 2018).

pastor models a form of active dependency that reclaims pastoral identity from fragmentation and collapse.

5.1 Waiting in an Age of Acceleration

In a world marked by social acceleration and a fight for relevance, waiting is countercultural. Rosa (2013; 2020) describes the modern world as driven by "dynamic stabilisation," where everything must constantly grow to maintain stability. In such a context, "to wait" becomes synonymous with failure, passivity, or irrelevance. As Root (2022:142) observes: "In late modernity, if you're not growing, you're declining, meaning if you're waiting, you're losing". This captures the prevailing mindset of pastors navigating the Age of Authenticity.

Yet waiting, in its biblical and theological richness, has always been central to the Christian tradition. As Robinson (2015:x) notes, "waiting is a virtue Christians are invited to learn," deeply rooted in the narrative of Advent, Lent, lament, and eschatological hope. McCarroll (2013:10) agrees: "Waiting demands we give ourselves to something outside ourselves." In this sense, the act of waiting is theological; it dethrones the autonomous self and creates space for divine interruption.

5.2 The shape of the waiting pastor

The waiting pastor, as envisioned here, is one who inhabits ministry differently, not through strategy or by conforming to the logic of the Age of Authenticity, but through presence, vulnerability, and theological attentiveness. Root (2022:143) calls this "waiting as attentive anticipation."[15] As McCarroll (2013:193) notes, true waiting is both active and passive, passive in that it respects God's freedom and transcendence, and active in that it is alert to the hidden ways in which God arrives in daily life. Such waiting is therefore not passive or withdrawn from the world, but alert and engaged in the concrete realities of life, while resisting the temptation to equate faithful action with human control (Root 2022:144–145; McCarroll

15 Nouwen (1987:ad loc.) adds: "Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening." Waiting, then, is not a lack of faith or action, but a form of faithful availability to the God who is not under our control.

2013:193).[16] In this vision, the waiting pastor refuses to be a "solution-provider" or spiritual technician. Instead, the pastor becomes a witness and placeholder, embodying hope in a God whose arrival we cannot predict, but whose presence we expect.

5.3 Spaces of divine action

If God is still active, the question becomes: Where does one wait? Where might God be found? This article identifies four concrete spaces where divine action remains possible, not in spectacle, but in the fragile, ordinary, and relational aspects of life.

5.3.1 Suffering: Waiting in liminal spaces

The first sphere in which the pastor can embody faithful waiting in the Age of Authenticity is precisely where modern culture least expects divine action: in suffering and death. In an age dominated by optimisation, therapeutic self-fulfilment, and the minimisation of discomfort (Taylor 2007:475; Rosa 2020:81), the figure of the pastor who chooses to remain present in moments of despair and death appears both strange and subversive.

This approach is rooted in Root's Christopraxis framework, which understands God's action as taking the form of a death-to-life pattern, where the crucified Christ reveals the being of God by entering human suffering. Root draws on Luther's *theologia crucis* and Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (1972), which reframe divine revelation not as triumph or power, but as weakness, suffering, and abandonment. For Root (2014:87), Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, precisely because He enters the concrete realities of human brokenness through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Waiting in these spaces, the pastor does not act as a manager or motivator but participates in a theological posture of active passivity, a willingness to join the other in their nothingness and remain with them without offering superficial resolution. Root (2019:210) describes this ministry as joining the "event horizon of nothingness," anticipating divine arrival in places where all other hope has failed.

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16 How this posture of waiting takes shape amid challenging realities such as poverty, violence, social injustice, and systemic inequality requires further exploration.

Key here is Root's development of Bonhoeffer's concept of *Stellvertretung*, translated as "place-sharing" or vicarious representation. This means more than empathy; it entails the pastor's deep identification with another's suffering, participating in their existential crises not to resolve them, but to witness to the presence of Christ who also shares in such darkness.

This theology of suffering insists that divine presence does not depend on human religious effort or moral success but is grounded in the solidarity of the crucified Christ with the forsaken. Root (2014:107) thus claims: "Grace is the human experience of God's being as becoming in the ministry of bringing life out of death." In other words, waiting with others in suffering is not an abdication of ministry but a participation in the core of Christian ministry itself. McCarroll (2013:199) also provides a theological lens for this waiting: "Hidden beneath the suffering of the cross is the presence of God." In this sense, the cross becomes not merely a symbol of death, but the place where God's hiddenness paradoxically reveals His nearness. The pastor, by waiting at the foot of the cross with others, bears witness to this divine solidarity.

This ministry of presence directly contrasts the expectations of late modernity. In a secular age shaped by acceleration, where everything must be done faster and more efficiently (Rosa 2020:24), the pastor's unhurried presence in a space of pain appears almost wasteful and irrelevant. Yet it is precisely this unproductive waiting that disrupts the immanent frame and creates the possibility of experiencing the transcendent.

5.3.2 Worship: Waiting in the hidden liturgy

A second way in which the pastor practices waiting in the Age of Authenticity is in the act and space of worship and liturgy. Barnard and Wepener (2020:22) describe the worship service as a "meeting space" (*ontmoetingsruimte*) between God and the gathered community, and between the community members themselves. They insist that God reveals Himself not only through preaching, but through the integrated whole of liturgy: including silence, song, space, sacraments, and spoken word. The *Handleiding vir die erediens* affirms this relational dynamic of mutual approach: "God draws near to the congregation, and the congregation draws near to God" (Clasen et al. 2010:11, 16).

This perspective directly challenges the liturgical reductionism often characteristic of the Age of Authenticity, where worship is shaped by performative individualism, emotional consumerism, and the commodification of spiritual experience. Taylor (2007:517) and Salkin (2013:46) have both warned that late modern people seek curated "experiences" rather than theological encounters, leading to a market-driven model of "selling worship." This temptation, visible in contemporary ecclesial practice, results in worship designed to entertain rather than to evoke the mystery of God, creating what Long (2001:43) critiques as audiences instead of congregations.

The waiting pastor, however, understands the liturgical space not as a spectacle to manage, but as what Cilliers (2011:1) calls "a space of anticipation." This anticipatory space is "pregnant" with the possibility of God's presence, God who may or may not "show up," but who remains free, other, and sovereign.

Van der Merwe (2009:148–149) adds that pastors must learn to "de-clutter" worship spaces, removing motivational speech, spiritual entertainment, and "God-products" that obscure true encounter. Citing Long (2001:21), he reminds pastors that "God is present in worship; our job is to clear the clutter and get out of the way of people's sight lines." This suggests a paradoxical pastoral action: to do less in order to let more of God be seen.

The task of the waiting pastor, then, is to shape worship not around relevance with cultural expectations, but around reverence, around the mystery and majesty of the Wholly Other God. Smith (2016:20) compares this work to recalibrating the congregation's liturgical *kardia*, their spiritual compass, toward their "magnetic north," which is not the self, but the Creator.

Moreover, worship is not merely an individual experience, but a collective act. Roberts (2017:75) warns that the Age of Authenticity has redefined Christian liturgy as a site for private meaning-making, displacing its communal, covenantal structure. As such, contemporary worshippers often gather in what Taylor (2007:482) calls "the lonely crowd", individuals experiencing "common action" without true communion. In contrast, Barnard (2019:154) asserts that worship is the culmination of the community's shared life with God, and all ritual acts, from the sacraments to the sermon, are means of encounter.

This means that the pastor does not wait in isolation, but with and among the people of God. Clasen et al. (2010:4) stress that every liturgical act, prayers, song, sacraments, is a mode of expectant engagement with God. In this way, worship becomes an act of "shared anticipation," not simply personal expression.

5.3.3 Prayer: Waiting in attentive listening

Prayer is arguably the most emblematic form of pastoral waiting, and in the Age of Authenticity it functions as a radical and countercultural act. Within a cultural milieu that is framed by expressive individualism and driven by performance and visibility (Taylor 2007:475), prayer appears irrational, unproductive, and even irrelevant. However, it is precisely this perceived futility that marks prayer as a site of deep theological resistance. To pray in a secular age is to step outside the market logic of self-optimisation and to attend instead to the mysterious and uncontrollable presence of the Wholly Other God.

Root (2022:143) makes a foundational claim: "Prayer itself is waiting." This simple phrase articulates a theology of prayer that stands diametrically opposed to the mechanistic, consumer-oriented spirituality so prevalent in late modernity. Prayer is not a tactic or tool. It is the very expression of a posture that assumes dependence on a God who is not at our disposal. The task of the pastor is precisely to form his own life around the practice of prayer. In doing so, the pastor models an alternative anthropology, one defined not by self-expression or autonomy, but by receptivity, vulnerability, and hope.

Nouwen adds theological weight to this claim. He writes: "To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God's first love, we must be mystics … This is the discipline of contemplative prayer" (Nouwen 1989:26). Elsewhere, Nouwen provocatively frames prayer as a form of "wasting time with God," rejecting utility as the measure of spiritual practice: "The world says, 'If you are not making good use of your time, you are useless.' Jesus says: 'Come spend some useless time with me'" (Nouwen 2010:38).

Thus, the waiting pastor does not pray to gain power over God or others, but to remain open to the One who addresses us. This openness is not passive.

As McCarroll (2013:202) explains, "Prayer is about keeping open to God. It includes awareness of God's presence in all of life and in all we do." Prayer in this sense is an intentional act of attentiveness to divine presence amid the distractions of the immanent frame. It is, as Root (2019:275) describes, "the broadening of our attention on the world around us, looking again for the arrival of God".

Peterson (2011:142) encapsulates the spirit of this calling in *The Pastor: A Memoir*, stating: "If I am going to stay true to my vocation as a pastor, I can't let the 'market' determine what I do. I will find ways to pray with and for people and teach them to pray … I'm not going to wait to be asked. I am a pastor".

5.3.4 Relationship: Waiting in shared humanity

The final expression of pastoral waiting in the Age of Authenticity unfolds within the space of human relationships. Relationships in the current age are often approached as tools for influence, strategic means to measurable ends. Against this prevailing logic, the waiting pastor embodies a different posture: one that regards relationships as spaces where the presence of the living God may be encountered.

Rather than treating relationships as mechanisms for church growth or institutional relevance, the pastor is called to restore them as ends in themselves, places of deep presence and mutual vulnerability. Root argues that many pastors treat relationships as tools, "a kind of glue that keeps individuals involved or coming", where the goal is not the relationship itself, but the strategic benefit it provides (Root 2013:17). This utilitarian view of relationships aligns with the logic of the Age of Authenticity, which promotes religious expression as one lifestyle option among many and encourages spiritualities that serve the self (Taylor 2007:484).

Contrary to this, the waiting pastor participates in relationships without pretence or hidden agendas, making room for authentic encounter. This kind of presence, person meeting person without manipulation, requires a relinquishing of control and an openness to the unpredictable work of grace (Root 2007:15). It is not a passive stance but one of attentiveness, alert to the possibility that God might be present in the shared life between

persons. Indeed, relationships themselves become the space in which the divine and human may intersect (Root 2013:160).

Such a practice of relational waiting functions as a quiet theological protest against cultural norms that prize autonomy, optimisation, and performance. Instead of curating relationships for utility, the pastor inhabits them as holy ground, spaces where divine presence might break through in trust, reverence, and love. As McCarroll (2013:205) puts it, these are the qualities through which hope is opened and nourished.[17]

To wait in relationships, then, is to embrace community not as a program or technique but as a gift. It is to welcome Christ's presence not through effort, but through openness. And it is to trust that transformation comes not from persuasion or strategy, but from the sacred event of person meeting person under the gracious sign of divine encounter.

6. Conclusion

The crisis facing pastors today is not merely institutional or psychological; it is deeply theological. When divine action is no longer anticipated or seen as an impossibility, the pastor becomes either a performer or a relic. But when the pastor dares to believe that God still acts, even in hidden, slow, and ordinary ways, a different vocation emerges.

This article has traced the historical, cultural, and theological shifts that have led to the current fragmentation of pastoral identity. It has argued that the answer to this crisis is not found in greater relevance, but in greater faithfulness; not in innovation, but in trust. The image of the waiting pastor, developed here as a theological alternative, offers a way forward: a vocation shaped not by control, but by attentiveness; not by performance, but by presence.

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17 Importantly, these sacred relational spaces cannot be engineered. They are not the result of strategic brilliance but of spiritual attentiveness. While pastors cannot manufacture encounters with God, they are called to curate spaces in which such encounters might unfold, holding them gently and faithfully as possibilities shaped by the Spirit (Root 2013:163). In this way, waiting becomes an active discipline, a form of witness to God's slow and transformative work in the lives of others.

In a disenchanted world, the most radical thing a pastor can do may be to wait, to believe that the living God still speaks, still moves, and still gathers a people. And in that waiting, ministry is not lost, but reborn.

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