

Healing the Hidden Wounds: Pastoral Care for Families Broken by Myanmar's Military Coup

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Introduction

Myanmar is one of the world's richest countries in terms of natural resources and culture, but it is also a poor country that has suffered from various oppressions and disasters under a military dictatorship for more than 70 years. It gained independence from Britain in 1946 and initially was ruled democratically. However, General Ne Win seized power in 1962, and 26 years later, his government caused an economic collapse. Then, in 1988, a student uprising broke out, which the military brutally suppressed, as it seized power again. Since 2010, the military has held nationwide elections under the guise of reform, changing its rule to a civilian-led multi-party democracy. In 2015, the party led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi won two consecutive elections. But on February 1, 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing launched a military coup, seizing power for a third time. At the time of this writing, it has been more than 4 years since this event. From the time of the first military coup, there has been oppression, injustice, and suffering in Myanmar, which continues to this day.

Since then, the military junta has stepped up its attacks on civilians by bombing towns from the air, destroying homes and places of worship, and seriously violating people's rights. As of March 2024, more than 18.6 million people needed humanitarian aid, over 1.6 million were forced to leave their homes, and war crimes like murder, torture, and attacks on schools and religious places were widely known to have happened. This long-lasting conflict has not only destroyed the country's property, but it has also caused terrible mental, emotional, and spiritual damage, especially to families who have been torn apart by violence, displacement, and lack of resources. Lindsay Maizland writes,

The coup has also brought economic turmoil, wiping out modest gains in poverty reduction made over the past decade. The economy shrank by nearly 20 percent in 2021. Additionally, the healthcare system has collapsed amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people are facing hunger, and tens of thousands have fled to other parts of Myanmar or across the border. Because of the coup, Myanmar has become a failing state, CFR's Joshua Kurlantzick says.¹

Notably, the junta also recklessly underinvested in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). With only 1.4% of healthcare spending allocated to mental health in 2019—already a meager \$0.05 USD per person—the post-coup government has further slashed resources, leaving nearly no systematic support for trauma survivors.² As documented by Carolina Buendia Sarmiento and her colleagues, “the junta terrorizes the country while also gutting health care,” compounding an already dire mental health emergency.³ Without an adequate formal infrastructure, the burden has shifted to grassroots networks—including churches and local pastors—who have stepped forward to meet immense emotional and spiritual needs.

In this article, I seek to show the significant gap in structured, context-sensitive pastoral care models for Myanmar's current situation, despite a significant demand for them. Families torn apart by violence and forced to move lack regular spiritual and emotional assistance. Thus, we will consider how pastors and local churches provide trauma-informed pastoral care during Myanmar's crisis, identify common emotional and spiritual wounds,

¹ Lindsay Maizland, January 31, 2022. “Myanmar's troubled history: Coups, military rule, and ethnic conflict.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>.

² United States Institute of Peace, “Addressing Myanmar's Mental Health Crisis,” accessed July 2, 2025, https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/myanmar-armys-war-against-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³ Ibid.

and explore theological and practical ways to heal and bring people back together.

Theological Reflection and Philosophy of Pastoral Care

To begin reflecting theologically on the current crisis, we will briefly consider the thoughts of five authors. They note that pastoral care is the ministry of presence, listening, guiding, and healing. At its core, it reflects the compassionate character of God, who draws near to the brokenhearted. Scripture abounds with pastoral images: God as the Good Shepherd (Ps 23), Christ as the Healer (Luke 4:18), and the Holy Spirit as the Comforter (John 14:26). In light of Myanmar's situation, the church is called to embody these pastoral roles in both word and deed.

Jeren Rowell, in *Thinking, Listening, Being*, emphasizes that pastoral care begins with deep listening—a posture of presence rather than problem-solving.⁴ Listening validates pain and opens space for the Spirit to work. Rowell asserts, “The gift of presence is often more healing than anything we say.”⁵ This principle is especially vital in Myanmar, where many families feel voiceless.

Moreover, William Willimon expands this by framing worship itself as a form of pastoral care.⁶ In worship, suffering communities remember God's faithfulness and reorient themselves around hope. In Myanmar, worship gatherings have been moments of both lament and strength, enabling families to release grief and reaffirm faith.

Furthermore, Eugene Peterson's *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* offers insight into the use of biblical texts for healing.⁷ He highlights

⁴ Jeren Rowell, *Thinking, Listening, Being: A Wesleyan Pastoral Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979).

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Lamentations and Job as resources for navigating sorrow. Teaching families to lament biblically empowers them to grieve while remaining anchored in God's presence.

Additionally, W. Phillip Keller's reflections on Psalm 23 remind us that shepherding care is both practical and spiritual.⁸ His vivid commentary on "He makes me lie down in green pastures" speaks to the need for rest, peace, and security amid chaos. For displaced families in Myanmar, Psalm 23 becomes a pastoral tool to restore trust in God's provision.

Finally, N.T. Wright's lecture *Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation* points us to eschatological hope.⁹ For Christians in Myanmar, resurrection hope provides the theological grounding for endurance and service. Healing is not only personal but communal and cosmic—it is rooted in Christ's victory over death and evil.

Myanmar-Specific Studies on Trauma and Coping

Populations living in conflict-affected areas in Myanmar experience multi-layered trauma. A qualitative study in Kachin State revealed that separation from family, exposure to death, and displacement caused sadness, depression, and hopelessness—manifesting in family breakdown, emotional distress, and sometimes suicidal ideation.¹⁰

Conflict resolution literature by Hsu Thiri Zaw highlights how prolonged ethnic violence has embedded structural trauma within

Eerdmans, 1992).

⁸ W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).

⁹ N.T. Wright, "Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation," online lecture, <https://ntwrightonline.org>. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wاتمvWVN4>

¹⁰ Catherine Lee et al., "Mental Health and Psychosocial Problems Among Conflict-Affected Children in Kachin State, Myanmar: A Qualitative Study," *Conflict and Health* 12, no. 39 (2018): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-018-0175-8>.

Myanmar's society since independence, complicating attempts at reconciliation and collective healing.¹¹ While such insights are helpful, I have found gaps in the literature. For instance, biblical models for trauma-informed pastoral care are well explored in other contexts but rarely applied specifically to Myanmar's cultural and conflict dynamics. Scant empirical research exists on the impact of pastoral care, especially among Myanmar's ethnic churches or forest-based spiritual communities. And a theological contextualization of trauma ministry that honors Myanmar's cultural narratives (e.g., oral lament traditions) is largely missing.

The literature affirms that healing in conflict contexts requires safe storytelling spaces, communal lament, Scripture-centered empathy, and trauma-informed practices. But for Myanmar's families—who face displacement, deep-seated inter-ethnic wounds, and theological disillusionment—a context-sensitive pastoral model remains undeveloped in both academic and ecclesial circles.

Meeting the Gap

To help meet the gap in a theologically contextualized model for pastoral care, I conducted interviews, while drawing on testimonies, church reports, NGO publications, and existing theological literature to understand how families experience trauma during the military crisis and how pastors minister to them. Rather than numerical data, this research focuses on lived experiences, spiritual responses, and ministry practices. I also consulted scholarly books, theological journals, and reports from humanitarian organizations (e.g., UNHCR, Free Burma Rangers, World Vision Myanmar). These sources help frame trauma and healing within a pastoral and theological lens. Of course, scripture should play a central role in interpretation. Texts such as Psalm 34:18 (“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted”), Romans 12:15 (“weep with those who weep”), and

¹¹ Hsu Thiri Zaw, “Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: The Long-Lasting Trauma of Myanmar,” *Advances in Journalism and Communication* 6, no. 4 (2018): 121–138, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2018.64010>.

Lamentations guide the theological interpretation of suffering and pastoral response.

During the interviews, respondents reported experiences of grief and trauma. For example, Pastor Yang recounted repeated airstrikes and tunnel bombings, which uprooted his family and congregation multiple times. He described his children “living amidst gunfire and bomb explosions,” feeling traumatized by the constant fear of death.¹² This comports with UN reports of 76,923 homes burned, over 2 million internally displaced individuals, and a staggering 61 % of adults with probable depression and 58 % with anxiety.¹³

Families fracture and endure socio-economic collapse in the current national situation. According to Love for Myanmar, traumatized families confront loss of breadwinners, land, and income—with rising alcohol/drug use and marital breakdowns.¹⁴ Children also lose school structure, leading to emotional distress and weakening family bonds.¹⁵ The ongoing crisis creates a spiritual void and a sense of hopelessness. Pastor Koo from Open Doors shares that many believers turn away from faith under trauma, some succumbing to alcohol, while others cling to hope through Scripture.¹⁶

¹² Simon, “No Safe Place: The Moving Story of Pastor Yang,” Open Doors, April 28, 2025, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/pastor-yang-displaced-myanmar/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹³ Carolina Buendia Sarmiento, Billy Ford, Yu Yu Htay, and Andrés Martínez, “The Myanmar Army’s War Against Mental Health and Psychosocial Support,” United States Institute of Peace, January 11, 2024, https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/myanmar-armys-war-against-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁴ Love for Myanmar Ministries, “Trauma Healing Ministry,” January 29, 2025, https://loveformyanmar.org/trauma-healing-ministry/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tim, Open Doors Team, “Christians in Myanmar in Desperate State as Military Control Brings Physical and Emotional Turmoil,” Open Doors UK, August 22, 2022, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/christians-myanmar->

Christian families—already a vulnerable minority—report spiritual despair, feeling targeted and abandoned by a powerful God when nurseries, homes, and churches are destroyed.

Stories of Resilience

However, some people find sources of hope. Although forced into the forests, Pastor Yang ministers to people in makeshift gatherings, comforting parents and children, while coping with constant fear. He emphasizes the need for prayer, lullabies, and Scripture under fire. The ministry challenges he faces include a lack of counseling training and an inability to offer security, leaving spiritual wounds partially unaddressed.¹⁷

The Karen pastor, Saw Paul, testified about his mother, who witnessed her husband’s murder, overcame grief through forgiveness, and raised him in love. This resilient pastoral model—“fighting with love, not hate”—demonstrates the deep pastoral potential of family-led spiritual care.¹⁸

Ministers in Myanmar, like Pastor Yang, embody a trauma-informed care: being present, listening, and facilitating solidarity in temporary “churches” under fire.

Scripture-Centered Healing

One of the most powerful tools in pastoral care amid crisis is Scripture itself. In Myanmar’s context—where families face profound grief, anxiety,

desperation/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁷ Simon, “No Safe Place: The Moving Story of Pastor Yang,” *Open Doors*, April 28, 2025, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/pastor-yang-displaced-myanmar/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁸ Saw Eh Kelu, “Motherhood in the Conflict Zones of Burma,” *Free Burma Rangers*, May 12, 2019, https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2019/05/12/motherhood-conflict-zones-burma/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

and disorientation—pastors and caregivers turn to the Bible not only as theological truth, but as a living source of emotional and spiritual healing. The Word of God offers language for pain, divine solidarity in suffering, and enduring hope. The Psalmist wrote, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18, ESV). This verse has become a foundational pastoral promise for many in Myanmar who feel abandoned or forgotten. When a family member is killed or disappears, survivors often feel as if no one sees or understands their suffering. This Scripture offers spiritual proximity—assurance that God is not far off, but deeply present in their pain.

In trauma care, presence is a key concept. As trauma disconnects individuals from themselves and others, the sense that God draws near becomes a restorative anchor. For pastoral caregivers, reading Psalm 34:18 in prayer, during funerals, or in house visits helps reframe suffering not as divine punishment but as a space where God actively intervenes with comfort and salvation.

Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15, ESV). In Myanmar’s displaced communities, where trauma is often carried in silence, weeping with others becomes sacramental. It dignifies their pain and creates space for communal healing. Local pastors have found that simply sitting beside grieving families, reading this verse, and crying together offers more healing than sermons or explanations.

Such shared mourning also counters cultural stigmas around expressing emotion, especially for men or community leaders. It models vulnerability as godly rather than shameful. When Scripture invites weeping, the church validates grief as holy, not weak. For we strive together, as believers. The apostle Paul reminds us about spiritual warfare: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12, ESV). In trauma ministry, survivors often ask, “Why is this happening?” or “Where is God?” While theological answers are complex, this passage allows pastors to name the spiritual dimension of

oppression and trauma without overspiritualizing the violence.

Myanmar's conflict is not only political—it carries demonic undertones of injustice, hatred, and dehumanization. Ephesians 6:12 helps caregivers interpret trauma as part of a cosmic struggle in which Christ has already triumphed. This perspective empowers Christians to respond not only with protest or survival, but with spiritual armor—truth, righteousness, faith, and the Word of God (Eph 6:13–17).

Using this passage, pastors teach families that trauma is not the final word. It is a battlefield where prayer, Scripture, and the community of faith are weapons of resistance and restoration.

Challenges

Those who seek to provide pastoral care in Myanmar today face challenges. Many pastors lack counseling or trauma education; their responses are compassionate but lack structured frameworks beyond prayer and presence. They also face security constraints. Ongoing danger severely limits access to displaced communities. Pastor Yang and others remain on the move, hampering consistent pastoral relationships.¹⁹ As well, cultural stigma and spiritual misunderstanding continue to complicate the situation. Mental health stigmas make psychosocial aid challenging. However, integrating services into trusted church infrastructure—such as groups and prayer—helps reduce stigma. The need remains for a theological curriculum and trauma-informed models adapted for Myanmar's ethnic diversity, along with training resources, to provide an adequate pastoral response.

A Theological Reflection

Lament, as a form of collective grief, is central to emotional and spiritual healing. Pastoral groups and chapel services validate people's pain, while

¹⁹ Simon, "No Safe Place: The Moving Story of Pastor Yang," *Open Doors*, April 28, 2025, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/pastor-yang-displaced-myanmar/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

channeling hope through scripture (e.g., Psalm 6 and Lamentations). Pastoral experience is buttressed by trauma counselors, who affirm that lament builds resilience. At the same time, Ephesians 6:12 frames trauma as a spiritual struggle. Pastoral care becomes spiritual warfare, wherein prayer, scripture, and community action serve as armor for sufferers. Again, Saw Paul's mother models how forgiveness confronts systemic violence. This echoes global models and scripture (e.g., Matt 5:44), which encourage reconciliation when safe.²⁰ Finally, the FBR's (i.e., Free Burma Rangers) provision of medical aid, counseling, child protection, and education reflects a Wesleyan theology of "whole person" care rooted in incarnational compassion (Jesus healing both body and soul). To strengthen resilience, the church must intentionally train leaders in trauma theology, develop integrated medical/psychosocial ministries, adapt trauma-healing curricula to Myanmar's diverse ethnic contexts, and advocate for peace as part of pastoral mission.

Conclusion

The ongoing military conflict in Myanmar has devastated not only political and social systems but also families, churches, and communities. The trauma caused by violence, displacement, and family separation has left deep emotional and spiritual wounds. Families grieve lost loved ones, struggle with broken relationships, and face an uncertain future, often without formal psychological or governmental support. In this context, the church has emerged as one of the few remaining institutions offering hope and healing.

However, local pastors, though often untrained in clinical counseling, are ministering faithfully in crisis situations—hiding with displaced believers in forests, conducting trauma healing workshops, offering prayer

²⁰ Saw Eh Kelu, "Motherhood in the Conflict Zones of Burma," Free Burma Rangers, May 12, 2019, https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2019/05/12/motherhood-conflict-zones-burma/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

and presence, and sharing Scripture to comfort the brokenhearted. Through stories like Pastor Yang and the efforts of the Free Burma Rangers, we see how even simple acts of pastoral care—like listening, lamenting together, or praying Scripture—can help wounded families begin a journey toward healing.

Trauma-informed pastoral care grounded in Scripture affirms that God is near to the brokenhearted (Ps 34:18) and that the body of Christ is called to “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). Pastoral responses in Myanmar echo these truths, functioning as spiritual lifelines amid physical and psychological devastation. Furthermore, the integration of holistic care—emotional, spiritual, and physical—reflects a Wesleyan vision of salvation that embraces healing for the whole person.

However, the urgent need for structured pastoral training remains. Many pastors lack resources, contextual theological frameworks, and support systems to meet the growing psychological needs of war-affected families. Without intentional development, families’ long-term spiritual and emotional health will remain fragile. To move forward, churches and theological institutions in Myanmar and abroad must partner to train leaders in trauma theology and pastoral counseling. They should develop culturally sensitive healing ministries that encourage communal lament and forgiveness practices, while equipping churches to be places of emotional safety and spiritual resilience.

In conclusion, I believe that the hidden wounds caused by Myanmar’s military crisis require not only humanitarian aid but also faithful, Spirit-led pastoral care. The church, when rooted in Scripture, shaped by compassion, and equipped for trauma-informed ministry, can offer a powerful witness to Christ’s healing love. It can become not only a shelter for broken families, but a sign of the resurrection hope that transforms even the deepest suffering into life.

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