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UNDERSTANDINGS OF PASTOR SUICIDE: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

COMPREENSÕES SOBRE O SUICÍDIO DE PASTORES: UMA REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA

COMPRENSIONES DEL SUICIDIO PASTORAL: UNA REVISIÓN INTEGRADORA

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Abstract

Understanding pastoral suicide requires a perspective that integrates institutional pressures, internal conflicts, and the existential dimensions of the ministerial exercise. The objective of this study was to examine the scientific production on suicide among pastors through an integrative review. The methodology, grounded in the PRISMA protocol, involved searching six databases (SciELO, BVS, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO), resulting in a final corpus of four articles. The analysis organized the data into thematic axes to problematize suicide within the pastoral ministry. The discussion was based on a dialogue between psychology, phenomenology, sociology of religion, and pastoral care literature. The results indicate that the pastoral exercise is a mode of being marked by loneliness, overload, and silencing. Religion proves to be ambivalent, acting as a risk factor by fostering guilt and stigma, or as protection by offering new meanings after a crisis. The study concludes with the need for an "ethic of care for the caregiver," with supervision spaces and support networks. Limitations include the predominance of Anglophone contexts, the absence of gender discussions, and the incipiency of the field, which restricts the generalization of findings to the Brazilian scenario.

Keywords: Suicide. Pastor. Religious Leaders. Pastoral Care. Suicide Prevention.

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Resumo

A compreensão do suicídio de pastores exige um olhar que integre pressões institucionais, conflitos internos e dimensões existenciais do exercício ministerial. O objetivo deste estudo foi examinar a produção científica sobre o suicídio entre pastores por meio de uma revisão integrativa. A metodologia, fundamentada no protocolo PRISMA, envolveu a busca em seis bases de dados (SciELO, BVS, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science e PsycINFO), resultando em um corpus final de quatro artigos. A análise organizou os dados em eixos temáticos para problematizar o suicídio no ministério pastoral. A discussão foi fundamentada no diálogo entre psicologia, fenomenologia, sociologia da religião e literatura de cuidado pastoral. Os resultados indicam que o exercício pastoral é um modo de ser marcado por solidão, sobrecarga e silenciamento. A religião revela-se ambivalente, atuando como fator de risco ao fomentar culpa e estigma, ou como proteção ao oferecer novos sentidos após a crise. Conclui-se pela necessidade de uma ética de "cuidado do cuidador", com espaços de supervisão e redes de suporte. As limitações do estudo incluem a predominância de contextos anglófonos, a ausência de discussões sobre gênero e a incipiência do campo, o que restringe a generalização dos achados para o cenário brasileiro.

Palavras-Chave: Suicídio, Pastores, Líderes Religiosos, Cuidado Pastoral, Prevenção do Suicídio.

Resumen

Comprender el suicidio pastoral requiere una perspectiva que integre las presiones institucionales, los conflictos internos y las dimensiones existenciales de la práctica ministerial. El objetivo de este estudio fue examinar la producción científica sobre el suicidio entre pastores mediante una revisión integradora. La metodología, basada en el protocolo PRISMA, implicó la búsqueda en seis bases de datos (SciELO, BVS, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science y PsycINFO), resultando en un corpus final de cuatro artículos. El análisis organizó los datos en ejes temáticos para problematizar el suicidio en el ministerio pastoral. La discusión se basó en un diálogo entre la psicología, la fenomenología, la sociología de la religión y la literatura sobre atención pastoral. Los resultados indican que la práctica pastoral es una forma de estar marcado por la soledad, la sobrecarga y el silencio. La religión se revela ambivalente, actuando como factor de riesgo al fomentar la culpa y el estigma, o como protección al ofrecer nuevos significados después de la crisis. La conclusión es que es necesaria una ética de "cuidado del cuidador", con espacios para la supervisión y redes de apoyo. Las limitaciones del estudio incluyen el predominio de contextos anglófonos, la ausencia de análisis de género y la naturaleza incipiente del campo, lo que restringe la generalización de los hallazgos al contexto brasileño.

Palabras clave: Suicidio, Pastores, Líderes religiosos, Atención pastoral, Prevención del suicidio.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine, through an integrative review using the PRISMA methodology, the scientific production on suicide among pastors and Christian religious leaders, seeking to understand the main approaches to the topic, the trends in what is being discussed, and possible gaps in the literature on pastor suicide. The investigation considers not only the social aspects but also the existential elements that permeate the pastoral experience, such as internal

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conflicts, isolation, overload, and lack of support, which can lead to severe psychological suffering and, in extreme situations, to suicide.

Suicide is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a serious public health problem, with more than 700,000 deaths annually globally (BRAZIL, 2021). In Brazil, the phenomenon reveals alarming statistics. Between 2010 and 2019, 112,230 deaths were recorded, representing a 43% increase in the period and a significantly higher prevalence among men (BRAZIL, 2021). Although universal, the understanding of suicide is modulated by historical context. Veneu (1994) and Barbagli (2019) highlight that the very notion of "suicide" is a construct of modernity, interpreted through theological, legal, or medical prisms depending on the era.

Traditionally, Durkheim's (2000) sociological analysis prevails as a reference, situating suicide as a social fact linked to integration and regulation. However, this structural reading has limitations, as Barbagli (2019) points out, by reducing individual experience to a mechanical reflection of social forces, neglecting subjective and existential elements. This critique is crucial when investigating religious leaders, whose suffering is not explained solely by social dysregulation, but also by internal conflicts and institutional pressures from the ministry.

In a pastoral context, this perspective requires situating the experience within its historical and symbolic horizon. The Christian tradition has historically linked voluntary death to sin and condemnation (Minois, 1998; Barbagli, 2019; Alvarez, 1999), generating a legacy of silence and taboo. Paradoxically, the contemporary scenario imposes high-performance expectations that favor burnout, loneliness, and exhaustion (César, 2000; Shelley, 2018; Carneiro, 2024). In this context, understanding suicide implies accepting the decision and the reasons that support it without reducing the experience to psychopathological labels, sins, or moral judgments, describing "what is at stake" when death is considered as a possibility and how the phenomenon appears in the articulation between the surrounding, shared, and one's own world (Feijoo, 2019).

It should also be noted that the mental health of pastors presents a specific vulnerability. These leaders accumulate spiritual and institutional responsibilities, frequently acting as agents of prevention and care in crisis situations, but are rarely recognized as individuals who also need support. The absence of spaces for listening and emotional overload, coupled with the expectation of exemplary behavior and resilience, contribute to a scenario in which their suffering tends to be made invisible.

METHODOLOGY

This study is configured as an integrative literature review, synthesizing evidence from qualitative and quantitative studies on the subject, offering a comprehensive view of the field and allowing the identification of gaps and trends (Hassunuma et al., 2024; Souza, Silva and Carvalho, 2010). Its objective was to examine, through an integrative review, the scientific production on suicide among

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pastors, seeking to understand the main approaches to the topic, the trends in what was being discussed, and possible gaps in the literature on pastor suicide.

The methodological approach was organized based on principles adapted from the PRISMA protocol (Page et al., 2022) and developed in six interconnected steps: (1) formulation of the research question; (2) identification of studies in relevant databases and sources; (3) initial screening through reading titles and abstracts; (4) application of eligibility criteria; (5) full reading of selected texts; and (6) analysis and interpretative synthesis of the data.

As a first step, the research question was developed: "What has the scientific literature produced on pastor suicide?". This formulation sought to explore theoretical, empirical, and practical approaches to the topic, allowing for a broad analysis of related academic productions. The second and third steps consisted of identifying potential research material, selecting and screening it using the *Rayyan application* . Then, the eligibility criteria for the studies were applied, and the selected works were read in full.

The search was conducted between December 2024 and April 2025 in the following databases: SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online); BVS (Virtual Health Library); LILACS (Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences); PubMed/MEDLINE (Public Medical Literature/MEDLINE - Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online), SCOPUS, Web of Science, and PsycINFO/APA (American Psychological Association). The choice of these databases considered the scope and scientific relevance of each to the topic of mental health and suicidology. Controlled descriptors (DeCS/MeSH and APA) and Boolean operators (AND and OR) were used to encompass the topic. The command line used was: “suicide” AND (“pastor” OR “religious leader” OR “priest”) and “suicide” AND (“pastor” OR “religious leader” OR “priest”), in order to guarantee the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the results.

The inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance of the studies analyzed. Articles were selected that: (1) presented suicide (ideation, attempt, or completed act) as the main object of investigation or central category of analysis, directly linking it to the particularities of Christian pastoral ministry; (2) were published between 2015 and 2025; (3) were available in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; (4) were systematic reviews, empirical studies, theoretical articles, or case studies on the topic; (5) were studies available in full text and/or with available abstracts; and (6) were freely accessible.

The exclusion criteria used were: (1) duplicate articles in different databases; (2) works that addressed suicide in a generic way, without a specific focus on pastors and/or Christian religious leaders; (4) research on other religions that did not include the context of Christianity; (5) studies unavailable in full text in a free and open access format; and (6) editorials, opinions or other publications not peer-reviewed.

The selection process was conducted by the principal investigator, who was responsible for the initial search and screening. To ensure transparency and reduce selection bias, the shortlisted studies were reviewed and validated by a second researcher (supervisor), who confirmed the articles' suitability to the guiding question and eligibility criteria.

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The sixth stage, analysis and interpretative synthesis of the data, was carried out through the complete reading, note-taking, and synthesis of the four selected articles. The analysis consisted of articulating the data into thematic axes, allowing for the problematization of the phenomenon of suicide in the exercise of pastoral ministry.

The construction of the thematic axes occurred from the identification of recurring core meanings in the texts, grouping the convergences of content that answered the guiding question. These axes were named based on the articulation between the empirical findings and the adopted theoretical framework, resulting in categories that synthesize the central dimensions of the phenomenon. The organization followed a progressive logic that starts from the operational reality and risks of professional practice (Pastoral Office and Suicide Risk) to the analysis of the symbolic and spiritual dimension (The Sacred as Risk and Protection), ending with a critical reflection on the current state of scientific production (Research Limitations).

To support the discussion, scientific literature from psychology, phenomenology, sociology of religion, and pastoral care literature was used. In this way, the integration of these perspectives allows for a path to understanding vulnerabilities and possibilities for care in the ministerial context.

RESULTS

Initially, 188 articles were identified that, at first glance, appeared to be related to the research topic. After reading the titles and abstracts, and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, this number was reduced: 35 articles were eliminated due to duplication; 111 articles were excluded for not directly addressing the investigated topic; 12 were excluded for addressing religions other than Christianity; 19 for discussing pastors as caregivers in suicide cases; 6 for being available only upon payment, preventing access to the full content; and 1 article could not be located.

Thus, the integrative review was conducted with a final corpus composed of 4 articles. To present the methodological approach, a flowchart with the search results was constructed according to the PRISMA methodology criteria (Page et al., 2022):

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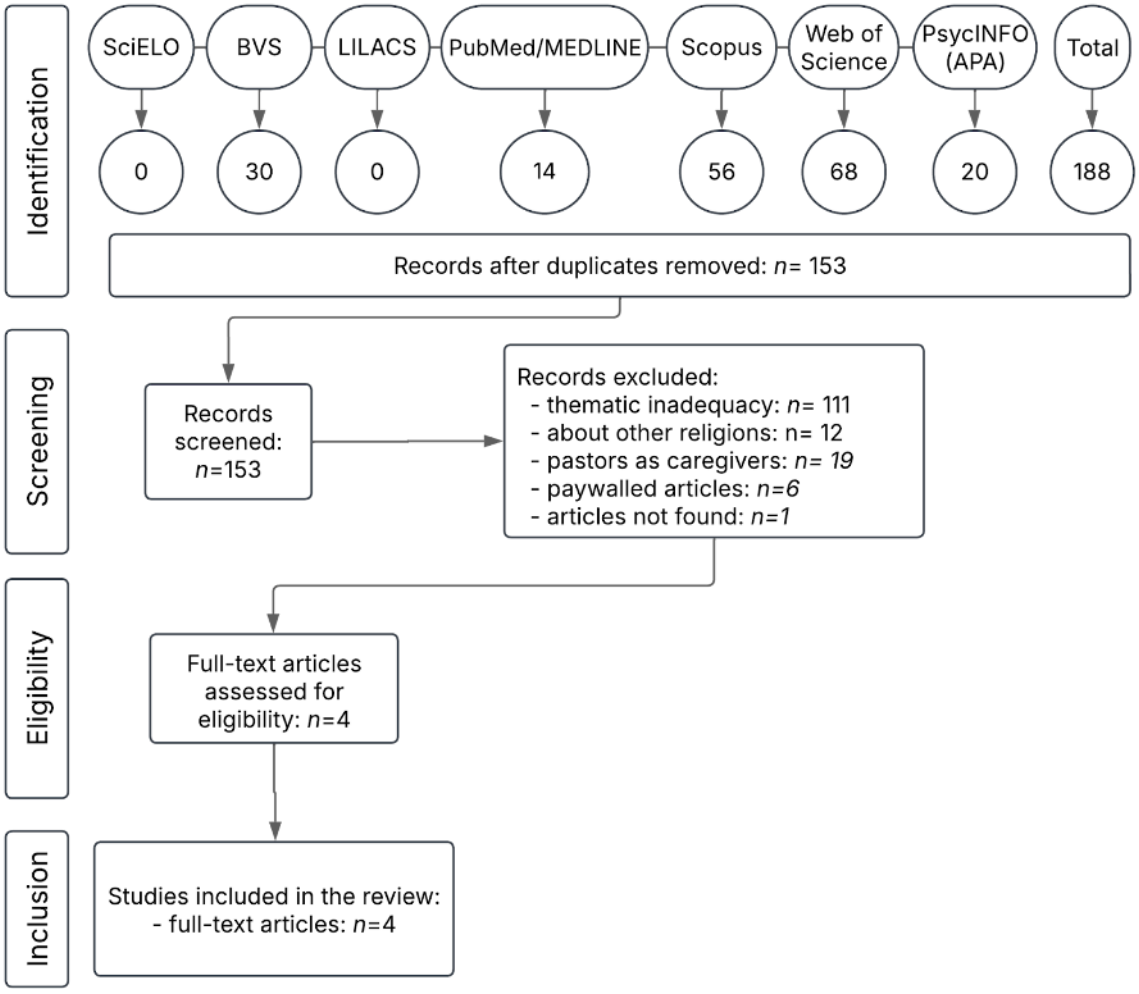
Figure 1 - Prisma Flowchart



Note: SciELO (*Scientific Electronic Library Online*); BVS (Virtual Health Library); LILACS (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature); PubMed/MEDLINE (*Public Medical Literature/MEDLINE - Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online*); APA (*American Psychological Association*).

Source - Created by the authors (2026)

Following the screening and eligibility process, four articles were selected for directly discussing suicide in the context of pastoral ministry. These works present geographical diversity, with research conducted in the United States, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, and vary in their approaches from quantitative and qualitative perspectives to theological reflections. A synthesis of these materials, detailing titles, authors and year of publication, journals of publication, objectives and methods, and main findings and conclusions, is organized in Table 1 - Characterization of the included studies, providing the basis for the thematic discussions in this article.

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Table 1 - Characterization of the included studies

ARTICLE 01	
Title	"Maybe Jesus Was Suicidal Too": A United Church of Christ Pastor Reflects on His Suicide Attempt.
Author and Year of Publication	Elizabeth Ryan Hall, 2021.
Publication Periodical	Religions.
Objective and Method	**Objective:** To investigate the intimate experiences of religion and spirituality lived by suicidal individuals, focusing on when, how, and why these spheres take on constructive or destructive forms in relation to suicide. **Method:** A qualitative study (mixing phenomenological and narrative styles) conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight survivors of suicide attempts in the USA, highlighting the account of a pastor.
Main Findings and Conclusions	The research revealed that religion and spirituality served as relief for suicidal ideation only *after* attempts. Before the attempts, religious factors aggravated or induced suicidal desires, frequently due to moralism, feelings of alienation, institutional exclusion, and pressures to conform. During the suicide attempt itself, religion had no impact on the person's cognitive process (irrelevant/inconsequential role). The author concludes by recommending that institutions combat the strong stigma surrounding the topic and that mental health professionals begin to address spirituality integratively in the care of suicidal patients.
ARTICLE 02	
Title	Reflection on the leadership practice of Saul as a failure of leadership for church pastors.
Author and Year of Publication	D. Ming, 2022
Publication Periodical	Acta Theologica.
Objective and Method	**Objective** : To describe King Saul's failure in leading the nation of Israel, using it as a reflection and proposing a constructive and transformational leadership model for contemporary pastors. **Method** : A descriptive qualitative approach based on a literature review and theological-literary analysis of the biblical narrative of Saul.
Main Findings and Conclusions	The study points out that Saul's leadership failed due to a shift in focus and motivation, where he stopped prioritizing God and started focusing on himself, acting selfishly, inconsistently, and breaking promises in pursuit of self-preservation and popularity. The author concludes by recommending a transformational leadership model called VIP for current pastors.
ARTICLE 03	
Title	Pentecostal leadership disputes in Zimbabwe: A pastoral challenge.
Author and	Zephania Mundhluri and Maake J. Masango, 2024.

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Year of Publication	
Publication Periodical	HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies.
Objective and Method	**Objective** : To examine the ramifications of a senior leadership dispute in the *Apostolic Faith Mission* (AFM) church, focusing on the serious impacts and traumas generated in junior pastors, aiming to establish a support structure for these individuals. **Method** : Qualitative research design with purposive sampling and face-to-face interviews ("one-on-one") applied to 12 junior pastors.
Main Findings and Conclusions	Prolonged power struggles and disputes over church assets at the highest levels caused enormous stress and fear among junior pastors, who felt intimidated and caught in the crossfire. The internalization of this profound sense of betrayal, isolation, and trauma compromises their ability to lead, leading to abandonment of the profession and increasing the risks of depression and suicide. The authors conclude that the church should adopt alternative dispute resolution (ADR) techniques and incorporate pastoral counseling models (such as "positive deconstruction" narrative therapy) to prioritize the emotional and spiritual healing of wounded leaders.
ARTICLE 04	
Title	A Study on Pastors and Suicide and COVID-19: How to Care for Suicidal Pastors.
Author and Year of Publication	Zihan Yang, Anthony Rando and Karen Mason, 2025.
Publication Periodical	Pastoral Psychology.
Objective and Method	**Objective** : To investigate the factors that contribute to suicidal ideation among pastors and to evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious life and suicidal ideation in this population. **Method** : An online *survey* with quantitative (regression) and qualitative thematic analysis, answered by 158 seminarians (seminary students), measuring suicidal behavior and its associated variables.
Main Findings and Conclusions	The study found that seminarians are at high risk, with two-thirds (66.4%) reporting suicidal ideation or attempts at some point in their lives. Feeling like a burden to others (perceived burdensomeness) and the constant strain of providing emotional support to members (often without receiving it in return) increase the likelihood of mental illness and suicide. The pandemic negatively impacted the relationship with God and the faith community, which correlated with an increase in suicidal behaviors during that period. The conclusion highlights the real risk in leadership and advises pastors to first take care of their mental health and focus on intimacy with God before devoting themselves solely to ministry.

Source - Created by the authors (2026)

The four selected articles present different levels of evidence and methodological adequacy. The study by Yang, Rando, and Mason (2025) stands

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out for its statistical rigor and sample size (n=158), offering strong quantitative evidence, although limited to the North American context. The works by Hall (2021) and Mundhluri and Masango (2024) have a qualitative-phenomenological character, providing depth on subjective experience, but with results that do not allow statistical generalization because they focus on specific contexts (an individual case and the Zimbabwean scenario, respectively). Finally, Ming's (2022) reflection, although theoretical, is based on rigorous documentary analysis, being essential for the symbolic understanding of the phenomenon, despite not having direct empirical data from contemporary pastors.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion is organized into thematic axes that articulate the data found with the literature of psychology, phenomenology, sociology of religion, and pastoral care. The first axis, "Pastoral Office and Suicide Risk," analyzes how pressures for productivity and the pursuit of spiritual perfection isolate the leader in their vulnerability. Following this, the axis "The Sacred as Risk and Protection" discusses the ambivalence of the religious phenomenon as a resource for support or a source of stigma and theological guilt.

Finally, the "Limitations of the Research" are presented, considering the predominance of international studies and the need to problematize gender disparities in the analyzed data. This integration of perspectives seeks to offer a synthesis of the vulnerabilities faced by pastors and the possibilities for care in the ministerial context.

Pastoral ministry and the risk of suicide.

The practice of pastoral leadership appears in the four studies analyzed as a field deeply permeated by psychic and spiritual suffering, often rendered invisible and unrecognized by religious communities. The function of guiding, caring for, and spiritually representing a group can, paradoxically, become a source of pain and exhaustion, leading some leaders to states of emotional collapse and even to suicidal ideation or attempts.

In their investigation into leadership disputes in the Apostolic Church of Missionary Faith in Zimbabwe, Mundhluri and Masango (2024) demonstrate that hierarchical and institutional conflicts produce profound trauma in junior pastors, who, deprived of support and under political and spiritual pressures, internalize suffering to the point of despair and, in some cases, commit suicide.

The authors emphasize that institutional instability and struggles over property and legitimacy create a climate of suspicion and anguish, in which accumulated trauma evolves into burnout and severe depression. This scenario not only victimizes the individual but also generates a devastating impact on the institution itself and its capacity to assist the faithful (Mundhluri and Masango, 2024).

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This dynamic reveals how the shared world of the institution, which should support the exercise of vocation, collapses in the face of the reality of power struggles. It becomes clear that the junior pastor sees his possibilities reduced to fear and isolation, transforming the sacred office into a horizon of anguish. This represents a contradiction in relation to the role of the pastoral office in the formation of new leaders. In this context, suicide can be understood as an extreme response to an existence that seems to have lost its capacity to project meaning within an ecclesial structure that prioritizes institutional performance to the detriment of caring for the caregiver.

The absence of safe spaces for emotional expression and the authoritarianism of ecclesiastical structures intensify the suffering and isolation of these leaders. Similarly, Hall (2021) describes religious burden and the fear of moral judgment as elements that exacerbate the subjective suffering of pastors. In his account of Jeremy and in the analysis of other suicide attempt survivors, the author shows how the expectation of spiritual perfection, in which the pastor must always have answers and never falter, leads to theological guilt and the inability to ask for help. The suicide attempt emerges, in this context, as a silent cry against the imposition of a spirituality that leaves no room for the human and the vulnerable.

This subjective reality is reflected in data showing the magnitude of the problem at the beginning of one's career. Yang, Rando, and Mason (2025), when discussing the context of pastoral formation, point to high rates of suicidal ideation among those in pastoral formation. The data reveal that 66.4% of seminarians have thought about or attempted suicide at some point in their lives. The risk increases as the perception of being a burden grows, along with social isolation and the weight of carrying the emotional responsibility for the congregation without receiving adequate support in return.

Similarly, when observing the institutions to which these pastors belong, Mundhluri and Masango (2024) argue that leadership conflicts and internal instability drastically affect the mental health of junior pastors. The trauma generated by political disputes and legitimacy creates an environment of fear and suspicion that can lead to burnout, depression, and even suicide. For the authors, the abandonment of these leaders motivated by exhaustion directly compromises the mission of the church and service to the community.

It is important to point out that this scenario, which is common to many pastors, demonstrates that this mental health crisis in pastoral ministry is not an individual failing, but a complex tangle of events in various spheres of their personal and professional lives. Unfortunately, when the church becomes a political battleground, the pastor ceases to be seen as a person and becomes a pawn in a power struggle. This emptying of the leader's humanity, coupled with the silence imposed by the hierarchy, can make suicide a way of overcoming this reality.

What these points raise is whether the current configuration of professional practice is not, in itself, becoming a risk factor for suicide. To advance this reflection, it is necessary to turn to pastoral literature and the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the profession beyond technique. From this perspective, pastoral work is understood as a way of being-in-the-world traversed by a historical, affective, and institutional facticity that conditions possibilities and

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limits (Heidegger, 2014). In this perspective, being a pastor is not reduced to the exercise of a function or the execution of rites, but constitutes a fulfilling "happening." It is an existential experience in which the care of oneself and others is sustained by the tension between hope and the concrete demands of the historical present.

The pastoral office, biblically instituted and historically continued, is understood as *a vocatio* and not merely an occupation, conferring specific responsibilities upon the minister (Trull and Carter, 2004). In the New Testament, the “minister” is defined less by technical skill and more by mission and devotion, comprising interconnected functions such as elder (recognized maturity) and bishop/overseer (care and supervision of the church), frequently exercised by the same person in the Early Church (Piper, 2002).

The term pastor refers to the responsibility of shepherding the flock, with an emphasis on care, nourishment, and protection, traditionally described as the care of souls (Lopes, 2013; Lopes, 2014). Ministerial identity is also delineated by the images of ambassador and servant, guiding pastoral authority through humility, responsibility, and commitment to the well-being of the flock. Thus, ecclesiastical leadership integrates prudent governance, spiritual maturity, and sensitive shepherding, articulating titles, functions, and character within a single vocational profile (Trull and Carter, 2004; Lopes, 2013, 2014; Piper, 2012, 2012; Tripp, 2014).

Literature on healthy pastoral ministry converges on the understanding that essential activities sustain the integrity of the office and preserve vocational identity, with prayer as a central inner disposition and public practice of care. New Testament testimony associates continuous dedication to prayer with the service of the Word, also recommending the mobilization of intercessors and leading the community to a devotional life (Peterson, 2006; Holdt, 2004; Ascol, 2004). Another structuring axis is the ministry of the Word and doctrinal teaching, which require continuous study, responsible handling of the biblical text, and a commitment to proclaiming God's counsel and correcting distortions, integrating faithful exposition and exemplary life (Duncan, 2004; Ascol, 2004; Peterson, 2006).

When addressing the moral responsibility of the pastor, the authors emphasize that ministerial validity and effectiveness are linked to character and personal life, with holiness as the practical foundation of service, demanding integrity, maturity, and visible irreproachability, sustained by spiritual discipline, ethical vigilance, and public accountability (Lopes, 2013; Mbewe, 2004; Ascol, 2004).

The articles, when compared with ecclesiastical literature, reveal a gap between lived practice and expectations regarding pastoral life. Han's (2017) thought explains how this existence is shaped by a performance that ignores the healthy ministry advocated by tradition. Captured by success standards, ministerial activity demands constant productivity and positive affect, even in the face of conflict and suffering.

In the performance society, the individual is shaped as an "entrepreneur of oneself," and continuous happiness becomes a functional requirement, which renders suffering invisible and turns life into a spectacle. When it is no longer possible to sustain this regime, performance collapses into depression and burnout,

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an expression of an internalized war against the imperative of performance (Han, 2017).

In this context, profiles of "self-employed pastors" exacerbate a pastoral posture that strains, and sometimes distorts, the biblical and ethical ministerial references regarding the ministry. The discrepancy between ideal and experience evidenced can become a risky condition, due to the combination of overload, isolation, and silencing. The articles analyzed converge in showing the complexity of this profession in which high institutional expectations, leadership conflicts, and a deficit of formative and emotional support create an environment conducive to burnout and suicidal vulnerability.

There is a great distance between pastors who "perform" their pastoral ministry and those who live it as a "*vocation*" , an existential reality. In the first case, adherence to institutional expectations and visibility metrics prevails, modulating gestures, speeches, and leadership styles, producing a "pastoral appearance" that responds to demands for efficiency, charisma, and success. In the second, the pastoral ministry is realized as a way of being that integrates, as seen, self-care and care for others, traversing the journey according to one's calling and vocation. Performance tends to reduce ministry to roles and protocols that offer quick recognition but weaken the rooting of meaning.

When the practice of leadership shifts from a focus on God (*vocatio*) to personal interest, as evidenced in the failure of Saul (Ming, 2022), who prioritized self-glorification and built a monument to himself, this results in a performative leadership built on selfishness, greed, and disobedience to doctrine and tradition, which affected him and all his followers.

In conflict contexts, such as in Zimbabwe (Mundhluri and Masango, 2024), this performance by senior leaders became traumatic for other leaders who depend on their leadership. As the authors point out, using an African proverb to metaphorically describe it: "When elephants fight, the grass suffers" (p. 1), representing the trauma and injury experienced by junior pastors, who felt isolated, unsupported, crushed, and questioning their purpose.

This instability, generated by performative logic, can lead to situations of trauma and high stress, as observed among junior pastors, potentially resulting in serious consequences such as burnout, depression, and, in some cases, contributing to suicide.

Performing the role of pastor can produce destructive effects. Conversely, ecclesiastical literature indicates that pastoral authority is not performative, but is confirmed in a way of living a vocation. Being an example of conduct, love, faith, and purity is not something that can be performed all the time in a lifetime, because the minister's life communicates more powerfully than his sermons (Lopes, 2013; Lopes, 2014; Trull and Carter, 2004; Ascol, 2004). Daily exemplarity nurtures trust, sustains teaching, and strengthens community care, integrating message and practice for the benefit of the flock and the ecclesiastical mission. It is a way of being-in-the-world that is not reduced to performance, but is rooted in integrity and existential coherence.

The Sacred as Risk and Protection.

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The four articles show that religion, religiosity, spirituality, and faith act in ambivalent ways within the experience of pastors' suicide. They can protect (by offering meaning, belonging, and coping resources) or exacerbate the risk (by producing guilt, stigma, and silence). These dimensions interfere with ideation, help-seeking, and recovery, varying according to the context and the pastor's lived experience.

Religious life unfolds within a horizon where religion, spirituality, and faith organize the meanings of existence and action. In Heidegger's view (2014), theology starts from a *positum*, an original given that the discipline does not question: Christ-likeness. This given structures the horizon of the believer and informs religiosity by guiding daily choices and renunciations.

Thus, the experience of faith is not merely a set of isolated rites or beliefs, but an event in which life is sustained by hope in the historical present. This foundation allows one to inhabit a world of one's own meanings, where care develops as the fundamental structure of the relationship with the divine and with others. In this way, religious experience ceases to be a mere fulfillment of norms and becomes the axis that gives meaning to the totality of life.

The analysis of the constructs of religion, religiosity, spirituality, and faith, grounded in psychological, sociological, and phenomenological studies, reveals that these terms designate interconnected dimensions of human experience, especially in the search for an ultimate and transcendent meaning. These constructs differ from one another.

Religion designates symbolic systems, doctrines, rites, communities, and institutions that establish a social "nomos" of meaning (Berger, 1985). Religiosity, on the other hand, is the effective experience and practice of this belief and belonging in experiential, ideological, intellectual, ritual, and consequential dimensions, with varying psychic weight according to its biographical centrality. Spirituality refers to personal openness to the transcendent and the search for ultimate meaning, which may occur with or without institutional affiliation. And faith is the fundamental trust that anchors life (as the biblical text in Hebrews 11:1 points out) and constitutes the generic aspect of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning, always seeking something totally firm and absolute, implicitly presupposing a transcendent pole of value and power that calms and gives meaning to life, and may culminate in integration between the mundane and the divine in daily living (Amatuzzi, 1998a; 1998b; 2000).

It is important to highlight these distinctions because, according to the articles analyzed, there is evidence that religion, religiosity, and spirituality, far from being exclusively protective factors, can function as risk factors and sources of trauma, especially in the context of church leadership.

In contrast to the traditional view that considers religious commitment as a protective factor, Hall (2021) demonstrates that religious commitment was not significantly correlated with protective factors for suicidal behaviors. The case of Pastor Jeremy highlights the tension between faith and existential crisis. The pastor stated that he maintained a “ strong conviction, but it was not enough to protect me from depression and suicide ” (p. 10).

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After the suicide attempt, he describes a collapse of meaning marked by nihilism, saying, " There is no God. There is nothing. There is no meaning or reason, and if I die it's just a body on earth. And I have no soul or anything like that, because it means nothing! " (Hall, 2021, p. 12). To that end, the author points out that, at the acute moment of the crisis, " religion and spirituality were inconsequential " (p. 19).

In the same vein, Yang, Rando, and Mason (2025) point out that religiosity " has been shown to be a protective factor against suicide attempts " (p. 420), but the high incidence of the phenomenon among pastors indicates that, in certain contexts, " these religious factors are not sufficiently protective " (p. 420).

Part of this limitation, according to the authors, relates to a "unique theological stigma about suicide" present in Christian communities where beliefs such as "Christians must have everything under control" and "suicide is an unforgivable sin" (Yang, Rando, and Mason, 2025, p. 420) make it "difficult for pastors to address the topic of suicide in the church and even more difficult for them to be vulnerable about their own struggles" (p. 420), reinforcing the silencing and vulnerability of these leaders.

This ambivalence of the sacred reveals that, for the pastor, religion can cease to be a field of protection and become a structure of accountability that can paralyze. When discourse transforms vulnerability into a sign of spiritual weakness, the leader is thrown into an ontological isolation in which his own source of meaning becomes the origin of his guilt.

The human being, who is a pastor, suffocated by the stigma of this theological discourse, loses the capacity to project possibilities of care. This phenomenon suggests that silencing is not merely a strategy for preserving the institutional image, but a profound existential fracture in which the pastor finds himself prevented from inhabiting his own humanity before the community and the divine.

Another risk factor related to religion and religiosity is the ineffectiveness of traditional theological deterrents. Yang, Rando, and Mason (2025) state that punitive religious moral objections (such as the saying that suicides go to hell) did not correlate with suicidal behaviors, indicating a departure from classical theology that viewed suicide as an unforgivable sin. Likewise, abstract concepts like that of hell become inaccessible or irrelevant to the immediate goal of ending suffering through suicide.

Hall (2021) states that, in moments of severe crisis, an individual may enter a state of "tunnel vision," where notional reasoning is blocked and complex religious ideas, including those intended to dissuade suicide, are neglected. She argues that, prior to suicide attempts, religious factors can exacerbate and even induce suicidal impulses. This risk occurs when the environment of religion and religiosity fails to inhibit suicidality. How? According to the author, a religious tradition that is moralistic, judgmental, silencing, and/or ostracizing contributes significantly to the risk. Study participants reported that religiosity can be harmful by fostering the feeling that the person is being punished, betrayed, or abandoned by God, or by generating irreconcilable anger towards God.

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Corroborating this, Yang, Rando, and Mason (2025) point out that a tense relationship with divinity and its precepts acts as a clear risk factor. As an example, they cite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship with God, which was a significant predictor of increased suicidal ideation. This tense relationship can be interpreted as a negative religious coping mechanism, manifested as doubt about God's love or a feeling of being punished or abandoned by Him, which correlates with an increased risk of suicidality.

What becomes evident is that these factors, previously seen as protective, do not fulfill their expected role. Negative religious confrontation reveals a rupture in the fundamental trust that sustains the being, transforming the relationship with God (the sacred) into an internal battlefield. Thus, spirituality ceases to be a resource for overcoming challenges and becomes yet another source of anguish, where the image of a punitive God only confirms the helplessness that the leader already experiences in their reality.

Another important point concerns religious doctrines that emphasize the sinfulness and imperfect nature of humans, implying that the individual will never be good enough. These doctrines generate discomfort at never being able to achieve a model of human being according to the precepts of the religion, consequently fueling despair. This promotion of negative views can induce guilt and self-hatred, creating fertile ground in which suicidal impulses can flourish and bear fruit.

As Hall (2021) points out, accounts show that, prior to their attempts, these leaders faced disdainful communities, doubts about God, and crises of purpose. The emphasis on shame for flawed human nature creates an excessive burden, aggravated by rigid dogmas and simplistic guidelines that do not resolve real crises. The risk becomes greater with the stigmatization of mental health and the idea of self-sacrifice as something redemptive. Furthermore, the contradictory behavior of those close to them and the lack of adequate institutional support transform religious experience into a factor of isolation.

Religious stigma and silence surrounding suicide constitute a strong risk factor in religious communities. Beliefs that Christians must maintain absolute emotional and moral control, and the idea that suicide is unforgivable, negate vulnerability, leading leaders to conceal suffering and suicidal thoughts for fear of judgment and discredit. This situation favors the internalization of pain and postpones the search for help, increasing the risk.

Furthermore, the belief that faith should be enough to "immunize" against depression and suicide turns illness into a sign of spiritual failure, intensifying guilt and shame and hindering the search for specialized care. The stigma manifests itself communally through shame, silence, and ostracism, which is what happened in the case of Pastor Jeremy.

However, the sacred is also a protective factor. In Jeremy's case (Hall, 2021), after his attempt at and subsequent approach to the church, there was a process of theological reconstruction in which he describes the "reconstruction and reconfiguration of God" (p. 12) in order to recognize in God a "pure affirmation, 'that thing that says yes in the universe, that does not discard, that does not ignore who we are, but that calls it out of us'" (p. 12). In this turning point, he replaces the logic

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that "anything less than perfection is sinful and wrong" with the conviction that "good theology begins where there is pain" (p. 13).

Similarly, Ming (2022) presents a perspective that implies an active spirituality, in which transformation occurs as interaction with God, requiring the pastor to be “always connected with God in prayer” and to “live completely and solely for God” (Ming, 2022, pp. 302–304). Such interaction is not manifested through signs or miracles, but through “wisdom that appears in daily life: in decision-making, in how to respond to a problem, and in the pattern of dealing with life” (Ming, 2022, pp. 303–304), evidencing the divine presence in daily attitudes.

The reflection on Saul's failure highlights precisely the inconsistency in obedience to God's decrees, described as "lack of consistency in obedience to God's decrees" (Ming, 2022, pp. 297, 304), which compromised his mission and his communion with the Creator. When religion follows a process of guiding through fidelity, spiritual coherence, and a life that concretely reflects the presence and values of the Kingdom of God, it is perceived as a protective factor against suicide.

Mundhluri and Masango (2024) point out that the pastoral function is not based on performance, but on communion with the divine and service to others. To this end, the authors recommend incorporating “an ethics of care within the framework of pastoral care to better meet the emotional and spiritual needs of these traumatized leaders” (p. 5), emphasizing that ethical care should be the basis for the spiritual reconstruction of wounded leaders.

This shift in perspective suggests that the protective potential of religion does not reside in the accumulation of spiritual tasks, in performance, or in doctrinal rigor, but in the reconfiguration of the bond with the divine. When the pastor accepts that theology can emerge from pain itself, the sacred ceases to be a tribunal and becomes a space for encounters and possibilities beyond punishment. In this sense, protection does not function as a shield against suffering, but as a wisdom that integrates faith into daily life. The exercise of pastoral ministry ceases to be a performance of holiness and becomes a way of being based on trust. Thus, human vulnerability ceases to be seen as a flaw and can become the starting point for an authentic ministry.

Religion can function as a powerful protective factor against suicide when it is experienced as an encounter with grace, meaning, and community, and not as a moral performance. In the account analyzed by Hall (2021), after the suicide attempt, the renewed contact with the church opened a process of theological reconstruction that replaced punitive perfectionism with a faith that embraces pain and integrates it into the care of oneself and others.

Although institutional dynamics can act as sources of stress, the literature indicates that the religious dimension becomes an effective protective resource when it ceases to be a metric of performance and perfection. This transition occurs when faith abandons punitive perfectionism and turns to embracing human fragility. In Jeremy's account, the reconfiguration of the bond with the divine allowed theology to begin precisely where the pain was, transforming the sacred into a space of affirmation and possibility instead of a tribunal. Thus, the protective potential lies in the capacity of spirituality to offer a meaning that supports the

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leader's vulnerability, integrating their experience of suffering into a narrative of grace and care.

The effectiveness of religion in preventing pastoral suicide is directly linked to building an ethic of care that prioritizes communion and service over performance and title. By integrating practical wisdom into daily decisions and maintaining an active spirituality, the pastor reduces existential isolation and strengthens their vocational coherence. When the religious community functions as a place for sharing this journey, offering language for suffering and real bonds of belonging, the sacred acts as a concrete barrier against despair. Authentic ministry finds its strength in the integration of one's own humanity with trust in the divine, allowing the leader to find support in the same source of meaning that they communicate to their flock.

Limitations of the Research

All research is a selective analysis, and in this case, the analysis is limited by the very scarcity of academic research on the subject. Although the dialogue between theory and data has offered ways to understand pastoral suffering, boundaries emerge that need to be demarcated so that the results are not interpreted in an absolute way. The limitations listed below do not invalidate the understandings achieved, but rather situate the findings in their initial stage and point out the gaps that science still needs to fill, especially in the Brazilian context.

The review reveals a lack of articles in Portuguese that meet the established inclusion criteria. The data analyzed are based on research conducted in the United States, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. This geographical concentration in countries with health systems and ecclesiastical structures distinct from Brazil's limits the direct transposition of the results. In a country like Brazil, where Christianity structures not only spirituality but also social and political relations, the psychological suffering of those who occupy the pulpit remains a blind spot. There is no national empirical data that allows for correlating pastoral function with suicide risk in the national context.

The scarcity of national literature on the subject poses practical challenges to understanding the phenomenon in Brazil. Firstly, institutional differences in the organization of denominations and support systems vary considerably between the Brazilian scenario and the contexts of countries such as the United States and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, stigma and the need to preserve public image hinder the collection of primary data, since vulnerability is often silenced in favor of ministerial functions.

The absence of local indicators means that care interventions are based on foreign models, which may neglect the particularities of the national religious culture. Likewise, the lack of evidence produced in the country prevents the development of prevention protocols that respond to the specific pressures faced by ministers in Brazilian territory.

Another relevant limitation in this review is the centrality of the male subject in discussions about pastoral suicide. The selected studies are predominantly based

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on men's experiences, as evidenced in the analysis of Jeremy's trajectory and the use of Saul's figure as a metaphor for collapse. The ecclesiastical literature that underpins the ministerial office also operates with historically masculine categories, such as those of presbyter, bishop, and supervisor.

Although public health indicators suggest that suicide affects men and women in different ways (Brazil, 2021), the reviewed literature focuses on a specific gender perspective. The predominance of reports based on male experiences restricts the understanding of the particularities of the suffering of women in ministerial roles, whose institutional demands and vulnerabilities are still underexplored in the academic field.

It is therefore necessary that future research consider suicidality among female pastors, whose dynamics of suffering may be influenced by distinct variables, such as institutional prejudice and the overload of roles in traditionally masculinized spaces.

Similarly, another limitation of this study is that scientific production on pastor suicide is still incipient and fragmented, which limits the generalization of the findings to different ecclesiastical contexts. In this review, the methodological diversity highlights the lack of a standardized database on this population.

This scarcity of systematic data implies that the conclusions should be interpreted as initial indicators of vulnerability and not as absolute standards applicable to any denomination. The field still lacks investigations that correlate occupational stress variables and institutional support more broadly. Therefore, the current results serve to highlight gaps and stimulate the development of local research that allows for the establishment of more robust prevention protocols better suited to the diversity of religious institutions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This review highlights that suicide among pastors is not an isolated phenomenon, but the outcome of a profound tension between the vocational ideal and the pressures of a performance-oriented society. The findings show that the expectation of spiritual perfection and institutional overload transform the ministry into a field of exhaustion and silencing. It is clear that the vulnerability of these leaders is often made invisible by structures that prioritize institutional image over the health of those who occupy the pulpit, which can make suicide an extreme response to a collapse of meaning.

The ambivalence of the sacred emerges as one of the central points for understanding the phenomenon and for future interventions. While punitive dogmas and theological stigma serve as risk factors that isolate the leader in their pain, a spirituality grounded in grace and the acceptance of human fragility acts as a powerful protective resource. Reconfiguring the relationship with the divine, allowing theology to begin where the pain is, is essential for religion to cease being a tribunal and become a space of real support (integrating vulnerability into the very narrative of faith).

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However, the absence of studies in the Portuguese language reveals an academic and institutional silence that needs to be broken in the Brazilian context. It is urgent that new research explores the national reality, considering gender diversity and the particularities of local denominations.

This work makes no claim to exhaust the subject. On the contrary, it is a starting point. The intention was to open a space for exploration and understanding of a phenomenon that is often hidden beneath layers of doctrine, theology, function, and performance. Pastoral suicide demands that we look at the human being before the title, at suffering before function, at existence before the institution. This means deconstructing assumptions and allowing the question of being to emerge before any position.

How to continue this path? Perhaps the answer lies in the willingness to remain in the question. To remain in the question is to resist the temptation of a quick concept, a moral diagnosis, or a technical solution. It is to make room for what has not yet been said, for what remains silenced, for what is only revealed in between. It is necessary to continue to allow oneself to be affected by what is shown in the suffering of the other. And this theme requires this willingness.

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