

Research Article

# The Role of Pastors in Pastoral Counseling for Cell Group Leaders Experiencing Internal Conflict

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**Abstract:** Cell group leaders occupy a strategic but underexamined position in congregational life because they translate pastoral vision into relational care, discipleship, prayer, and informal spiritual guidance. This conceptual research article examines the role of pastors in pastoral counseling for cell group leaders who experience internal conflict, understood as intrapersonal, relational, moral, and role-based tension arising from leadership pressure, loyalty dilemmas, unresolved interpersonal strain, and spiritual burden. The article aims to construct a practical-theological framework that enables pastors to respond to such conflict without reducing counseling to advice, discipline, or crisis management. Using an integrative literature review and constructive practical-theological synthesis, the study analyzes scholarship on pastoral care, church conflict, Bowen family systems theory, small-group participation, servant leadership, psychological safety, clergy burnout, and organizational conflict. The synthesis generates three main findings. First, internal conflict among cell group leaders is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by role ambiguity, anxious triangulation, and spiritual-moral burden. Second, pastors function most effectively as differentiated counselors, mediators, and boundary keepers who combine empathic listening with ethical clarity. Third, pastoral counseling should be embedded in restorative supervision and congregational learning rather than treated as an isolated emergency intervention. The article concludes that pastors need a theologically grounded, psychologically informed, and organizationally responsible counseling model that restores leaders while strengthening the health of the church system.

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## 1. Introduction

Cell groups have become a significant structure in many contemporary churches because they provide relational proximity, discipleship, shared prayer, mutual care, and opportunities for lay leadership. In large and medium-sized congregations, cell groups often function as the relational tissue through which pastoral vision becomes embodied in everyday Christian community. Research on congregational life indicates that small-group involvement can deepen belonging, participation, and communal attachment in religious organizations (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). A related study links small-group contexts with civic engagement and congregational participation (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015). However, the strength of cell groups is also their vulnerability. They depend heavily on lay leaders who carry spiritual, relational, and organizational responsibilities, often without receiving the same level of pastoral supervision, emotional support, or formal training as ordained ministers.

The object of this article is the cell group leader who experiences internal conflict. In this study, internal conflict does not refer narrowly to a psychiatric diagnosis or a temporary mood fluctuation. It refers to a complex condition in which a leader experiences tension between

personal conviction and institutional expectation, pastoral loyalty and group loyalty, spiritual ideals and relational frustration, service motivation and emotional exhaustion, or calling and inadequacy. Such conflict is often hidden because cell group leaders may feel obliged to appear spiritually mature, loyal, available, and stable. In Pentecostal, evangelical, and cell-based churches, leaders may also interpret distress through spiritual language. This language can enrich meaning-making, but it can also delay careful pastoral and psychological assessment when distress is moralized, over-spiritualized, or treated as a lack of faith.

The urgency of this topic lies in the strategic location of cell group leaders. They are neither ordinary members nor fully ordained pastoral staff. They are often volunteers, but their work has pastoral consequences. They counsel members informally, mediate relational disputes, communicate church programs, lead Bible reflection, model spirituality, mobilize service, and represent pastoral authority in intimate group settings. This intermediate position creates role strain. Studies of clergy and pastoral workers show that ministry roles are vulnerable to burnout, boundary pressure, emotional labor, exposure to conflict, and role ambiguity (Adams et al., 2017). Conflict-management style and turnover risk have also been linked to clergy strain (Beebe, 2007). Studies in Asian pastoral settings likewise report stress and burnout among pastors (Chan & Chen, 2019). Organizational consequences of pastor burnout extend beyond personal distress (Fulmer & Sinclair, 2023). Although such studies frequently focus on ordained clergy, their findings are relevant to lay cell group leaders because many of the same pressures caregiving, availability, moral expectations, and relational conflict are present in cell-based ministry.

Previous research provides several important insights. First, studies on small groups demonstrate that involvement in small groups strengthens religious belonging and congregational participation (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). Small-group contexts are also associated with civic engagement and congregational participation (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015). Second, research on clergy well-being identifies burnout as a serious ministry concern (Adams et al., 2017). Conflict-management style and turnover are also related to clergy strain (Beebe, 2007). Role differentiation has been linked to pastoral burnout and job satisfaction (Frederick et al., 2022). Pastor burnout also has consequences for congregational and organizational outcomes (Fulmer & Sinclair, 2023). Third, pastoral theology emphasizes that pastoral counseling must attend not only to individual distress but also to meaning, culture, community, power, and spiritual interpretation (Doehring, 2015). Intercultural pastoral care strengthens this claim by locating care within cultural difference and lived experience (Lartey, 2003). Classical pastoral care also frames ministry as healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling (Patton, 2005). Fourth, Murray Bowen's family systems theory highlights anxiety, triangulation, and differentiation as central relational dynamics (Bowen, 1978). Edwin H. Friedman later applied systems theory to churches and synagogues (Friedman, 1985). Anxiety has also been identified as a major cause of church conflict (Son, 2019). These fields are rich, but they are rarely integrated around the specific problem of internal conflict among cell group leaders.

The research gap is therefore not the absence of literature on pastoral counseling, church conflict, leadership, or small groups. The gap is the absence of a constructive model that connects these bodies of knowledge and applies them to the pastoral counseling of cell group leaders as intermediate pastoral actors. Existing studies often examine small groups from the perspective of participation, clergy from the perspective of burnout, and conflict from the perspective of congregational systems. Less attention is given to the cell group leader who absorbs tension from both above and below: from pastoral leadership expectations and from the emotional needs of group members. This liminality requires a counseling response that is simultaneously spiritual, relational, ethical, and organizational.

This article asks three research questions. First, how should internal conflict among cell group leaders be understood in light of pastoral theology, systems theory, leadership studies, and organizational conflict research? Second, what roles should pastors assume when counseling cell group leaders who experience such conflict? Third, what constructive framework can guide pastoral intervention without reducing counseling to informal advice, spiritual discipline, or administrative correction?

The proposed solution is a practical-theological framework that positions the pastor as a differentiated counselor, mediator, boundary keeper, and formative supervisor. This approach assumes that internal conflict is not merely an individual weakness but a signal that personal, relational, and systemic dimensions require interpretation. It also assumes that pastoral counseling must be more than a crisis conversation. It should include assessment, theological meaning-making, emotional containment, ethical boundary-setting, restorative mediation, leadership clarification, and continuing supervision.

The contribution of this article is threefold. Theoretically, it integrates pastoral counseling, Bowen family systems theory, servant leadership, psychological safety, and organizational conflict theory into a focused framework for cell group leadership. Practically, it offers pastors a structured way to accompany leaders who are struggling internally without shaming them or prematurely removing them from ministry. Ecclesologically, it argues that the health of cell group leaders is not a private matter but a congregational concern, because unresolved internal conflict can spread through the church's relational system. The article proceeds by reviewing relevant literature, explaining the conceptual method, presenting three analytical findings, comparing the proposed contribution with prior studies, and concluding with implications for pastoral practice and future research.

## 2. Literature Review

Pastoral counseling has historically been understood as a ministry of care that integrates theological wisdom, relational presence, and attention to human suffering. Classical pastoral care literature emphasizes healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling as core functions of ministry (Clinebell, 2011). A related account frames pastoral care as an essential ministry of presence, guidance, and restoration (Patton, 2005). More recent pastoral theology expands this framework by attending to culture, trauma, power, narrative, and the interpretive role of religious meaning in human distress (Doehring, 2015). Intercultural pastoral care further insists that care must be interpreted within the particularities of culture and lived experience (Lartey, 2003). Spiritually integrated approaches to counseling argue that religious and spiritual dimensions should not be treated as peripheral when counselees interpret suffering, vocation, guilt, forgiveness, and hope through faith commitments (Pargament, 2007). Professional competency literature also supports careful attention to spiritual and religious dimensions in psychological care (Vieten & Lukoff, 2022). For cell group leaders, this is particularly relevant because their conflict is often experienced not simply as emotional strain but as a crisis of calling, obedience, identity, and spiritual responsibility.

At the same time, pastoral counseling cannot be reduced to spiritual language. Internal conflict among leaders may involve emotional exhaustion, anxiety, resentment, shame, relational injury, or unresolved role confusion. Studies of clergy and pastoral workers show that burnout is shaped by workload, congregational expectations, leadership pressure, conflict, and insufficient boundaries (Adams et al., 2017). Clergy conflict-management style has also been associated with burnout and turnover risk (Beebe, 2007). Pastors in China report stress and burnout, highlighting the cross-cultural relevance of ministry strain (Chan & Chen, 2019). Pastor burnout has implications beyond the individual pastor because it can affect congregational and organizational outcomes (Fulmer & Sinclair, 2023). These findings are important for cell group ministry because lay leaders often perform pastoral functions without the institutional recognition, sabbatical rhythms, or supervisory structures available to clergy. A leader may be treated as a volunteer when support is discussed, but as a pastor when responsibility is assigned.

Church conflict literature adds another layer. Congregations are not only theological communities but also emotional systems. Murray Bowen's family systems theory argues that anxiety circulates within relational systems and that leaders can become triangulated when unresolved tension between others is displaced onto them (Bowen, 1978). Edwin H. Friedman applied this theory to churches and synagogues and argued that religious leaders need differentiation: the capacity to remain connected without being emotionally absorbed by the anxiety of the system (Friedman, 1985). A later pastoral counseling study develops this insight by identifying anxiety as a major cause of church conflict (Son, 2019). For cell group leaders,

triangulation can occur when members bring complaints about the pastor, when pastors expect loyalty without listening to field-level realities, or when leaders become the emotional container for unresolved conflict among members. Internal conflict, therefore, emerges not only from personal weakness but also from systemic anxiety.

Organizational conflict theory helps clarify the nature of conflict. Karen A. Jehn's work distinguishes between task conflict and relationship conflict, showing that conflict may have different effects depending on its content and emotional tone (Jehn, 1995). M. Afzalur Rahim argues that conflict management requires more than suppression; it involves diagnosis and intervention in substantive and affective conflict at several relational levels (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). Dean Tjosvold further proposes that organizations can become conflict-positive when they treat disagreement as a potential resource for learning rather than a threat to unity (Tjosvold, 2008). In church contexts, however, conflict is often spiritualized, avoided, or personalized. The rhetoric of unity may unintentionally silence legitimate concerns, while the rhetoric of authority may prevent honest dialogue. For cell group leaders, this can lead to internal division: they may sense that something is wrong but lack the permission to name it.

Leadership studies also inform this discussion. Servant leadership emphasizes humility, empowerment, stewardship, and the growth of followers (Eva et al., 2019). Empirical research links servant leadership and serving culture with individual and unit performance (Liden et al., 2014). Theoretical synthesis also describes servant leadership as a multidimensional model of empowering and ethical leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). This model resonates with Christian pastoral leadership because it resists domination and frames authority as service. However, servant leadership must not be romanticized. Leaders who constantly serve without boundaries may become overextended, especially in emotionally demanding settings. Pastors who counsel cell group leaders must therefore model servant leadership that includes empowerment and protection, not merely availability and sacrifice. Pastoral authority should create conditions in which cell group leaders can speak truthfully, receive correction safely, and grow without being consumed by ministry expectations.

Psychological safety is another important concept for cell-based ministry. Amy C. Edmondson introduced psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Later scholarship connects psychological safety with voice, learning, and organizational adaptation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In church leadership, psychological safety does not mean the absence of correction. It means that leaders can report problems, ask questions, confess weakness, and disagree respectfully without fear of humiliation, spiritual labeling, or arbitrary removal. Without such safety, internal conflict is likely to remain hidden until it becomes resignation, passive resistance, relational fracture, or moral failure.

The literature reveals four gaps. First, research on small groups often emphasizes congregational participation but pays less attention to the inner life of cell group leaders. Second, clergy burnout studies illuminate ministry strain but usually focus on ordained pastors rather than lay leaders in cell-based structures. Third, pastoral counseling literature offers rich theological resources but does not always specify how pastors should counsel intermediate leaders caught between authority and membership. Fourth, church conflict studies identify anxiety and systemic patterns but need further integration with pastoral counseling practice. This article addresses these gaps by constructing a framework that interprets internal conflict among cell group leaders as a pastoral, systemic, and formative concern.

### 3. Proposed Method

This study uses a qualitative conceptual design grounded in an integrative literature review and a constructive practical-theological synthesis. It is presented as a research article, but not as field research. No interviews, surveys, observations, or experimental data were collected. The article, therefore, does not claim empirical findings from a specific congregation. Instead, it develops a conceptual framework by critically synthesizing existing literature and applying it to a specific pastoral problem. A literature review methodology is appropriate when a study aims to clarify fragmented knowledge, identify gaps, and build a structured conceptual contribution (Snyder, 2019). An integrative literature review is also

suitable for using past and present research to develop future-oriented theoretical insights (Torraco, 2016).

The data sources were academic publications on pastoral counseling, small-group ministry, church conflict, clergy burnout, servant leadership, psychological safety, and organizational conflict. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2023, while classical works were included when they provided foundational theoretical categories, such as Bowen's family systems theory, Friedman's application of systems theory to religious leadership, and classical pastoral care frameworks. Academic books in pastoral theology and counseling were also used, as this field relies heavily on monographs that shape theological and ministerial reasoning. Popular blogs, unsupported opinions, and non-scholarly internet sources were excluded.

The literature was gathered through purposive thematic searching. Search terms included pastoral counseling, church conflict, cell group, small group involvement, clergy burnout, pastoral leadership, servant leadership, Bowen family systems theory, role conflict, spirituality and counseling, psychological safety, and organizational conflict. Sources were selected based on relevance, scholarly credibility, theoretical contribution, and applicability to the problem of cell group leadership. Because the study is conceptual, the goal was not statistical representativeness but analytical adequacy: the selected literature had to illuminate the object of inquiry from multiple disciplinary angles.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the literature was coded thematically around recurring concepts: internal conflict, anxiety, role ambiguity, burnout, mediation, pastoral authority, servant leadership, boundaries, spiritual interpretation, and restorative care. Second, these themes were mapped across three domains: individual experience, relational system, and pastoral intervention. Third, the mapped themes were interpreted through practical theology, especially the movement from descriptive understanding to normative discernment and pragmatic response developed in Richard R. Osmer's practical-theological method (Osmer, 2008). Fourth, the article constructed a framework for pastoral counseling that is both theological and operational.

Validity in this conceptual study was pursued through theoretical triangulation, internal coherence, and critical limitation. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by integrating pastoral theology, organizational behavior, systems theory, leadership studies, and counseling literature. Internal coherence was achieved by ensuring that the proposed framework directly addressed the research questions rather than merely summarizing the literature. Critical limitation was maintained by avoiding empirical overclaiming. The article does not claim that all cell group leaders experience conflict in the same way, nor does it claim that the proposed framework has been tested in a field setting. It offers a reasoned model for further application and empirical study.

Ethically, the article does not involve human participants and therefore does not require human-subject data protection. Nevertheless, ethical reflection remains necessary because the topic concerns vulnerable leaders and pastoral authority. The proposed framework emphasizes confidentiality, informed pastoral boundaries, non-coercive counseling, referral to licensed mental health professionals when needed, and protection from spiritual manipulation. Pastoral counseling should not be used to silence criticism, preserve institutional image, or pressure leaders to remain in roles that are damaging to their well-being.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Internal Conflict as Role Strain, Anxious Triangulation, and Spiritual-Moral Burden

The first finding of this conceptual synthesis is that internal conflict among cell group leaders should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a purely personal problem. In many churches, leaders who struggle internally may be judged as lacking commitment, maturity, submission, or faith. Such interpretations may sometimes contain partial truth, but they are insufficient. Internal conflict often emerges when a leader's role exceeds the available support structure. The leader must care for members, represent pastoral direction, manage relational tension, maintain spiritual discipline, and sustain personal life. When these expectations are unclear or excessive, they are internalized as conflict.

Role strain is central here. Cell group leaders often occupy a middle position between pastoral authority and congregational members. They receive instructions from pastors, but they also hear the frustrations, wounds, and needs of members. They are expected to communicate vision downward and report problems upward. This creates double accountability, which can be emotionally costly. Role differentiation is relevant to pastoral burnout and job satisfaction (Frederick et al., 2022). Although this finding concerns clergy, the concept applies to cell group leaders as well. A leader who cannot differentiate personal identity from ministry performance may interpret every group problem as personal failure. A leader who cannot differentiate loyalty from silence may suppress legitimate concerns. A leader who cannot distinguish between care and control may become overinvolved in members' lives.

Internal conflict is also intensified by anxious triangulation. In Murray Bowen's family systems theory, triangulation occurs when tension between two parties is stabilized by involving a third party (Bowen, 1978). In cell group ministry, a member may complain to the cell leader about another member, the pastor, or church policy. The pastor may expect the cell leader to maintain unity without fully hearing the complexity of the situation. The leader then becomes the third point of a set of multiple triangles. Edwin H. Friedman argues that religious leaders need differentiation to remain present without being absorbed by systemic anxiety (Friedman, 1985). Anxiety has also been identified as a major cause of church conflict (Son, 2019). When pastors fail to recognize these patterns, they may counsel the cell leader as though the issue were merely emotional weakness, while the leader is actually carrying displaced systemic anxiety.

The distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict is also helpful. Karen A. Jehn shows that not all conflict is equally harmful because conflict effects differ according to content and emotional tone (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict may involve disagreement about goals, methods, or interpretation, while relationship conflict involves personal hostility, resentment, or distrust. In cell groups, task conflict might concern how often to meet, how to handle outreach, or how to apply church teaching. Relationship conflict might involve jealousy, gossip, perceived favoritism, or unresolved offense. Internal conflict becomes severe when task disagreement is interpreted as personal rejection or spiritual rebellion. M. Afzalur Rahim argues that conflict management requires diagnosis before intervention (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). Pastoral counseling must therefore help cell group leaders name the kind of conflict they face rather than treating all conflict as disunity.

The spiritual-moral dimension is equally important. Cell group leaders do not experience conflict only as stress; they often experience it as guilt, shame, failure, or spiritual inadequacy. They may ask whether their frustration is sinful, whether their fatigue shows a lack of love, whether questioning pastoral decisions means rebellion, or whether stepping back from ministry means abandoning God's calling. Pastoral theology insists that such questions must be treated seriously because religious meaning shapes how people suffer and heal (Doehring, 2015). Spiritually integrated psychotherapy likewise treats sacred meaning as central to coping, struggle, and transformation (Pargament, 2007). However, spiritual interpretation must not obscure psychological and relational realities. A leader's distress may require prayer, repentance, rest, mediation, role clarification, and professional referral, depending on the case.

The first analytical implication is that pastors need to move from moralistic evaluation to diagnostic listening. A pastor who quickly asks, *Why are you not faithful?* may intensify shame. A pastor who asks, *What tensions are you carrying, and where are they coming from?* opens space for discernment. Diagnostic listening does not excuse irresponsibility. Rather, it distinguishes between sin, immaturity, overload, systemic dysfunction, trauma, role confusion, and ordinary human limitation. Without such distinction, pastoral counseling risks producing either permissiveness or authoritarian correction.

The second implication is that internal conflict should be read as feedback from the ministry system. Pastor burnout is associated with congregational and organizational outcomes, including belonging, financial stability, and turnover intentions (Fulmer & Sinclair, 2023). This suggests that leader distress is not merely private. When multiple cell group leaders experience similar tensions, pastors should ask whether the church's leadership culture, communication pattern, expectations, and care structures need reform. A cell leader's internal

conflict may reveal unclear role descriptions, unrealistic availability expectations, weak supervision, unresolved congregational conflict, or a culture that rewards performance while neglecting emotional health.

The third implication is theological. The church should not assume that spiritual maturity means emotional invulnerability. Christian leadership involves suffering, but not all suffering is redemptive—poor systems, unclear authority, or a lack of care cause suffering. Pastoral counseling must therefore recover a theology of human finitude. Leaders are called to serve, but they remain embodied persons who require rest, support, correction, and community. When pastors acknowledge this, cell group leaders can bring internal conflict into the light without fear that honesty will disqualify them.

### **The Pastor as Differentiated Counselor, Mediator, and Boundary Keeper**

The second finding is that the pastor's role in counseling conflicted with cell group leaders, who must combine three functions: differentiated counselor, mediator, and boundary keeper. These functions are interrelated. If the pastor only counsels privately but does not address relational systems, the leader may feel temporarily relieved but return to the same conflict pattern. If the pastor mediates conflict without providing spiritual care, the process may become administrative. If the pastor sets boundaries without empathy, the leader may experience correction as rejection. Effective pastoral counseling requires integration.

As a differentiated counselor, the pastor offers non-anxious presence. Differentiation does not mean emotional distance. It means the capacity to remain connected while not being controlled by another person's anxiety. Murray Bowen's family systems theory provides the conceptual basis for this claim (Bowen, 1978). Edwin H. Friedman's application of systems theory to religious leadership extends the same idea to churches and synagogues (Friedman, 1985). In pastoral counseling, this means the pastor listens without panic, defensiveness, or premature judgment. When a cell group leader expresses anger, confusion, disappointment, or desire to resign, the pastor should not immediately defend the church, correct the leader, or spiritualize the problem. The first pastoral task is containment: helping the leader speak truthfully in a safe setting.

This requires deep listening. Pastoral care literature emphasizes that care is not simply problem-solving but attentive presence that helps people interpret their lives before God and community (Clinebell, 2011). Another pastoral care account similarly stresses guidance, presence, and restoration as essential dimensions of ministry (Patton, 2005). Pastoral care must attend to lived experience, relational power, and meaning-making (Doehring, 2015). Applied to cell group leaders, this means pastors should listen for emotional content, theological assumptions, relational history, and role expectations. A leader who says, I am tired of leading this group, may mean several things: burnout, resentment, grief, moral injury, fear of failure, conflict with a member, disagreement with pastoral direction, or a need for sabbatical rest. Counseling begins by refusing to flatten the statement.

As a mediator, the pastor helps transform conflict into a truthful, accountable conversation. Mediation is necessary when internal conflict is connected to unresolved relational tension. However, the pastor must avoid becoming a partisan actor. In cell-based churches, pastors may be tempted either to protect institutional authority or to automatically defend the cell leader. Both responses are inadequate. A conflict-positive approach recognizes that disagreement can become constructive when handled with clarity, mutual responsibility, and shared commitment to truth (Tjosvold, 2008). The pastor's mediating role is not to force artificial harmony but to create a process in which wounds, expectations, facts, and responsibilities can be named.

This mediating role requires ethical caution. Pastors hold spiritual and institutional authority. If mediation is conducted coercively, members or leaders may feel pressured to confess, forgive, reconcile, or submit before they are ready. Pastoral counseling must therefore distinguish reconciliation from forced closure. Forgiveness is central to Christian faith, but it should not be used to bypass truth, accountability, or protection. In cases involving abuse, manipulation, severe mental distress, or power imbalance, pastoral counseling must involve referral and safeguarding rather than informal mediation alone. Spiritual care should

cooperate with professional care when the situation exceeds pastoral competence (Vieten & Lukoff, 2022).

As a boundary keeper, the pastor clarifies what the cell group leader is and is not responsible for. Boundaries are not a lack of love; they are conditions for sustainable love. Research on ministry burnout shows that helping roles become damaging when leaders lack role clarity, support, and recovery space (Adams et al., 2017). Cross-cultural evidence on pastoral stress also confirms that insufficient support can intensify burnout (Chan & Chen, 2019). Cell group leaders may assume that they must answer every message, solve every marital dispute, visit every absent member, absorb every criticism, and prevent every conflict. Pastors must teach that cell leaders are shepherding assistants, not saviors. They participate in care but do not replace pastoral oversight, professional counseling, family responsibility, or the work of the Holy Spirit.

Boundary keeping also protects the church from unhealthy dependency. A cell group can become overly centered on a charismatic leader, or a leader can become overly dependent on affirmation from the group. Servant leadership is useful here because it frames leadership as empowering others rather than creating dependency. A systematic review identifies empowerment and follower growth as central to servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Empirical research also links servant leadership and serving culture with healthier performance outcomes (Liden et al., 2014). Theoretical synthesis describes servant leadership as ethical, relational, and empowering (van Dierendonck, 2011). Pastors should counsel cell group leaders to distribute care, develop assistant leaders, encourage member participation, and resist the need to be indispensable. The goal is not a heroic cell leader but a healthy body.

Psychological safety is indispensable for this integrated role. Amy C. Edmondson defines psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). In church leadership, psychological safety means that cell group leaders can report problems, admit weakness, ask for help, and disagree respectfully without fear of humiliation or removal. Pastors create or destroy this safety by how they respond to conflict. If leaders are punished for honesty, they will hide internal conflicts until they become crises. If leaders are heard and guided, conflict can become formative. The pastor, therefore, becomes not only a counselor of individuals but also a cultivator of a leadership culture in which truth can be spoken responsibly.

Theologically, the pastor's role should be shaped by shepherding rather than control. Shepherding includes guidance, protection, nourishment, correction, and restoration. It does not mean surveillance or domination. A pastor who counsels cell group leaders well will hold together compassion and truth. Compassion without truth may leave destructive patterns unnamed. Truth without compassion may crush wounded leaders. The pastoral task is to create a disciplined space where leaders can encounter grace that does not deny responsibility and correction that does not deny dignity.

### **A Constructive Framework for Restorative Supervision and Congregational Learning**

The third finding is that pastoral counseling for internally conflicted cell group leaders should be embedded in restorative supervision and congregational learning. Many churches treat counseling as a reactive intervention: a leader struggles, meets the pastor, receives advice or prayer, and returns to ministry. This may help temporarily, but does not necessarily change the conditions that produced the conflict. A constructive model requires a broader process that integrates personal care and organizational learning.

This article proposes seven movements. The first is containment and assessment. The pastor provides a confidential setting, listens carefully, and assesses the nature of the conflict. Questions should address emotional state, relational context, ministry expectations, spiritual interpretation, physical fatigue, family impact, and risk factors. The pastor should ask whether the leader is safe, whether others are being harmed, whether the conflict involves abuse or serious mental health concerns, and whether immediate referral is necessary. This stage prevents premature spiritual advice and protects the leader from being treated as either a problem to be fixed or a worker to be quickly restored to productivity.

The second movement is theological meaning-making. Internal conflict often produces distorted spiritual conclusions: I am useless; God is disappointed; I must continue even if I

am collapsing; or, if I disagree, I am rebellious. Pastoral counseling should help leaders examine these interpretations in light of Scripture, grace, calling, community, and human limitation. Kenneth I. Pargament argues that the sacred can be a source of both coping and struggle (Pargament, 2007). The pastor helps the leader discern whether their spiritual interpretation is life-giving, condemning, avoidant, or corrective. The goal is not to impose simplistic answers but to recover truthful communion with God.

The third movement is conflict mapping. The pastor and leader identify the actual conflict structure. Is the conflict intrapersonal, interpersonal, role-based, doctrinal, organizational, or moral? Who are the parties? What events triggered the tension? What assumptions are operating? What has been spoken, and what remains hidden? Conflict mapping draws from organizational conflict theory, which emphasizes diagnosis before intervention (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). For cell group leaders, this mapping can reveal whether they need rest, mediation, correction, training, protection, or role redesign.

The fourth movement is mediated conversation when appropriate. If the internal conflict involves unresolved relational tension, the pastor may facilitate a conversation between the leader and the relevant parties. This should occur only when safety, consent, and readiness are present. The purpose is not to win an argument but to seek truth, responsibility, and restoration. The pastor must set ground rules: speak from experience, avoid accusation, listen without interruption, clarify facts, identify harm, and agree on next steps. This process reflects a conflict-positive approach, in which conflict is seen as an opportunity for learning rather than a threat to be suppressed (Tjosvold, 2008).

The fifth movement clarifies the role of the covenant. Many internal conflicts persist because leaders do not know the limits of their role. A role covenant should clarify expectations, authority, accountability, confidentiality, pastoral reporting, crisis procedures, rest rhythms, and referral pathways. This is not merely administrative. It is pastoral protection. When expectations are clear, leaders can serve without guessing what loyalty requires. Role clarification also supports differentiation because leaders can distinguish what belongs to them from what belongs to pastors, members, families, or professional counselors.

The sixth movement is restorative accountability. If the leader has acted wrongly through harsh speech, gossip, manipulation, neglect, or misuse of authority the pastor should address it directly. However, accountability should aim at restoration, not humiliation. Restorative accountability asks what happened, who was affected, what responsibility must be taken, what repair is needed, and what formation is required. This differs from punitive discipline because it seeks truth and transformation. It also differs from permissiveness because it does not excuse harm. A church that refuses accountability in the name of compassion may harm its members; a church that refuses compassion in the name of accountability may harm its leaders.

The seventh movement is continuing supervision and congregational learning. After the immediate conflict is addressed, pastors should provide follow-up. This may include scheduled supervision, peer support among cell leaders, training in conflict management, sabbath rhythms, formation in emotional health, and periodic review of cell ministry structures. If similar conflicts recur across groups, pastors should examine the system. Are leaders overburdened? Are members unclear about the purpose of the cell group? Are pastors communicating expectations inconsistently? Are cell groups being measured only by attendance and multiplication rather than health? Congregational learning occurs when the church allows local conflict to reveal systemic needs.

This framework contributes to pastoral practice by shifting the focus from crisis correction to leader formation. The cell group leader is not merely a ministry functionary but a person being formed in Christlike leadership. Servant leadership research emphasizes leader humility, empowerment, and follower development (Eva et al., 2019). Empirical work also links servant leadership and serving culture with healthier performance outcomes (Liden et al., 2014). In pastoral terms, this means the pastor must develop cell leaders as whole persons, not simply deploy them as ministry labor. A church that multiplies cell groups without caring for cell leaders may achieve structural growth while weakening spiritual health.

The framework also reframes pastoral authority. Authority is not minimized; it is disciplined. Pastors must sometimes correct, remove, or reassign leaders. However, such decisions should emerge from careful discernment rather than anxiety, favoritism, or institutional defensiveness. A differentiated pastor can remain connected to a hurting leader while also protecting the group. A servant pastor can empower leaders without exploiting them. A wise pastor can value unity while allowing necessary conflict to surface.

Finally, the framework answers the research problem by showing that pastoral counseling for internally conflicted cell group leaders must be integrative. It must include care for the soul, analysis of the system, attention to leadership roles, and commitment to restorative practice. The pastor's role is not simply to calm the leader but to interpret the conflict, protect the person, guide the relationships, clarify the role, and strengthen the church's capacity to learn.

## 5. Comparison

Compared with previous studies, this article offers a more specific and integrative contribution. Research on small groups has demonstrated the importance of group involvement for belonging and congregational participation (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). A related multilevel analysis connects small-group contexts with civic engagement (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015). Studies on clergy burnout have provided valuable insights into ministry stress and comparisons with helping professions (Adams et al., 2017). Research on clergy conflict-management style adds insight into burnout and turnover risk (Beebe, 2007). Studies of role differentiation show its relevance for pastoral burnout and job satisfaction (Frederick et al., 2022). Work on pastor burnout also demonstrates organizational consequences for churches (Fulmer & Sinclair, 2023). Church conflict studies, especially those informed by systems theory, explain anxiety and triangulation (Friedman, 1985). Anxiety has also been examined as a major cause of church conflict (Son, 2019). These studies require further translation into pastoral counseling processes for cell-based ministry.

The distinctive contribution of this article is its focus on the cell group leader as an intermediate pastoral actor. This position is structurally important because the leader stands between the pastor and the congregation, between vision and practice, and between spiritual care and organizational expectations. The article also contributes a constructive framework that moves from internal conflict diagnosis to restorative supervision. Its strength lies in combining pastoral theology, systems theory, servant leadership, psychological safety, and organizational conflict studies into a usable model for church practice.

The limitation is that the framework is conceptual and has not yet been empirically tested. It may need adaptation across denominations, cultures, governance structures, and theological traditions. Churches with hierarchical leadership may apply the model differently from congregational churches. Pentecostal-charismatic churches may require additional attention to prophecy, deliverance, spiritual warfare, and authority structures. Future research should test the framework through qualitative fieldwork with pastors and cell group leaders, case studies of churches with mature cell systems, and intervention research on pastoral supervision practices.

## 6. Conclusions

The role of pastors in pastoral counseling for cell group leaders experiencing internal conflict. It argued that such conflict should not be interpreted narrowly as personal weakness or lack of spirituality. Rather, it is a multidimensional phenomenon involving role strain, anxious triangulation, relational tension, spiritual-moral burden, and organizational pressure. Because cell group leaders occupy a strategic middle position in congregational life, their unresolved internal conflict can affect not only their personal well-being but also the health of the cell group and the wider church system.

The article answered its research objective by proposing that pastors serve as differentiated counselors, mediators, boundary keepers, and formative supervisors. Pastoral counseling should provide safe listening, theological meaning-making, conflict diagnosis, mediated

conversation, role clarification, restorative accountability, and continuing supervision. This model avoids two common reductions: treating conflict merely as a spiritual problem or treating counseling merely as administrative problem-solving.

The article's theoretical contribution is the integration of pastoral counseling, Bowen family systems theory, servant leadership, psychological safety, and organizational conflict theory into a framework for cell group ministry. The practical contribution is a structured approach that pastors can adapt when accompanying cell group leaders who struggle with hidden tension, emotional exhaustion, divided loyalty, or unresolved relational conflict. The ecclesial contribution is the claim that caring for cell group leaders is part of caring for the congregation itself.

The study is limited by its conceptual design. No new empirical data were collected, and the proposed framework requires testing in concrete church contexts. Future research should conduct interviews with pastors and cell group leaders, compare counseling practices across denominations, and examine how pastoral supervision affects leader resilience, conflict resolution, and cell group health. Nevertheless, this article provides a constructive basis for churches seeking to cultivate healthier leaders, wiser pastoral counseling, and more truthful communities.

### Author Contributions

Conceptualization: J.S.P.R. and G.W.; Methodology: J.S.P.R.; Formal analysis: B.M. and D.I.P.; Investigation: B.M.; Writing—original draft preparation: J.S.P.R. and D.I.P.; Writing—review and editing: G.W. and B.M.; Supervision: G.W.

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### Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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