

The Place of Psychology in the Counselling Ministry of Adventist Pastors in Southern Ghana

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ABSTRACT—This study was conducted to assess the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of Adventist pastors in southern Ghana. The researchers sought to find out the role psychology plays in counseling among the pastors, unearth the top three issues that members confront pastors with, and how pastors use psychological techniques to minister to these members. It was revealed that psychology is very essential in the counseling ministry of pastors. The study concludes that marital issues, work and career related issues, as well as spiritual issues accounted for the top three most common problems among church members. It was also revealed that pastors use various techniques to minister to members who confront them with their needs but the techniques mostly used are providing encouragement, listening to members, helping members make their own decisions, and offering prayers. Since the majority of pastors have had a minimum of a Bachelors degree, most of them had taken a course in psychology as part of their training but a majority of them acknowledged that they have not taken any additional workshop or short course training in psychological counseling. The researchers therefore recommend that pastors should be helped to take courses in Psychological counseling so as to improve their skills in the counseling ministry.

Keywords: Psychological counseling, Seventh-day Adventist pastors, Counseling techniques, Psychology

Manuscript received Dec. 21, 2016; revised Feb.1, 2017; accepted Feb. 20, 2017.

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I. Introduction

The work of the pastor has generally included the care of the overall wellbeing of members. This includes members' spiritual, physical, mental, and psycho-social wellbeing. This overall care stems from the fact that the work of the pastor can be described as the work of a shepherd. The people of God, over whom the pastor presides, are described metaphorically as God's "sheep" or "flock" (cf. Song of Solomon 1:8; Jeremiah 23:1, 2, 4; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:8; 1 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Peter 5:2; Jude 12.) who are always in need of shepherding (Jules, Cassimy, and Kennedy, 2009). God is often described in Scripture as the "Shepherd" of his people (cf. Psalm 23; John 10:11, 14; 1 Peter 5:4). Therefore, pastors are called upon to function as under-shepherds (cf. Jeremiah 3:15; 23:4; 10:21; 23:2; Ezekiel 34:2, 7, 8; 1 Peter 5:2). This work of shepherding includes offering special care and nurturing to members. Nurturing "leads in the direction of offering knowledge and understanding to the flock, giving oversight, being supportive, offering care and compassion, mediating between fighting sheep, bringing necessary correction to errant sheep, and offering prayerful intercession on behalf of the sheep" (Jules et al, 2009, pp. 150-151). This special pastoral care includes counseling of members and helping them to make informed decisions (White, 2010).

In a 1960 study, it was revealed that ministers are often called upon to give counseling (Feld and Feld, 1960). It was found that one in every seven interviewed had sought professional help for some kind of conflict or emotional problem and 42% of those who had sought professional help first went to a clergyman, 29% went to non-psychiatric physicians, and the remaining 31% sought out traditional mental health professionals. It is so clear that pastors are a major source of help for people who need any form of counselling. This demand has pushed almost all pastors to do some form of counselling as a way of providing the needed "shepherding" care to "God's flock" (i.e., their members).

This aspect of pastoral ministry poses a major problem. Some pastors do not have the requisite training in counseling and others resort to providing just any form of soothing words rather than systematically making use of counseling principles in addressing the needs of clients. Also, many are confused about the differences between a pastor who offers counseling and a professional clinical counselor. The counseling that a pastor may offer is quite different from that which a professional

clinical counselor might offer. Some authors have recognized the varied roles that clergy play in identifying and addressing mental health needs in their congregations (cf. Young, Griffith, and Williams, 2003; Jules, Cassimy, and Kennedy, 2009; Powlison, 2012). But a lot more needs to be done.

Young et al (2003) conclude that African-American urban ministers functioning as pastoral counselors constitute an engaging and useful group with experiences and skills that can be tapped by interested secular professionals. The clergy who participated in the study described a tendency to pray and quote scripture in their sessions and to include some references to confession and faith healing. They did tend to classify the problems they encountered among members of their congregations as religious or spiritual. In their dealings with these members, the study reveals, nearly three-quarters of the pastors identified a faulty relationship with God as a significant cause of mental illness. However, nine out of ten respondents pointed to stresses in living, and almost as many mentioned unhealthy early family relationships (Young et al, 2003). A replication of this type of research in the African context is important.

The researchers have observed that most pastors in Ghana have been involved in counselling as part of their shepherding work. It however seems most do not have the requisite training or the skills to apply the rudiments of counselling. This trend appears to be creating problems for members who may need psychological counselling. It is against this background that this paper seeks to study the trend among Adventist pastors in Southern Ghana. Hence, this research seeks to identify the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ghana. The paper surveys the role of Psychology in Counseling Ministry, and thereafter focuses on the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of Seventh-day Adventist pastors in Southern Ghana.

A. The Place of Psychology in Counseling Ministry

Psychology can be defined as the scientific study of behaviour and the mind or mental processes. According to the Nevada Psychological Association, “psychology embraces all aspects of the human experience- from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged.” Misconceptions in the understanding of psychology have wrongly placed practices such as telepathy, precognition, astrology and palm reading as pertaining to

psychology. True psychology has its basis in the scientific method rather than general, untestable, anecdotal-evidence theories or practices. As a whole, psychology is a new science with most advances occurring over the past 150 years (McLeod, 2011). In Ghana, the field of Psychology is less evolved but still growing. One such significant progress came in March 2012 with the passing of the Mental Health Bill, an act that hadn't occurred since 1972 when the previous mental health law was passed. The field of psychology is broad and consists of various sub-fields in clinical medicine, sports, education, forensics, etc. Psychologists who deliver clinical or counseling services evaluate and treat mental, emotional and behavioural disorders such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia. In Ghana, symptoms of psychological disorders have been attributed to spiritual causes. The attribution of psychological problems to spiritual causes is not uncommon in the broader history of psychology in Europe. Although Europe and America have largely moved away from such belief systems, the culture of Ghana and the pervasiveness of the Christian religious practice make it less likely for Ghana to follow the same trajectory. For this reason, rather than completely disregarding the assumed spiritual elements of psychological problems in Ghana, psycho-education is needed to broaden the current scope of understanding. The spiritual conceptualization of psychological disorders has come with a spiritual healing modality which has been shown to improve psychological problems (BasicNeeds, 2007).

People look to the church for spiritual support in times of distress. When a pastor counsels a person in distress, it is expected that the pastor inadvertently also address the psychology of the person and problem. Psychological distress can be defined as a state of emotional suffering that impacts the biopsychosocial (or biological, psychological and social) well-being of an individual. It exists on a continuum from mild to severe that mandates the counselor to be equipped with the requisite skills and training. Without the appropriate skills, psychological symptoms can worsen and lead even to death. A study by Lifeway Research supports the need for pastors to know their own boundaries when it comes to addressing psychological issues. This study also conveys how some manic episodes can look like signs of devotion or sacrifice and how some unhealthy faith expressions can actually be a symptom of mental illness. When a pastor is equipped with the skills and training that allows for the differentiation between expressions of spiritual devotion and mental illness, the pastor is better able to fulfill his role as an under-shepherd in his counseling ministry. With the right skills and training in psychology, a pastor might even be in a better position than the professional clinical

counselor to address psychological distress since the pastor will also have the spiritual sensitivities that the ordinary professional clinical counselor may not possess. Ideally though, because of the diversity in the training and experience of the pastor and the clinical counselor, the best option for dealing with an individual in serious psychological distress would be to jointly work together to provide both spiritual and professional clinical support.

Pastors can acquire the requisite skills and training to better deal with psychological distress after seminary training. Another option is to be trained from the onset as a pastoral counselor. Pastoral counseling can be used as a general term to describe the counseling services that pastors provide. Officially, the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) describes pastoral counseling as 'a unique form of counseling which uses spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for healing and growth.' According to Sigmund (2002), pastoral counselors with training in the behavioural sciences can help evaluate and treat patients who prefer psychotherapy that reflects their spiritual beliefs. The spiritual attribution of psychological problems can include the belief that psychological distress is as a result of or punishment for sin. Also, conflicts related to the misinterpretation of the Bible and the religious beliefs of church members can serve as a source of distress in addition to or separate from psychological issues that the pastoral counselor is well-equipped to address. Pastoral counselors, in addition to being able to address such issues are also trained to identify when psychotropic medication is needed or when they are being used to avoid psychiatric treatment (Sigmund, 2002). Even with pastoral counseling, care must be taken to offer services within the boundaries of care and practice. It is by this exercise that pastors are better able to address the psychological distress symptoms that members of the congregation present with in a responsible and ethical manner that does not deviate from the care that pastors are to provide. With pastoral counseling or training in psychology, pastors come to possess a wider range of empirical or evidence-based counseling modalities that have been shown to be effective.

B. Psychology and counseling ministry of Seventh-day Adventist pastors in Southern Ghana

The Seventh-day Adventist church is described as a worldwide church that is operated under an organized system. The system of church organization recognized by the church is representative, with ultimate

authority resting in the membership (General Conference, 2015, p. 26). The church recognizes the authority of pastors to function as shepherds for specific congregations. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* describes the work of the pastor to include spiritual care. The manual states that “by virtue of ordination, the pastor is qualified to function in all rites and ceremonies. The pastor should be the congregation’s spiritual leader and adviser” (General Conference, 2015).

In Ghana, pastors are normally employed to care for a group of local congregations called a “District.” District Pastors are burdened with the task of offering spiritual care for members of their various congregations. These pastors meet members who need pastoral or professional counseling. The question that remains unanswered is how psychology impacts the counseling ministry of these pastors. To assess the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of these Seventh-day Adventist pastors, this paper seeks to assess the top three issues that members seek counseling on, what counseling techniques pastors use to address members’ issues, and how psychology is used in dealing with these issues.

C. Scope and Method

This paper focuses on the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of Seventh-day Adventist pastors in Southern Ghana. This includes randomly selected pastors in ten conferences in the southern part of Ghana: namely, Accra City Conference, South-West Ghana Conference, East Ghana Conference, Volta Ghana Mission, Meridian Ghana Conference, Mountain View Ghana Conference, Pioneers Ghana Conference, Mid-South Ghana Conference, Diamond Ghana Conference, and Eastern View Ghana Conference. Also, the research is not focused on all aspects of the counseling ministry. While several aspects of counseling can be looked at, the paper narrows down to an assessment of the top issues that pastors are confronted with by members, the techniques that pastors use to address the issues and the use of psychology in helping members.

To assess these, the researchers designed a questionnaire which was uploaded online using Google docs. This simple and easy-to-answer questionnaire was sent to pastors on various social media networks and ministerial platforms. The questionnaires included both close-ended and open-ended questions that were designed to meet the goals of the research. It is difficult to determine how many pastors received the

questionnaire as some were posted and reposted without the knowledge of the authors. Out of the questionnaires sent out, however, 44 Adventist pastors from Southern Ghana responded. These consisted of Adventist pastors with various educational backgrounds, age groups, and ministerial experiences. The responses were put together and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The conclusions reached bring out the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of the pastors as well the issues they are mostly confronted with and the techniques they use in addressing them. These are discussed in detail.

II. Data Analysis and Discussion

The data for this research was gathered through questionnaires which were answered by 44 respondents, pastors from various conferences in the southern part of Ghana. This section presents the demographics of the respondents as well as the details of their responses and how they help answer the questions raised by this paper.

A. Demographics of respondents

The pastors were randomly selected from ten conferences in the Southern Ghana Union Conference as shown in Table 1. They are also from various age brackets, ministerial and educational backgrounds. The numbers and percentages of pastors in each demographic category who responded to the questionnaire are shown:

Table 1: Conference

	Frequency	Percent
Accra City Conference	11	25.0
Meridian Ghana Conference	7	15.9
East Ghana Conference	3	6.8
Eastern View Conference	4	9.1
Mountain View Conference	3	6.8
Diamond Field Conference	3	6.8
Mid-South Ghana Conference	3	6.8
Pioneers Ghana Conference	4	9.1
South-West Ghana Conference	4	9.1

	Frequency	Percent
Accra City Conference	11	25.0
Meridian Ghana Conference	7	15.9
East Ghana Conference	3	6.8
Eastern View Conference	4	9.1
Volta Ghana Conference	2	4.5
Total	44	100.0

The highest number of respondents was in the Accra City Conference. The uneven distribution of respondents in the various conferences is mainly because they were selected randomly. The questionnaire was shared electronically in the various social media platforms. The uneven distribution is also partly because of the numbers of pastors in the various conferences. Despite the uneven distribution, these researchers are confident the responses given are representative of all the Adventists ministers in Southern Ghana.

Table 2: Age Range

	Frequency	Percent
25-34 years old	29	65.9
35-44 years old	10	22.7
45-54 years old	2	4.5
55-64 years old	2	4.5
65 and above	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

The majority of respondents in this study were the young ministers within the age bracket of 25-34 years (Table 2). They made up 65.9% of all respondents. While this is because of the use of electronic questionnaire, the numbers are also a reflection of the numbers of ministers in the various fields in Ghana. The majority of pastors in the field today are young, hence their views might be expected to be highly representative of the views of their colleagues in the various fields.

Table 3: Length of Pastoral Ministry

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1 year	6	13.6
1-2 years	12	27.3
3-5 years	13	29.5
5-7 years	5	11.4
Over 7 years	8	18.2
Total	44	100.0

Because the majority of respondents are relatively young, most of them have fewer years in ministerial experience. 29.5% have been in ministry for about 3-5 years and 27.3% have been in ministry for 1-2 years. Though few, pastors who have been in the ministry for over 7 years are also represented (18.2%). This ensures a balanced presentation of ideas and the varied experience levels will present views from various angles.

Table 4: Highest Educational Qualification

	Frequency	Percent
Doctorate	1	2.3
Masters	10	22.7
Bachelors	32	72.7
Other	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

It is shown in Table 4 above that the majority of respondents (72.7%) have a Bachelors degree. This is probably because most pastors are employed based on their Bachelors degree. As a result only a few continue on to study for a Masters or Doctoral Degree. The fact that the responses are from people who hold degrees of various levels is indicative that the responses can be reliable.

B. Background in Psychological Studies

To understand the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of pastors, the research also sought to assess the background of respondents in the study of Psychology. The focus was to find out the number of

courses they had taken in Psychology as part of their ministerial training and workshops and/or short courses they had taken in psychological counseling.

Since the majority of respondents had a minimum of a Bachelors degree, most of them had taken a course in Psychology as part of their training. 45.5% have taken at least one course in Psychology, 25.0% have taken two courses, 9.1% have taken 3 courses and 11.4% have taken more than 3 courses. With only 9.1% reporting to have taken no courses in Psychology, it can be concluded that the average Adventist pastor in southern Ghana has some basic knowledge in psychology.

In addition to taking one, two or three course(s) as part of ministerial training, the research sought to find out what extra training pastors have taken in psychological counseling. It was revealed that a majority (45.5%) of respondents have not taken any additional workshop or short course training in psychological counseling. Out of 44 respondents, only 2 (4.5%) responded that they have taken “some workshop/short course training” in psychological counseling. The remaining pastors responded that they took “a few workshops/short course training” (20.5%) or “one workshop/short course training” in psychological counseling (29.5%).

C. Top Three Presenting Issues

This research also aimed at finding out the top three issues that pastors are mostly confronted with by members. In an open-ended manner, pastors were asked to state the top five issues that members presented with for counseling. Out of the 44 respondents, only one person gave a single broad response of “family issues.” Although 9 out of 44 respondents (20.5%) provided less than the expected 5 responses, their answers still fell above the targeted top three issues. Respondents mostly answered with one to three-word statements with only four respondents giving more than three worded responses such as, “loss of a loved one” or “making a decision on something.” Out of the 44 pastors, 40 of them (90.9%) reported marriage or marital issues as the most common presenting problem among church members. The second most common presenting problem identified by pastors were work, job or career related with 27 out of 44 pastors (61.4%) indicating this. Finally, 20 out of 44 pastors, (45.5%) reported that spiritual issues (including “spiritual life” and “spiritual attacks”) were a common problem faced by church members. This research therefore concludes

that the top three issues that members confront pastors with are marital/marriage issues, work/career issues, and spiritual issues.

D. Psychological Counseling Techniques

This research further sought to assess the counseling techniques used by pastors to help members in their issues. The questionnaire included questions that were meant to find out if Adventist pastors have used some psychological counseling skills with church members and the most common ways in which they handled cases brought before them by members. The responses are as follows:

A majority (75%) of the pastors claim that they have used some psychological counseling skills with their members. 4 out of 40 pastors (9.1%) reported that they have not used any psychological counseling skills while 7 out of 40 respondents (15.9%) indicated that it was possible they may have used some psychological counseling skills but didn't know it.

One cannot be sure if the 75% who claim they have used psychological counseling skills on members have done so appropriately. To get this properly investigated, a question was asked regarding the most common counseling technique used by pastors. The answers to this question revealed the following:

A majority of pastors (72.7%) endorsed "mostly encouragement" as a common counseling technique that was used with members. "Mostly listening to them" and "Mostly helping them make their own decisions" tied as the second most recognized counseling techniques (68.2%) that were used among 30 out of 44 pastors. Praying with church members was also considerably endorsed by 29 out of 40 pastors (65.9%) as a counseling technique that was used with church members. Mostly making biblical references (61.4%), mostly analyzing the situation (61.4%), and mostly giving advice (50%), though highly endorsed by many pastors, are below the top three techniques used by pastors. It is quite encouraging to realize that only 13.6% of pastors endorsed "mostly giving mini-sermons" as a common counseling technique they used.

It is quite clear from the study that the pastors need further training to gain more skills in counseling. It was noted that 43 out of 44 (97.7%) pastors believe that training in psychology is helpful in their counseling work. The single respondent whose answer differs simply answered maybe. This response seems to reveal that the pastors generally feel they

still need more training to function appropriately. This is reflected in the question seeking to find out if they are also willing to enrol in a psychological counselling course over a period. Because they believe it would be beneficial, 97.7% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in enrolling in a Psychological counseling course. Choosing various preferred durations between 6 weeks and 1 year, all except one have expressed interest in enrolling in such a course. It therefore behooves on church leadership to make arrangements to ensure pastors get the required training.

E. Implications

Results of this research showed that the majority of respondents had a minimum of a Bachelors degree and had taken a course in psychology as part of their training. 45.5% had taken at least one course in Psychology, 25.0% had taken two courses, 9.1% had taken 3 courses and 11.4% had taken more than 3 courses. While this is better than no course at all, much more training in psychology is needed to equip pastors with the appropriate tools to better handle psychological issues among church members. It will be important that leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Ghana take note of the implications of these figures and act appropriately.

Providing encouragement, a listening ear, prayer and assistance in helping members make their own decisions as reported in the survey are techniques that can be broadened with training in psychological counseling. For example, with the most common presenting problem of members being marital or marriage issues, skills and training in cognitive behavioural couples therapy or integrative behavioural couples therapy could equip pastors with more tools for helping members facing marital crises. With regard to assisting the second most endorsed problem of work and career related issues, training in psychological counseling could broaden the approach of pastors to include discussions on personality-career matches to referrals for psychological assessments to assist in career pursuit or direction decisions. In addressing the third most prevalent presenting issue (i.e., spiritual issues) training in psychological counseling techniques could equip the pastor with skills to make communication and encouragement more effective. For example, pastors could employ empathic listening skills to let members feel more heard and understood during counseling sessions. Also, pastors could learn psychological counseling modalities that are targeted at empowering members towards making their own decisions. For this reason, it is

quite encouraging that most of the pastors have expressed a willingness to enroll in a training course in psychological counseling when they have the opportunity. Such a course will expose them to various counseling techniques and therapies and hence their ministry will be enhanced.

III. Conclusion

This paper has evolved from the background that the work of the pastor has generally included attending to the overall spiritual, physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing of members. This work which can be likened to the nurturing work of the shepherd consists of offering knowledge and understanding to the flock, giving oversight, being supportive, offering care and compassion, mediating between fighting sheep, bringing necessary correction to errant sheep, and offering prayerful intercession on behalf of the sheep” (Jules et al, 2009, pp. 150-151). According to White (2010), this special pastoral care includes the counseling of members and helping them to make informed decisions.

The paper notes that Psychology is a young science of about 150 years old. This field is even less developed in Ghana although strides are being made to catch up to the advances witnessed in the developed world. In Ghana, symptoms of psychological disorders have been attributed to spiritual elements just as they have in the history of psychology in Europe. With a large population of Ghanaians believing in a higher power, and the pervasiveness of Christianity in Ghana, it is far less likely for the spiritual attribution of psychological problems to be a thing of the past. For this reason, rather than completely disregarding the assumed spiritual linkage of psychological problems in Ghana, psychology and spirituality must work hand in hand to bring about healing among church members. This is especially imperative given the tendency for pastors to be the first line of help when it comes to psychological problems.

Although pastoral counseling is loosely described as the counseling that is given by a pastor, the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) describes pastoral counseling as ‘a unique form of counseling which uses spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for healing and growth.’ In this way, pastoral counseling presents the needed marriage between spirituality and psychology that forms a more complete basis for addressing psychological distress among church members. Sometimes, spiritual issues are the source of psychological disturbances and in this way, pastoral counseling serves as the right modality for addressing such issues among members. Other

times, psychotropic medication is needed and training in pastoral counseling equips pastors with the training to know when a referral to a psychiatrist is needed. With pastoral counseling or sufficient training in psychology, pastors come to possess a wider range of empirical or evidence-based counseling modalities that have been shown to be effective.

Results of this study reveal that further training in psychological counseling will be a great resource for pastors in their counseling ministry. They can better relate with members in handling their issues, offering better help, and assisting them in making informed decisions. Since the study showed that 9.1% pastors took no psychology courses as part of their training, it would be important to train them further. Also, a majority of respondents (45.5%) acknowledged that they have not taken any additional workshop or short course training in psychological counseling. This makes the need for further psychological training paramount. It is therefore impressive that 97.7% of pastors believe that training in psychology is helpful in their counseling and would enroll in a psychological counseling course, thus endorsing the place of psychology in the counseling ministry of Adventist pastors in southern Ghana.

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