

Study: Seminaries fail to train pastors to help mentally ill congregants

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WACO—People struggling with mental illness often turn to pastors for help, but seminaries do little to train ministers in how to recognize serious psychological distress and when to refer someone to a doctor or psychologist, a [Baylor University](#) study reveals.

Matthew S. Stanford “Many people in congregations continue to suffer under well-meaning pastors who primarily tell them to pray harder or confess sin in relation to mental health problems,” researchers wrote in the study, published in the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*.

Nearly half of all Americans will meet diagnosis criteria for at least one mental disorder in their lifetime, and in a given 12-month period, more than 25 percent of Americans meet that criteria, said lead researcher [Matthew S. Stanford](#), professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University. Halle E. Ross, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Baylor, worked with Stanford on the research.

The article—“Training and Education of North American Master’s of Divinity Students in Relation to Serious Mental Illness”—is based on a survey of 70 seminaries in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, with 14 church traditions represented.

Earlier research by Stanford showed many families affected by mental illnesses leave the churches, and many church communities seem to ignore their need.

An overwhelming majority of Americans—95 percent—claim to believe in God, and 42 percent report attending church in the past week, according to previous research.

Clergy vs. psychiatrists

“Perhaps for these reasons, clergy are pursued more often in times of emotional distress than other professions, and perhaps more commonly than psychologists and psychiatrists combined,” the current study notes.

Complicating the issue, some antagonism exists between clergy members and psychologists. That is largely because clergy do not fully understand all the services psychologists provide, and psychologists tend to be less religious than the general population, previous research by Stanford showed.

While pastors should not be expected to make psychiatric diagnoses, they do have a “gatekeeper” responsibility to provide interventions for which they are qualified or to refer an individual to an appropriate professional, Stanford said.

Because pastors often are concerned about the role sin may play in psychological distress—and how that will be handled in therapy—they are more likely to refer congregants to psychologists who share their religious values.

Most of the counseling classes offered by seminaries focused on premarital counseling, couples counseling, family counseling or grief counseling. The survey showed 59 of the seminaries—88 percent—offered courses in which the topic of mental health was addressed in some way, although it may not have been a counseling course. And of the 30 seminaries that offered counseling courses, only 21 offered a course or courses specifically dedicated to mental illness, according to the study.

Lack of counseling electives offered

Students often were not able to find time in their program requirements to take counseling courses as electives, said directors of master's of divinity programs. And even if they did, "there was a distinct lack of counseling elective options for the M.Div. student who wants to become a pastor," the study found.

While seminaries offered many types of internships, none were in organizations in which students would regularly interact with mentally ill people, researchers said.

Seminaries were asked to provide their official stance on the subject of mental illness, but they overwhelmingly responded that no such official stance exists.

Because there is no cohesive theological position on mental illness, Christian church members throughout the nation do not receive a similar standard of referrals, respect and support from their pastors and other congregation members, the study concluded.

"In order for the church to move past the belief that all mental illness is the result of spiritual warfare or a personal failing, the church must come together to discuss the views of mental illness and establish a systematic stance on the topic, taking into consideration both the biological and spiritual aspects of sin."