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# What Evangelical Pastors Want to Know about Psychology

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# WHAT EVANGELICAL PASTORS WANT TO KNOW ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY

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Increasing attention has been given to psychologist-clergy collaboration in mainstream psychology journals, yet much remains to be considered regarding how these collaborative relationships will benefit the work of pastors and Christian congregations. The purpose of this research was to evaluate clergy perspectives regarding what psychologists can offer to facilitate the ministry of the church. Various methods of assessment were used, including a survey of evangelical pastors, responses to an open-ended question via electronic mail and in person, and a focus group of Christian mental health practitioners. Respondents indicated an interest in the relationship of sin and psychological disorder, interventions particularly related to marriage and family counseling, understanding of diverse personalities in dealing with church conflict, understanding of psychological disorders, and methods of caring for their personal needs as pastors. Recommendations are offered for those interested in collaborating with clergy.

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A central aspect of the work of pastors throughout Christian history has been their attention to the ministry of soul care. Contemporary psychology and psychotherapies are also concerned with the "care of souls," addressing the psychological and emotional needs of people. Though new models of caring in contemporary psychologies have been enriching resources for the church (Stone, 1980; Browning, 1976), the rise of modern psychotherapies has also presented an unprecedented challenge to the healing ministry of

the church by seemingly overlapping with what had once been a unique and distinct domain and mission of the church (Kemp, 1947). According to Benner (1998), the tension and competition created by this apparent overlap contributed to the inappropriate and theologically incorrect separation of the spiritual and the psychological aspects of persons. Increasing acceptance of this distinction over the past century has in many circles resulted in compartmentalization of responsibilities in soul care, with the church considered relevant only to spiritual well-being while psychologists attend to mental and emotional well-being. Yet we contend that soul care remains the domain and mission of the church. Approximately 4 out of 10 Americans report that they would seek assistance from members of the clergy in times of personal distress (Weaver et al., 1997). The need is clear for clergy and psychologists to reunite the care of souls and rejoin their efforts in delivering services to those in need.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in religious beliefs and values in the scientific arena and an awareness of religious issues in the mental health profession. Increasing attention has been given to psychology-clergy collaboration in mainstream psychological journals (Benes, Walsh, McMinn, Dominguez, & Aikins, in press; Budd, 1999; Edwards, Lim, McMinn, & Dominguez, 1999; McMinn, Chaddock, Edwards, Lim, & Campbell, 1998; Plante, 1999). Three themes can be distilled from these recent publications. First, though collaboration between psychologist and clergy is not occurring at a high rate (McMinn et al., 1998), some psychologists and clergy are finding innovative ways to collaborate that go well beyond a pastor referring a parishioner for psychological treatment (Aikins &

McMinn, 2000; Benes et al., in press; Budd, 1999; Edwards et al., 1999; Plante, 1999). Second, effective collaboration requires relationships in which clergy are valued as co-professionals and trust is established (Aikins & McMinn, 2000). Third, there is interest in finding ways to view religious communities as a locus of care (Benes et al., in press), thus requiring Christian psychologists to think outside of the traditional methods of service delivery and to consider ways that psychology can be applied in the context of the Church. All three of these themes require ongoing dialog between clergy and psychologists. The purpose of this article is to contribute to this dialogue by inquiring about clergy perspectives regarding what psychologists can offer to facilitate the soul care ministry of the church.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

This study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and participants for each methodology were drawn from separate sources. For the quantitative analysis, a list of randomly selected evangelical pastors was obtained from American Church Lists, Incorporated. Pastors included belonged to denominations affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals. Of the 400 pastors to whom surveys were sent, 37 were undeliverable. Of the 363 who could have responded, 105 returned completed or partially completed surveys, resulting in a usable return rate of 28.9%.

For the purposes of qualitative analysis, four separate convenience samples of data were collected. First, a focus group of 13 Christian mental health practitioners from a large group practice (3 psychiatrists, 2 psychologists, 4 licensed clinical professional counselors, 1 licensed clinical social worker, and 1 pre-doctoral and 1 post-doctoral intern) were interviewed regarding their perspectives and experience with clergy-psychologist collaboration, using a semi-structured interview. Second, 27 written responses to a single question were obtained from participants at a conference for mini-church lay pastors in Chicago. The question was: "If you were considering taking a seminar or reading a book by a Christian psychologist, what topic(s) would you find most useful for your work in the Church, and why?" Third, 41 pastors from diverse denominational backgrounds responded by email to the same question regarding information desired from psychologists. Fourth, of

the 105 respondents to the quantitative survey, 18 offered comments in response to an open-ended question: "Please offer suggestions of other issues for chapters that you believe would be beneficial to pastors and lay ministers in the Church related to the place of psychology in the ministry of the Church."

### *Materials*

The survey questionnaire was divided into two main sections. First, participants responded to a list of 27 possible book chapter titles and descriptions and asked to rate how useful they would consider it to their ministry. The list of book chapters was derived from discussions among the authors, and was not intended to be a homogenous list that would yield high internal consistency—rather, it was intended as a diverse list of possible psychology-related topics that might be of use to clergy. Usefulness of each book chapter was rated on a five-point scale: 1 = I definitely would not read it, 3 = Maybe/Unsure, or 5 = I definitely would read it. Participants were also asked to offer suggestions of other issues for chapters that they believed would be beneficial to pastors and lay ministers related to the place of psychology in the ministry of the Church.

### *Procedure*

Surveys were mailed in October, 1999, with a cover letter describing the purpose of the study, and participants were asked to return their completed survey in a postage-paid envelope. The envelopes had a code to identify who had returned the survey; but, because surveys were completed anonymously and separated from the envelopes upon receipt, none of the survey responses could be traced to individual respondents. This assured anonymity for those completing the survey. We included a return postcard with the first mailing by which respondents could request an email copy of the results of the study upon its completion. Those who had not yet returned the survey after five weeks were sent another questionnaire packet.

## RESULTS

### *Quantitative Data*

Of those responding to the survey, 102 (97.1%) were male, and 3 (2.9%) were female. The average age of respondents was 48, ranging from 30 to 74. The number of years in the ministry ranged from 2

**Table 1**

Topic of Interest	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Sin and Problems in Living	105	4.4	1.0
Marital Counseling	105	4.3	1.0
Family Counseling	105	4.3	1.0
Parenting	105	4.2	1.0
Divorce	105	4.2	1.0
Counseling Adolescents	105	4.2	1.0
Dealing with Difficult People	105	4.2	1.1
Dealing with Angry People	105	4.1	1.1
Grief	104	4.0	0.9
Stress Management	103	4.0	1.1
Human Sexuality	105	3.9	1.1
Christian Psychotherapy	105	3.9	1.0
Care of Elderly	104	3.7	0.9
Spiritual Formation and Faith Development	104	3.7	1.1
Care of the Mentally Ill	104	3.7	1.0
Scriptural and Theological Foundations	105	3.6	1.2
Psychiatry and Medications	105	3.6	1.2
Psychopathology	105	3.6	1.1
Psychotherapy & Pastoral Care	105	3.6	1.1
Collaboration: Is it possible?	105	3.5	1.0
Ministry Program Effectiveness	104	3.5	1.1
Human Development & Ministry	104	3.4	1.0
Utilizing MH Professionals Outside of the Church	104	3.4	1.1
Utilizing MH Professionals Inside of the Church	104	3.4	1.0
Psychology and Human Functioning	104	3.2	1.0
Organizational Development	103	3.1	1.1
Contemporary and Historical Perspectives	105	3.0	1.1

to 48 years, with a mean of 20 years; 92 (87.6%) were ordained and 13 (12.4%) were not. Respondents spent an average of 4.8 hours per week counseling (range from 0 to 20 hours), and referred out an average of 1.8 parishioners per month for counseling (range from 0 to 13).

The ranked means for various topics on the survey are presented in Table 1A repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant overall differences among the various topics, Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.25$ ,  $F(26, 74) = 8.3$ ,  $p < .001$ , meaning that some topics were perceived as significantly more relevant to pastors than others. Once the topics were rank ordered, we computed

profile analyses of adjacent means, using a conservative alpha of .01 to control for Type I error, to see which topics were rated as significantly more relevant than the topics on either side. These profile analyses revealed only one difference—between the third and fourth items on the ranked list (family counseling and parenting),  $t(104) = 2.5$ ,  $p = .01$ .

#### *Qualitative Data*

The data from qualitative sources were imported into the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD\*IST 4, 1997) software package for qualitative analysis. Several prominent themes emerged, and are summarized in Table 2

**Table 2**

Theme	Examples
Sin and Pathology	<p>“What I would like to see is that there be less of a disconnect between psychology and theology. After all, aren’t we all “soul-carers?” I agree with Dr. Larry Crabb who makes the point that actually proper counseling is really giving people a proper understanding of deep theological truths that are somehow flawed in us because we believe lies, instead of God’s amazing truth. Please don’t take this as a “simplistic” answer. I am fully aware of people’s intense struggle, and have dealt with everything from suicide, depression, eating disorders, sexual abuse, etc. I am by no means claiming to be an expert. However, I feel as if my best resource is still God’s word, deeply impacting people to their very core, changing them by His Spirit.”</p> <p>“How do the truths about what Christ has done for us and the awareness of our own sinfulness affect our behavior, relationships, etc. How can the Gospel and the truths of redemption affect true inner transformation? In short, a psychological theology of sanctification? Larry Crabb gets close but does not go far enough in the area of personal renewal and change resulting from the Gospel and the power of redemption. If we are in Christ we are free, we are accepted, we are forgiven, but we are still sinners. These truths have to get from our textbooks, and minds, and into our hearts. [Sorry for the preaching but someone could really run with this].”</p> <p>“I think that Dr. Jay Adams in <i>Competent to Counsel</i> says all that needs to be said. Minirth and Meier in their early and sound days (<i>Happiness is a Choice</i>) is also useful. Adams has said that you do not so much counsel unbelievers, you evangelize them. Believers are best helped by the application of Scriptural truth to their lives. Psychology really does not seem to fit well with the church.”</p>
Care for Pastors	<p>“Ministerial stress and its relation to ministerial functions.”</p> <p>“Time prioritization. In this day and age, more and more ‘things’ are thrown into our schedules. As I try to provide a single income household, working a 60-hour work week, I find myself feeling guilty or angry as I give more time in leadership at church, because I’m limited with family time. How/when do I draw the line?”</p> <p>“First, the healing of past wounds ... you know, dealing with your own garbage.”</p> <p>“Why do pastors fall so easily into addictive behaviors like workaholism, adultery, pornography?”</p>
Dealing with Diverse Personalities	<p>“The psychological question that I’d like to have answered is how to help people accommodate others. Sometimes a disagreement in the church is not a matter of right and wrong, but a matter of taste. Some people like things one way and others like them another way. How does a pastor get his people to understand and accommodate differences in personality and style?”</p> <p>“I would be most likely to read something related to the issue of conflict management in relationship to personality types. Pastors must be skilled in managing conflict and helping people to grow in their ability to understand one another if they are to make progress in accepting and loving one another.”</p>
Interventions (emphasis on marriage and family)	<p>“To develop further counseling skills ... ones that are intentional. Most pastors just listen and try to offer helpful comments, but more is needed. When I went through seminary I had one course in counseling. That’s 1 hour out of a 102 semester-hour degree. Yet 50% of my work as a pastor has been counseling. That’s just not right.”</p> <p>“Issues of most interest would be marriage and family counseling. Particularly, helping people to understand how their personality strengths and weaknesses come to play in their relationship together and with their children. Included in this would be helping dysfunctional families to understand their problems and practical ways for them to overcome these problems.</p> <p>In my work the problems I’ve encountered have almost always involved problems in the family.”</p>

(Table 2 continues next page)

**Table 2 (continued)**

Theme	Examples
Understanding Psychological Disorders	“I would be interested in helping people with mental illness—how to understand them, how to set limits, and how to detect signs that the person is at risk.” “In answer to your survey question, I would find most useful a seminar or book dealing with abnormal behaviors, both extreme, excessive behaviors (e.g., disorders like schizophrenia) and those not necessarily viewed as such (e.g., ADD). As a minister, I am running into more and more cases of such behaviors, and I am concerned with what I perceive to be a steady increase of such problems in our society.” “I am thinking of diagnostic kinds of information that would help me to better understand the people I minister to and the situations in which I deal with them. I think that that is probably what would be most helpful.”

**DISCUSSION**

*Area of Expressed Interest*

Evangelical pastors in this study expressed interest in the relationship of psychology and theology, particularly the interface between theological views of sin and psychological dysfunction. Some of the comments in Table 2 illustrate the effort some pastors are making to understand the connection between spiritual problems and psychological problems. It appears that they are asking similar questions that many Christian psychologists are asking and are reading the books authored by some of these Christian psychologists. However, evangelical pastors are not inclined to abandon theological explanations in favor of more contemporary psychological theories. They hold firm to the assumption that theological and spiritual truths have healing power beyond that which can be found in the modern psychotherapies. The theologically grounded views of persons valued by pastors in this study are complemented with a genuine interest in some of the practical helping methods coming out of psychology, with particular interest in marriage and family interventions. Pastors encounter many forms of family difficulty in their congregations and value opportunities to enhance their counseling skills in these areas. It is interesting to note that four of the top five categories of interest on the quantitative survey are related to marriage and family issues.

Pastors minister to people with a variety of personalities, and sometimes face frustrating situations as they try to work with people who are difficult to understand. Not surprisingly, the pastors participating in this research wanted help working with diffi-

cult and angry people. They also wanted a better understanding of the personality dynamics involved in disagreements within their churches. Additionally, they expressed interest in understanding mental illness as a way of better understanding some of their parishioners.

Pastors are also interested in learning about themselves and tending to their own emotional struggles. The demands placed on pastors are high, and several of our respondents were forthright about a need for better self-care and care from others. Though this topic was not included on the quantitative survey questionnaire, it would be a fruitful area for more systematic research.

*Areas with Surprisingly Little Interest*

Perhaps what is most striking from the responses we received from evangelical pastors is not what was included in their responses, but what was left out. As we have already noted, increasing attention has been paid to psychologist-clergy collaboration among those in the field of psychology; however, none of the pastors in our sample seemed to be advocating an intentional collaborative model of care between psychologists and clergy. In addition, many aspects of the skills and information resources that psychologists possess and could potentially offer to those in pastoral ministry were absent from survey responses. For example, no mention was made of psychologists' expertise in areas of psychological assessment, consultation, program evaluation, community psychology or organizational and system assessment. We suspect this reflects a lack of awareness of the various "hats" that psychologists wear. Pastors may

see psychologists as counselors while overlooking the other skills they can bring into a collaborative relationship.

### *Additional Observations*

The low response rate is troubling from a methodological perspective, but is perhaps important information nonetheless. We used a similar survey procedure used with other surveys that have produced much higher return rates among other professionals and a consistently low return rate among pastors. For example, Meek and McMinn (1999) used a similar procedure with psychologists and obtained a 68% response rate. McMinn et al. (1998) surveyed psychologists and clergy and obtained a response rate of 30% from clergy and a 51% from psychologists. Chaddock and McMinn (1999) surveyed pastors and obtained a 29% response rate. The picture that emerges is that many clergy are not inclined to return psychologists' surveys. Though there are many possible interpretations of this observation, it is possible that this response rate reflects a disinterest or perceived distance between clergy and psychologists. The majority of psychologists who receive a survey from a psychology department at a Christian college complete it, presuming that the research is worth their time and effort. However, the majority of clergy do not complete the surveys they receive from a psychology department at the same Christian college, perhaps because they do not perceive the research of Christian psychologists to be worth their time and effort. Perhaps their reluctance to participate is warranted. To what extent are Christian psychologists contributing to the vitality and well-being of evangelical congregations?

### *Recommendations for Psychologists*

How can bridges be built between clergy and psychologists interested in collaborating for the sake of facilitating vibrant, healthy communities of faith? Previous work on clergy-psychologist collaboration underscores the importance of shared values and a trusting relationship as prerequisites to collaboration (Aikins & McMinn, 2000; Chaddock & McMinn, 1999; Kloos, Horneffer, & Moore, 1995; McMinn et al., 1998). Building on shared values requires a common language for effective communication between evangelical psychologists and pastors. From a historical perspective, it seems reasonable that the well-

established language of Christian theology should be used. The present study demonstrates that pastors are interested in wrestling with the relationship of psychopathology and sin, but they must first find psychologists interested in talking about sin. Psychologists committed to collaborating with clergy need to learn the theological concepts and language that allows them to share informed dialog. Simply reciting diagnostic criteria for a particular disorder will not be satisfying to clergy who tend to think beyond diagnostic manuals to grapple with the theological anthropology that underlies specific symptoms. Psychologists who lack the ability to do this may not find clergy open to collaborating.

A trusting relationship, another prerequisite for building effective collaboration, requires psychologists to perceive clergy as co-professionals. If psychologists perceive themselves to be the experts in soul-care, and ask pastors to confidently share this assumption by referring parishioners, then an imbalanced unidirectional relationship is being attempted. This sort of relationship may feel collaborative to the psychologist, but may seem lop-sided to the pastor (Meylink & Gorsuch, 1988). One way to correct the imbalance of this sort of relationship is to offer psychological expertise to clergy via consultation. Because many pastors are involved in counseling interventions of various sorts (an average of 5 hours per week in this sample), psychologists committed to collaboration can provide consultation via telephone, regularly scheduled meetings, or workshops to support pastors in the work they are doing within their church congregations. This requires a shift in perspective, from "let me work with your troubled parishioners" to "how can I support you in your work with troubled parishioners." This consultation model has been applied very successfully in some contexts (e.g., Benes et al., in press).

Having made these recommendations, we are also aware of the potential reluctance of some to build these bridges. Collaboration will not be a shared goal for every psychologist or every pastor. But for those who are interested, there is much that we can learn from each other in our ministries of care and much benefit that can be realized for those we serve.

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