An Assessment of Church Leaders' Skill in Counselling in the Accra Metropolis

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Abstract

This study investigates the counselling competencies of church leaders within the Accra Metropolis in terms of providing effective guidance and counselling services. The research examines whether church leaders possess the requisite skills for counselling and discusses the influence of perceived closeness to God on their counselling abilities. A mixed-methods approach was utilised, with purposive sampling of eight churches and two seminaries. The sample entailed 85 church leaders and lecturers who completed questionnaires, plus 15 church members who had received counselling. Quantitative data were cleaned, described and subjected to chi-square tests. Among key findings, the study revealed that the counselling training courses significantly enhanced competencies among participating church leaders. Female counsellors also tended to facilitate the clients in thinking about the problems for themselves. Thus, such research emphasises professional counselling training among church leaders, which entails systemic programs that aim to develop particular competencies. First of all, allowing the provision of professional counselling channels, then the legislative support towards mandatory training, followed by the development of counselling courses within the theological study. The paper contributes to the narrowing of the gap between spiritual guidance and professional counselling within religious institutions.

Keywords: Counselling, Skills, Church, Leaders

Introduction

This article offers a critical analysis of the practice and study of pastoral care and counselling in Ghana. The essential goal is to present an article about what is considered a more holistic approach to pastoral care and counselling in the country. It also aims to provide a resource for pastoral care and counselling.

Although articles on counselling seem to be increasing in number by the month, there are relatively few on pastoral counselling in Ghana. The particular relevance of and need for this is the fact that it treats pastoral counselling as something to be done professionally, which takes into consideration psychological, physiological and

sociological needs. It is an approach that offers pastoral counselling as a profession beyond the morality in which most pastoral counsellors now live.

The researcher aims to broaden and deepen the current understanding of pastoral counselling within the counselling profession by moving it from an unprofessional approach in Ghana to a professional one. The critical question within the pastoral counselling literature seems to be, "How competent is the church leader/pastor to offer counselling services?" Thus, the ever-growing field of professional counselling training has been born to assist church leaders in counselling to understand their clients and themselves.

This is an important question and various attempts have been and are being made to respond to it in terms of research, training and publications. It is an accepted fact that the mindset in the way in which the question is posed has led to particular ways of responding. At the heart of most religious traditions including Christianity lays an injunction to care, to love and or to pay attention to self and others. Such teaching concerning care is very often enshrined in the training and practice of the religious functionaries who have leadership and oversight of devotees. However, some church leaders do not have the competencies to handle such care. Another major related question, emanating more recently from Christianity and society at large is whether counselling by church leaders is effective. The church leader as a counsellor is expected to help such person(s) to develop his or her hidden abilities and to self-actualize. This can only be done by a church leader who is competent in counselling.

The church leader as a counsellor is expected to help such person(s) to develop his or her hidden abilities and to self-actualize. This can only be done by a church leader who is competent in counselling. The church is the community of all assumed true believers for all times. This definition understands the church to be made up of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5: 25). Here the term "church" is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ.

Jesus Christ himself builds the church by calling his people to himself. He promised, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). The church is invisible, yet visible. In its spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible. This is because we cannot see the conditions of people's hearts. It is assumed that we can see those who outwardly attend the church, and we can see outward evidence of inward spiritual, change, but we cannot see into people's hearts and view their spiritual state God can do that.

The church is local and universal. In the New Testament the word "Church" may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home to the group of all true believers in the universal church. To help us understand the nature of the church, the scriptures use a wide range of metaphors and

images, for example, Paul views the church as a family. In other metaphors, scriptures compare the church to branches on a vine (John 15:5). The Church is assumed to be composed of all types of people saved and others unsaved; church members may have different problems for which they may require help. This is why church leaders require competence in counselling to enable them to discharge their duties as counsellors effectively.

Statement of the Problem

This writer has observed that the proliferation of churches has led to many people joining the leadership of the church. Due to this phenomenon, many of these leaders are likely to be untrained and therefore lack competencies in counselling. The emergence of churches is not bad but more of their leaders who are not trained counsellors claim to be counsellors. Since they are not trained how do they help people? More of the church leaders are coming in as counsellors without being trained. The question is how competent are these counsellors? This study seeks to investigate whether or not the church leaders have the requisite skills to offer Guidance and counselling services.

Objectives of the Study

The researcher intends to investigate:
1. Whether or not church leaders have the requisite skills to offer Guidance and Counselling services
2. Whether church leaders take advantage of counselling programmes

The writer intends to fully investigate the phenomenon through the administration of questionnaires, interviews and where possible direct observation.

Research questions
1. To what extent do church leaders take advantage of counselling?
2. To what extent do church leaders allow their clients to think through their problems?
3. What are the requisite skills of church leaders to offer counselling services?

Literature Review
Introduction

The role of counselling in the pastoral ministry has become one of the most important aspects of deliberation amongst church leaders and practitioners. With the increasing demands for the church leader to become a counsellor, there is a great need to reconsider, critically, what counselling involves in religious contexts and the competencies that are needed for effective pastoral practice.

Counselling

Counselling is broadly defined as working with individuals or relationships, addressing developmental, crisis, psychotherapeutic, guiding, or problem-solving needs. It provides an opportunity for clients to explore, clarify, and develop ways of living more satisfactorily and resourcefully (British Association of Counselling, 1984). It denotes a professional relationship between a trained counsellor and a client, typically on a one-on-one basis, though it may involve more participants. Burks and Stefflre (1979) describe counselling as a process that helps clients understand their life circumstances and make informed, meaningful choices to resolve emotional or interpersonal challenges.

Contemporary Pastoral Care

Pastoral care today represents a modern expression of the age-old practice of religious caregiving. It involves a profound concern for the human experience, addressing visible and hidden aspects of an individual's life. Unlike purely psychological or sociological approaches, pastoral care incorporates a transcendent dimension, recognizing the spiritual elements of human existence (Clinebell, 1984). Its purpose extends beyond individual support to fostering growth and fulfilment in both individuals and communities.

Purpose of Pastoral Care

Deeks (1987) identifies five core purposes of pastoral care:
1. Encouraging Meaningful Reflection: Helping individuals make sense of their experiences through active listening.
2. Disclosing Christian Meaning: Providing a faith-based interpretation of life events.
3. Engaging Christian Tradition: Stimulating dialogue with Christian teachings.
4. Enhancing Human Living: Promoting ways of living that reflect discipleship and holiness.
5. Raising Justice Concerns: Addressing broader social issues like equity and fairness.
6. Additional contributions from Clinebell (1984) emphasize nurturing, while Lartey highlights the empowering and liberating dimensions of pastoral care.

Healing and Growth

Pastoral care often involves guiding individuals through physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual loss. Healing ministries provide support, companionship, and care, helping individuals reclaim what they have lost. Drawing on Gibran's insights, pastoral guidance enables individuals to unlock their potential through faith and love. Clinebell's "Growth Counselling" framework further underlines the goal of maximising

human potential for personal and societal development.

The Crucial Role of Pastoral Counselling

Pastoral counselling serves as a bridge for those burdened by hidden struggles. Church leaders often become the sole confidants for individuals facing complex issues, such as addiction, grief, or family discord. Oates (1960) asserts that pastors do not have the option to avoid counselling; their choice lies between providing skilled or unskilled support. Competent pastoral counsellors earn the trust of their congregants, offering guidance that meets their emotional and spiritual needs.

Essential Qualities of a Counsellor

Effective counsellors require specific tools and personal qualities, which fall into the following categories:
1.   Compassion: This involves an active response to others' suffering. It operates on two levels:
- *Affective*: Being emotionally attuned to another's feelings while maintaining objectivity.
- *Cognitive*: Analysing situations to take appropriate action.
2.   Empathy: This quality enables counsellors to understand and communicate their clients' emotions while maintaining the necessary distance to provide objective support (Rogers, 1995).
3.   Reasoning and Consideration: Effective counselling involves observing and analysing client behaviour while balancing intellectual and emotional responses to avoid detachment or over-involvement.

What Clients Need from Counsellors

Clients seek acceptance, particularly during the initial stages of counselling. This involves non-judgmental verbal and non-verbal communication that fosters trust. Enhancing statements (Ivey & Smirk-Downing, 1980) are essential for reinforcing positive regard and support. Furthermore, effective counselling requires a thorough assessment of client concerns, providing insight into their issues and informing the counsellor's approach. By addressing client concerns seriously, counsellors demonstrate respect and lay the groundwork for meaningful interventions.

Methodology
Design-Survey

This portion focuses on the research design, population sampling, instruments to be used for the study, how data will be collected and data analysis procedure to be adopted to achieve the purpose.

Descriptive survey

A descriptive survey was used by the researcher to collect information from a specific population from the field to answer research questions. A descriptive survey determines the status of a given phenomenon (Osuala, 2001). It provides a quantitative picture of individuals or units concerned. This design is seen by policymakers in educational research as a good research method because data gathered by way of descriptive surveys represents field conditions. The study adopted both the quantitative and quantitative research design.

Target Population

The target population for the study was church leaders in the Dansoman Municipality, their clients and lecturers of seminaries.

Sampling and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants were directly relevant to the research objectives. The eight churches and two seminaries were deliberately chosen based on their prominence in the Accra Metropolis and their active role in providing counselling services, aligning with the study's aim to assess counselling competencies. The sample size comprised 85 church leaders, 15 church members, and 5 lecturers, which was considered adequate to capture diverse perspectives and provide a balanced view of the counselling practices.

While purposive sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it was appropriate for this study as it allowed for a focused exploration of specific competencies in a targeted group. This choice was made to ensure depth of analysis within the context of church counselling. Future studies, however, may consider adopting stratified or random sampling techniques to enhance representativeness across a broader population.

A sample size of seven (7) churches was adopted. The study was limited to church leaders and members.

These church leaders and counselees were used because they are directly involved in counselling and clients determine the effectiveness of counselling administered by church leaders.

Pastors   -   40

Elders   -   20

Deacons   -   20

Church Members   -   15

Lecturers   -   5

These leaders were purposively selected; total number of respondents was 100. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with the writer's supervisor and the measurement expert.

Research Instrument

The instrument for the data collection comprised different questionnaires for clients, church leaders, and selected seminary lectures to establish the competencies of church leaders as counsellors. The researcher developed a questionnaire in conjunction with a measurement expert.

A pilot study was conducted to check the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The coefficient used was Cronbach's alpha, and the coefficient estimated was 0.62. These researchers observed fifteen (15) church leaders involved in counselling.

Procedure
Data Collection

Permission was sought by the researcher from church leaders to seek their maximum support during the data collection period. Church leaders were consulted to set dates and clients were informed and the purpose of the questionnaire they would complete.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data obtained. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the research questions. Data was coded into the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The inferential statistics, that is, the Chi-square test was applied using SPSS to analyse the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion of the study about the present study. The study investigated the competencies of the church leader as a counsellor in the Accra Metropolis. The results of statistical significance and practical implications are

presented and discussed about the specific objectives. This was carried out with data collected from (81) church leaders and (15) clients or church members.

Table 1: Those who have had formal training in counselling

Item	Number
Had formal Training	12
No formal Training	69

Table 2: Respondent gender

Item	Number
Males	50
Females	31

Table 3: Level of education

Item	Number
Middle School or Junior High School	35
O & A Level or Senior High School	20
Diploma	8
Degree	10
Post Graduate Degree/Diploma	8

After a thorough review of the literature based on the objectives, two hypotheses were stated and examined. Results from the hypotheses testing are outlined below.

Hypotheses 1

The first hypothesis of the present study stated that "church leaders (who serve as counsellors), who take advantage of counselling programmes are more competent to counsel than church leaders who do not take advantage of it". The chi-square test was used to test the significance of these hypotheses. Summarized results are in Table 4.

Table 4: Chi-square test

	df	$\chi 2$	P
Competency			
Counsellors taking advantage of counselling programmes of programme		Counsellors not taking Counselling advantage	
Competent	48	3	1	27.96	<0.05
Incompetent	12	17			

The competency level in Table 4 of the leaders of the church who attended and those who failed to attend counselling programs entirely differs. In the column showing the church leaders who attended training programs, 49 were competent and 12 incompetent; on the contrary, of those who failed to attend any training, only 3 were competent and 17 were found incompetent. The chi-square test shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between participation in counselling programs and level of competencies: χ^2 (1) = 27.96, p < .05.

These findings imply that formal training in counselling is quite crucial in making competent church leaders. For example, 80 percent of the trained respondents were found to be competent, which was in contrast with 15 percent of the untrained ones. The huge difference between the two groups suggests that formal training in counselling forms an indispensable part of a system aimed at equipping church leaders with the necessary skills to provide guidance and support efficiently.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis stated that "competent counsellors are more likely to be skilful than incompetent counsellors". Given this Chi-Square was used to test the significance of this hypothesis. Summarized results are in the Table.

Table 5: The relationship between competency and skillfulness among counsellors

	Competency		df	$\chi 2$	P
	Competent	Incompetent			
Skilful		50			6
		1		16.2	<0.05
Not Skilful		12			13

The data indicate the number of counsellors 50 were competent and skilful, 12 incompetent but skillful, 6 were competent unskilful, and 13 had unskilful and an incompetent attribute. A chi-square test, $\chi^2 (1) = 16.4$, $p < 0.05$, confirmed that skillfulness was distributed in a significantly different way based on the competency levels. Results have shown that a higher number of competent counsellors 50 were skilful, while only 12 were skilful without being competent.

This would therefore mean that there is a strong relationship between competency and the likelihood that one is going to be skilful, hence further proving the hypothesis that competent counsellors are more likely to possess skills for effective counselling. These findings point to the need to develop both competency and skills through focused training programs for an overall better performance of counselling practices.

Discussion

The findings of this research reveal crucial insights into church leaders' counselling capabilities and highlight significant implications for counselling training programs. The study underscores the essential nature of professional training in equipping church leaders with the necessary skills to provide effective counselling support.

Perhaps the most compelling observation from this research is the marked difference in performance between trained and untrained church leaders. The data consistently demonstrates that formal training not only enriches counsellors' theoretical understanding but also substantially improves their practical ability to navigate the complex and diverse challenges presented by their clients.

This is a confirmation of other studies, for instance, Hal and MacLean (1955); and Pietrofessa et al., (1984), which deduce that professional training constitutes one of the most salient factors in the development of counselling expertise. The results affirm that training programs do have a transformative effect in terms of enabling the counsellor to establish rapport, ensure the client becomes self-directing as well as attain the desired therapeutic results.

The study has shed light on the interesting interconnectedness of competence and skillfulness. It turned out that competent counsellors "are more likely to go on to advanced skills-bridging, focusing, leading and restructuring-and that good counsellors do end up helping clients attain helpful paradigmatic shifts in reflecting on their thinking and behaviour". This corroborates findings by Kankarn and Onivehu (2000) and Eigan (1986) identifying or isolating skills as the basis essential to effective counselling. The observed association of competence and skill calls for broad-based training programs that include both theoretical and practical aspects.

Gender-Related Findings

The gender-related differences in counselling approaches identified in the study align with findings from existing literature, which highlight the unique dynamics introduced by gender in counselling relationships. Female counsellors' tendency to encourage client independence reflects broader patterns documented in counselling research, where women are often observed to adopt a relational and facilitative style that empowers clients.

Female Counsellors and Client Independence

Hill et al. (2016) reported from one study that female counsellors are most likely to use collaborative and client-centred approaches. This style empowers the clients to solve their problems. This concurs with the present study, which found that female counsellors allow clients to think through their problems by themselves. These include collaborative and client-centred approaches; and humanistic counselling theories that emanated from Carl Rogers' person-centred framework, which describes the importance of a counsellor in creating an avenue to allow the clients to express themselves freely, both in words and feelings.

Furthermore, the literature on gender and styles of counselling often indicates that it is women who tend to mix emotional attunement with strategies of empowerment. As Eagly and Carli (2007) indicate, it is in building relational connections that women, as leaders and caregivers, often succeed where the clients develop trust and can make independent decisions for themselves. The relational quality improves client autonomy but also affects satisfaction with counselling outcomes positively.

Male Counsellors and Engagement Gaps

This is also in line with findings from those studies that have investigated gendered communication styles in counselling. The typical approach for men is to adopt directive or problem-solving methods, which, even while effective in certain situations, may not fully support a process of developing client autonomy, as McLeod observed in 2015. What such an approach can do- even though this is seldom one's intention limits opportunities for clients to begin engaging in self-reflection and critical thinking.

In addition, there is the implication of Addis and Mahalik's (2003) study on the traditional male role that male counsellors may be over-inclined to solution-focused approaches at the expense of relational engagement in developing their clients' independence. Again, the need for specific training on the part of male counsellors balances directive skills with facilitative and exploratory ones.

Implications for Training Programmes

The differences in counselling approaches between male and female counsellors emphasize the need for training programmes that consider these dynamics. Training modules could incorporate findings from existing literature on gender and counselling styles to equip counsellors with a broader repertoire of skills. For instance, integrating approaches like motivational interviewing, which emphasizes autonomy and client empowerment (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), can be particularly beneficial in addressing the observed gaps.

Such gender-responsive training could be important, as suggested by Day-Vines et al. (2007), to increase counsellors' awareness of their tendencies and to modify styles based on the needs of the client. In this vein, female counsellors could be supported to strike a balance between relational attunement and boundary-setting, while male counsellors might receive training on the establishment of relational gains and client independence.

Broader Implications of Training Programmes

The findings have significant implications for the design and delivery of training programs in counselling for church leaders. The findings below indicate that formal training programs increase not only competence but also the skillfulness needed for addressing the complex needs of clients. The training programmes, in this respect, should emphasize practical hands-on components such as role-playing, case studies, and supervised counselling sessions.

In addition, it would appear that the leaders of churches need more access to structured training programmes, including the addition of counselling modules into theological education and continuing professional development programs-which could necessitate support at a legislative or organizational level to ensure all church leaders who are practising pastoral care and counselling undergo minimum counselling training. This may be an area of steps taken in terms of filling the gap regarding the competencies of counselling for effective, ethical, and professional delivery. The implications also extend to policy and resource allocation. This points to the importance of investment by church organizations and their respective seminaries in designing more robust and standardized counselling programmes, focusing both on general counselling principles and specific challenges church leaders face as situated in their cultural, social, and spiritual contexts.

Recommendations

This article advances some practical suggestions, such that church leaders in the

Accra Metropolis shall have the opportunity of improving counselling competencies toward confronting most of the challenges inherent in the study.

First, there is a dire need to establish professional channels of counselling in the city. Such facilities can be utilized as training and practice sites for church leaders where such facilities and expertise are made available that they must have to enhance their skills. Mentorship opportunities, workshops, and hands-on training must be provided at these outlets so the church leaders get practical exposure during their training.

The Church administration should be the leading facilitator of a structured and sustained counselling programme that would be available at any stage of their service. It can be embedded into regular church activities like leadership seminars, retreats, and others for updates of knowledge and practice skills to serve their flock with their current needs.

This may also call for legislative action in terms of setting standards for counselling among church leaders. It should be made a requirement that one must have basic counselling qualifications before engaging in formal counselling activities to ensure at least a minimum level of competence across all churches. This would not only raise the quality of counselling but also protect congregants from incompetent and potentially harmful advice.

The tertiary institutions should also be at the forefront of this initiative. Such an introduction of certificate programs in counselling specifically tailored for church leaders will close the gap between spiritual leadership and professional counselling. These programs could include modules on ethics, psychological principles, and practical counselling techniques to make certain that it is a comprehensive approach. Partnerships between theological institutions and universities could further enhance the accessibility and relevance of these programmes.

Finally, it is necessary to take into consideration the social view of church leaders as persons with high moral character and spiritual authority. This places them in a position of trust, yet it also calls for professional competence to match these expectations. Formal training and avenues for continuous development will put church leaders in a position to carry out their responsibilities effectively. What is required, then, is a multi-dimensional approach: professional outlets, accessible training programs, legislative backing, and academic support. Investment in the development of counselling competencies will better equip church leaders to serve their people with empathy, skill, and professionalism in impactful pastoral care.

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