



Integrating Professional Counselling into the Church: An Analysis of Knowledge, Attitude, and Perception of Lay Church Leaders of the Church of Pentecost, Sowutuom, Accra

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Abstract

Professional counselling services is gradually gaining place and value in ministry of churches in Ghana. This is partly due to the growing awareness of burden of mental health issues among the general population as well as well as the huge treatment gap of mental healthcare in the country. The Church of Pentecost has introduced a counselling ministry into the church's ministry since 2019. The counselling ministry seeks to rally both professionals and lay leaders in the church to provide psychosocial support for their congregants and the larger community. The paper conducts an empirical analysis of the knowledge, attitude, and perception of lay leaders on the integration of counselling into the church. It was observed that although lay church leaders have appreciable level of knowledge and attitude towards counselling, there are concerns of the role of the Holy Spirit and pastoral authority to provide healing for hurting members. There is, therefore, the need to pursue continuous engagement between church leaders and professional counsellors to promote collaboration for addressing mental health needs of congregants.

Keywords: Counselling, Ministry, Mental Health, Church Leaders

Introduction

The link between religion and mental health appears to have been disputed for centuries. The earliest mental health facilities, founded in the 14th century, were church-sponsored and supervised by clerics (Okello, Sirera & Otieno, 2021). Christian leaders are often the first point of contact when church members experience psychological or mental health problems. It has become a widespread practice for highly religious individuals in need of mental health services to first contact their religious leaders to seek help (Allen, & Hill, 2014). Due to the high tendency for Christians to prioritize seeking help from their lay church leaders and pastors, many churches also offer a variety of psychological support through psycho-educational interventions to address emotional and relational problems (Hodge, Hook, Davis, & McMinn, 2020).

Given this substantial overlap of the roles of the church and mental health professionals, The Church of Pentecost (CoP) has established a counselling ministry to provide competent counselling services to make the Christians effective, ready to serve and transform their communities. The church has long played a significant role in providing emotional and spiritual support to its members.

Foskett, Marriott, & Wilson-Rudd, (2004) found that even though a majority of religious leaders acknowledge a significant link between mental health and religion, more than half of all religious leaders perceived that exposure to counselling therapy could have the potential of confusing clients about their religious faith and practice. Hence, indicating that counselling professionals are more understanding and open to collaborating with church leaders than are church leaders toward counselling professionals (Foskett, Marriott, & Wilson-Rudd, 2004). Furthermore, the complexities of mental health concerns in this day and age usually call for specialized therapies that extend beyond the boundaries of pastoral care. Professional counselling is a vital resource for addressing these needs, but its implementation within the CoP context can be welcomed with various degrees of acceptance, willingness, challenges and understanding. This research seeks to analyse the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of lay church leaders towards the integration of professional counselling activities within the church.

Background and Context

The Church of Pentecost is a global Pentecostal church, with presence in 190 countries. The church, with approximately five million members globally, has its headquarters in Accra, Ghana. The counselling Ministry of the Church of Pentecost was introduced in the 2018 as part of a new vision of the church - Vision 2023. Prior to the introduction, the church operated a Counselling Unit, situated at the Headquarters, with the focus on equipping ministers and leaders on contracting marriage in the church and Ghana.

However, with the growing emotional needs of the increasing members of the Church, the leadership decided to build a ministry to meet these needs. As stated in the Vision 2023:

“as an institution concerned with the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of its people, COP shall seek to reorganise its counselling unit to address mental health and other related issues such as grief/depression/anxiety, suicidal crisis; domestic violence and abuse; financial and social problems; chronic health problems; families struggling with transitions/ crisis” (The Church of Pentecost, 2019, p.42)

This implies that with the introduction of the Counselling Ministry, the church seeks to build a solid, well-structured counselling services into the ministry of the church. Consequently, the Church has constituted leadership teams at all levels of the church to ensure its smooth implementation. Additionally, the Church of Pentecost offer training for lay leaders (church officers) in basic counselling skills and as well encourages church members who are professional counsellors, registered with the Ghana Psychology Council to provide services as part of the church’s ministry (World Faiths Development Dialogue 2024).

The Sowutuom township is a peri-urban suburb near the city of Accra in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The global Headquarters of the Church of Pentecost located in the city of Accra, which is the capital city of Ghana. There are twelve local assemblies (congregations) in the Sowutuom area.

Brief Literature

According to World Health Organization (2017), Ghana’s public mental health infrastructure remains under-resourced. The country has fewer than one psychiatrist per 600,000 people and limited community mental health programmes. Stigma, financial constraints, and cultural explanatory models (e.g., supernatural causation) further restrict access to formal services (WHO, 2017). In this ecosystem, Pastors and lay church leaders often metamorphose into de facto counsellors for issues ranging from anxiety and depression to family conflict and substance abuse. In view of this, it has become expedient for churches to integrate professional counselling services into their activities. However, for effective integration strategies, it is essential to examine three interrelated dimensions of lay leaders’ readiness: their knowledge of mental health, their attitudes toward counselling services, and their perceptions of collaborating with trained professionals.

Knowledge of Mental Illness among Church Leaders

There is a growing interest in knowledge of mental health among religious leaders globally. In the Philippines, Del Rosario, Lacerna, Castaños, Fabon, & Malang., (2023) surveyed church leaders from five religious denominations to investigate their knowledge and beliefs about mental illness. The study found that, most church leaders possessed only a moderate grasp of mental health concepts and fell squarely in the “somewhat knowledgeable” range when assessed on mental illness symptom recognition, etiological factors, and evidence-based treatments. In Ghana, some studies report inadequate knowledge of mental health among church leaders (Ndinyun, Salifu & Osei-Tutu, 2024; Osafo et al., 2021; Salifu Yendork, Kpobi, & Sarfo, 2016;). These studies further emphasized on the low or no formal training for many church leaders in handling mental health issues. This situation highlights the need for intensive mental health education and training for church leaders to be well equipped to deal with mental health concerns. In addition, there is a call for collaboration between mental health professionals and church leaders in order to reduce treatment gap for persons with mental health problems (Asafor 2021; Osafo et al., 2021; Osafo, 2016).

Attitudes and Perception towards Professional Counselling

Attitudes toward professional counselling range from enthusiastic collaboration to guarded scepticism. Avent, Cashwell, & Brown-Jeffy, (2015) found that some pastors perceive formal therapy as a rival to spiritual ministry, often favouring prayer exclusively and expressing concern that involving external professionals could challenge their pastoral authority. In Ghana, some studies observe that although church leaders are unable to provide formal counselling services for their congregants, they often have negative attitudes towards referring their members for professional counselling services (Adjei, 2024; Asamoah, Osafo, & Agyapong, 2014)

Due to their theological and ministerial background, the clergy may sometimes interpret emotional or psychological issues through a strictly religious lens—for example, viewing hallucinatory behaviour as a sign of spiritual struggle (Boateng et al., 2024; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000).

Freire, Moleiro, Rosmarin, & Freire, (2018) in a study that assessed the perception of religious and spiritual leaders on mental health and their collaborative efforts with mental health professionals, discovered that, religious leaders often see themselves as key figures in supporting and safeguarding the mental well-being of their congregants and assisting in their recovery. However, this role is typically conducted with limited collaboration or referrals to mental health professionals. The study further revealed that, even though religious leaders generally perceived counselling professionals to be skilled,

open, and respectful of religious diversity, many religious leaders continued to view them as secular, particularly when addressing sensitive issues like homosexuality, pornography use, abortion, and marital challenges. Concerns that psychological approaches might conflict with their religious convictions often made them hesitant to refer congregants for professional counselling (Freire, Moleiro, Rosmarin, & Freire, 2018).

Methodology

The current study employed a qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview guide as the principal data collection instrument. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the objective is to explore in depth the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of lay church leaders regarding the integration of professional counselling into church practice - topics that require rich, contextualized description and interpretation rather than measurement alone (Guest et al., 2006).

The study targeted lay leaders within the Kusi Donkor Worship Centre (KDWC) of the Church of Pentecost in Sowutuom, Accra, through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because the Kusi Donkor Worship Centre is a typical local assembly that has a Resident Pastor collaborating with lay leaders to provide pastoral care. This situation is different from other local assemblies that do not have a resident Pastor but are managed by lay officers under supervision of a district pastor. The nature of this congregation presents lay leaders that are best suitable to provide responses that are representative of both leaders of a local assembly and a District at the same time. The total population of forty lay leaders in KDWC constituted the sample size using a census enumeration technique. In all, twenty-five out of the forty lay leaders sampled participated in the study.

The interviews used a structured format that included opportunities for open-ended responses. The average duration of the interviews was 45 minutes. The interview questions covered four broad areas: demographics, knowledge about counselling services, attitudes of lay leaders towards professional counselling, perception of lay leaders on the integration of counselling services within church. Thematic analysis was conducted on the open-ended responses to explore levels of knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions in greater detail.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines approved by the Pentecost University Research Ethics Committee.

Findings and Discussion

Despite the overlapping roles of lay church leaders and professional counsellors, they most often function independently of each other. An attempt to harness the synergies of these two specialties by integrating professional counselling into church activities may

be challenging. This present study sought to analyse the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of lay church leaders towards the integration of professional counselling activities within the church. The socio-demographic data of the study participants is presented in Table 1. A total of twenty-five lay leaders participated in this study. Of this number, 7(28%) were Elders, 7(28%) were Deacons and 11(44%) were Deaconesses. Demographically, the male-female ratio of respondents was 44% (11) vs 56% (14) with a mean age of 40 years. Most of the study participants were singles (n=15, 60%), with a few married (n=8, 32%) and 2(8%) widows. Almost all participants had had some form of formal education with about 48% completing tertiary level of education and 32% completing secondary level of education.

Table 1: Socio-demographic data of participants

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	14	56.0
	Female	11	44.0
Age	18 – 35	11	44.0
	36 – 65	14	56.0
Education	Primary school	1	4.0
	Junior high school	4	16.0
	Senior high school	8	32.0
	Tertiary	12	48.0
Position	Elder	7	28.0
	Deacon	7	28.0
	Deaconess	11	44.0
Marital status	Single	15	60.0
	Married	8	32.0
	Widowed	2	8.0

Source: Field data, 2024

Understanding of Professional Counselling

This study examined lay leader's level of knowledge about counselling and mental health. Professional counselling is understood in multiple ways, but several key themes emerged. First, counselling is seen as an empowering process that helps individuals, families, and groups address a wide range of issues, including mental health, wellness, and career or life goals. In reference to this, one respondent remarked "*professional counselling is a relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness education and carrier goals*" (Field data 2025). This notion of counselling emphasizes the place and value of relationship in counselling as well as the goal of counselling, which seeks to empower both individuals and groups towards growth. The American Counselling Association (ACA) emphasises counselling as a goal – oriented relationships that seek to support the general well-being of individual and families, at the same time empowering them to handle challenges of life (ACA 2025). Similarly, Alqahtani (2025) also reports that professional counselling improves mental health outcomes of individuals with chronic diseases.

Additionally, some respondents also underscore the concept that counselling is a process and that it should be carried out by trained personnel. This is important especially, in a church setting where counselling is often misunderstood as offering advice and spiritual guidance by church leaders. For instance, a respondent intimated that "*professional counselling in general means, the process where an individual, couple, family or group of people meet with a trained professional counsellor to talk about issues and problems that they are facing in their lives*" (Field data 2025). Another participant related that "*this is a counselling embarked on by a trained individual in the counselling field*" (Field data 2025). It is observed that respondents' understanding of counselling as the one involving trained personnel is in agreement with the Ghana Psychology Council (GPC) that counselling is undertaken by trained practitioners who work with individuals and or groups over a short or long term to help them bring about effective change or enhance their wellbeing (GPC 2025). The emphasis on the need for counselling to be provided by professionals who received the requisite training and are recognized in their jurisdiction as professional counsellors was reported in other studies (Reeves, 2022; Gignac & Gazzola, 2018).

Confidentiality and being non-judgemental were also highlighted in the conceptualization of counselling by the participants. Some respondents are of the opinion that professing counselling should adhere to key elements of counselling such as confidentiality and not being judgmental even though the counselling is offered in church congregations. For instance, one respondent observed that "*anyone offering professional counselling should be confidential and non-judgemental irrespective of the fact this is in church*" (Field data 2025). This emphasis on confidentiality and non-judgemental could

be partly due to the concern that counselling in church congregational setting has challenges with maintaining confidentiality and being neutral and open to diversity. For instance, Devassia and Gubi (2022) observed that the struggle between counselling and confession in the Catholic church contributes to difficulties in maintaining confidentiality in church counselling. In Ghana, this difficulties of keeping confidentiality in church-based counselling was observed in earlier studies, and the need for continuous training for counsellors involved in counselling as part of church's ministry was recommended (Kilengi, 2023; Dzokoto & Adams, 2016).

The overall results indicate that lay church leaders demonstrated a good level of knowledge about counselling - the counselling process and its importance - as respondents asserted that counselling is an empowering process that helps individuals, families, and groups address a wide range of issues, including mental health, wellness, and career or life goals. According to this study lay church leaders know that counselling is a structured, guided process where a trained professional provides advice, guidance, and support. This may indicate that lay leaders with a satisfactory level of knowledge and understanding of counselling may be instrumental in implementing counselling integration strategies into the church. Such leaders may be pivotal in educating the congregants on the importance of this integration. This finding is consistent with other studies that report that lay leaders had appreciable level of knowledge and understanding of mental health in their communities (Del Rosario et al., 2023; Ogbolu et al., 2020). However, the findings differ from earlier studies that report negative attitude towards professional support for mental health problems among church leaders (Osafo 2016; Asamoah et al., 2014).

Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Professional Counselling Services in the Church

The study also analysed the attitudes of lay leaders towards counselling in the church. The respondents attitude favours integration of counselling into the church due to its perceived potential to promote both the growth of individual members and the entire congregation. Firstly, some participants hold the view that inclusion of professional counselling will promote personal growth such as problem-solving skills, providing mental health support and boosting members' confidence. In this vein, one respondent indicated "*including professional counselling in church services helps individuals to solve problems and develop problem-solving skills*" and another participant reports that "*integration of faith and mental health provides emotional support*" (Field data 2025).

Some studies have also observed that churches can serve as a powerful therapeutic community when they creatively combine congregational care with psychotherapeutic intervention strategies (Nganyu, 2025; Chalfant, 2020).

Similarly, some respondent also revealed that integration of counselling brings in the expertise of professional counsellors, thereby reducing the workload of church leaders.

It also promotes accessibility, and the growth and development of the church. This was evident in the data as one participant related that “*including professional counselling in the church makes services available to all members irrespective of age or financial status.*” Another person intimated “*pastors can't attend to everyone, and professional counsellors have more specialized knowledge*” (Field data 2025).

This suggests a strong belief in the potential positive impact of professional counselling on both the church and its members. Foskett, Marriott, & Wilson-Rudd (2004) found that religious leaders are less understanding and not open to collaborating with mental health professionals than are mental health professionals toward religious leaders. Findings from this present study may not support this result. All Lay leaders in this study demonstrated a positive attitude towards the idea of the Church of Pentecost integrating professional counselling services within the church setting. Some positive attitude themes that emerged from this study depicted a strong belief in the potential positive impact of professional counselling on both the church and its members. This finding is in agreement with a study report from Kenya that indicate that clergy recognise a critical need to collaborate with professional counsellors in addressing mental health needs of their ministry of the church (Okello, Sirera & Otieno 2021). Lay leaders in this study believed that integrating counselling into the church would generate these positive impacts such as growth and development of the church, mental health support, reduce the workload of church leaders, increase accessibility, and boost members' confidence. These positive attitudes exhibited by lay leaders towards counselling are essential in ensuring the successful integration of professional counselling into the church. Consequently, some church leaders consider training in counselling as important for ministry (Freire, Moleiro, Rosmarin, & Freire, 2018).

Perception about the Compatibility of Integrating Professional Counselling in Church Activities

Findings from this study suggested that lay leaders have a good perception of integrating counselling into the church. The key themes that emerged under this theme included the perception of having initial challenges with acceptance, careful planning and alignment with church doctrines required, compatibility between counselling and spiritual life, and serving to strengthen the church's influence and engagement with the members.

It was observed that respondents perceived that there will be initial challenges with regards to acceptance of counselling as part of the church's mission. However, over time the result of counselling in the church's ministry could change this perception. For instance, one respondent opined that “*it wouldn't be easy from the beginning but as time goes on and members become well informed, it will be easier*” (Field data 2025). This perceived resistance to integrating counselling into the church's ministry could partly be due to the

tension between theology and psychology, especially, among Pentecostal Christian (Nganyu 2025).

Similarly, another prominent issue is the extent to which counselling can be aligned with the church's doctrine. In this vein, a participant retorted "*I perceive the comfortability of integrating professional counselling in church activities is that specific questions can be asked, including the individual religious background and the doctrines of the church*" (Field data 2025). Another person asked, "*which of our doctrines support the integration of counselling into the church*" (Field data 2025). The issues of doctrines and counselling in Pentecostal ministry is a principal issue for consideration. This is because, in Christian faith, doctrines are like the theories that inform practice. This is also connected to the tension between psychology and theology due to their differences in terms of worldviews and approaches to human problem. According to Nganyu (2025), integrating psychological interventions into church is key in improving the lives of congregants, however challenges persist with potential doctrine and psychological theories.

This study revealed that professional counselling is seen as an extension of the church's mission to guide and support its members. Integrating professional counselling is therefore perceived as a way to strengthen the church's influence and engagement with the members. These findings align with a study by Okello et al, (2021) which revealed that 96.15% of the clergy respondents indicated that psychology was useful in pastoral work and they were seriously considering taking additional or further training in psychology or human behaviour. An emerging theme from the qualitative analyses revealed that integrating professional counselling with church activities might require careful planning and alignment with church doctrines. Hence stressing the need to consciously align professional counselling services with the Church's doctrines. This concern may be further emphasized by a common perception of respondents which revealed that addressing a client's religious background within counselling sessions can help align the services with the church's spiritual mission (Boateng et al., 2024). Concerning potential implementation, some respondents expressed concerns about initial challenges, such as resistance from members or the need for training. However, they believe that over time, acceptance will grow as members become more informed about the benefits of professional counselling.

Another perception of lay leaders about integrating professional counselling into the church was the belief that professional counselling provides holistic support that addresses both the emotional and spiritual needs of individuals, leading to personal growth and better psychosocial functioning. These positive perceptions may indicate a willingness by lay leaders to fully accept the integration of professional counselling into the Church and also work hard to ensure it is thriving and sustainable (Freire, Moleiro, Rosmarin, & Freire, 2018; Avent, Cashwell, & Brown-Jeffy, 2015).

Respondents' Recommendations on the Integration of Counselling Services in the Church

Insightful suggestions emerged from this request. In summary, the participants emphasized the importance of selecting well-trained, spiritually grounded counsellors who understand the needs of the congregation. For example, a respondent indicated that “*the counsellor should be a member of the church who has gone for training on counselling, who is physically and spiritually strong.*” And another suggested that “*professional counsellors who are God-fearing should be employed*” (Field Data 2025). Some participants also are of the opinion that regular workshops, seminars, and provision of relevant educational materials will improve counselling services in the church. This implies that the leaders found particularly important the spiritual background of the counsellors as well as the quality of training received by counsellors. This suggestion agrees with (Nganyu 2025) that regular and adequate training of pastoral carers in a congregation setting is crucial not only in improving mental health outcomes but also resolving the tension between psychological interventions and religious beliefs.

In addition, they advocated that, for the integration of counselling services into the church to be effective, it should be supported by a professional data-driven approaches. A participant relates that “*through counselling, the church can collect data and know the needs of the people and find lasting solutions to these needs*” (Field data 2025). This could also point to the fact the church recognizes that some members have needs that could be met through the counselling services as part of the church’s mission.

The need for the church to commit the whole integration process to God in order to seek his guidance was another recommendation. They believed that nothing can succeed in the church if it does not have God’s blessings. One participant opines that “*we should seek God's guidance and wisdom in the counselling ministry*” (Field data 2025). This underscores the emphasis on prayer for the success of any endeavour among Christians.

Lastly, respondents recommended that the church should recognize the importance of counselling and create awareness among the congregants. Some suggested that a special day should be observed annually as a counselling day, whiles other also proposes a monthly meeting to create awareness and insightful sessions with members.

These suggestions by lay leaders of the church reveal a deep commitment to ensuring the Church’s vision of integrating professional counselling into the church is fully realised and successful.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are some limitations in this present study. The study employed a qualitative study design making causality impossible. Perhaps, a longitudinal study may be best suited

to address this concern. Also, the role of factors such as socio-economic status, position at church, age, gender, and level of education were not considered in this study. Future studies should consider these factors to see how they influence knowledge, attitude, and perception.

Conclusion

This survey study has provided valuable insights into the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of lay leaders within the Church of Pentecost regarding professional counselling and its integration into the church. It was observed that participant possess an adequate understanding of counselling services and the need incorporate professional counselling into the church's ministry. Consequently, a favourable attitude towards the integrating of counselling into the ministry of the church was noted. By understanding their perspectives, we can work towards creating a more integrated and comprehensive approach to supporting the mental health needs of church members.

It is, therefore recommended that there is the need for future studies to expand across a wider geographic locations as well as socio-cultural factors such as age, gender and education to provide a more holistic view of lay leaders' knowledge, attitude and practice towards integration of counselling into the church's ministry.

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