

Integrating professional counselling during marriage counselling within neo-Pentecostalism



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It is argued here that most couples in neo-Pentecostalism tend to consult their pastors when encountering various challenges in their marriages as opposed to professional counselling. Some would, however, opt for consulting professional counsellors as a last resort to save their marriages. The marriage counselling offered by pastors has proven to be effective in some instances, but it has some shortcomings in others. This kind of counselling is often conducted by untrained pastors who are not able to do a proper diagnosis of the problems and to offer proper solutions. In addition, previous studies demonstrate that some Pentecostal pastors have abused their congregants during such counselling. In this article, the integration of professional counselling is proposed as a complementary approach to the counselling offered by Pentecostal pastors. This will be achieved by reviewing the literature on counselling offered by pastors and its successes and failures. The integration of professional counselling with the counselling conducted by Pentecostal pastors will be discussed using the integrated approach as a theoretical framework.

Contribution: This article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourses on the abuse of religion among neo-Pentecostal churches by proposing an integration of professional counselling. This type of counselling is important for the ethical conduct of Pentecostal pastors as counsellors, correct diagnosis of problems, and providing an accurate solution.

Keywords: professional counselling; pastoral counselling; marriage; Pentecostalism; integration theory.

Introduction

Counselling is an important component of practical theology in assisting congregants when facing challenging situations. Similarly, married couples within the neo-Pentecostal churches tend to consult their pastors when facing challenges in their marriage. The same exists even during premarital counselling where a couple, planning to get married, would consult their pastor for counselling sessions before their marriage. In some instances, some pastors are well qualified to conduct professional counselling to their members by acting as marriage officers. In classical Pentecostalism, well-established denominations set criteria for those who wish to serve as pastors who will also be responsible for counselling. The requirement in most cases will be a qualification in theology in the form of a diploma or a degree. However, among neo-Pentecostals, the pastors conducting this counselling would not be qualified, because most of them did not have proper theological training. In the process, the counselling conducted by untrained pastors creates the opportunity for many misconducts including abuse of those who attend the counselling session. This article is proposing the integration of professional counselling to mitigate these misconducts by untrained pastors in the Neo-Pentecostal churches. Firstly, the main sections of the article will be the review of the counselling conducted by pastors in neo-Pentecostalism. Secondly, the article will look at the disadvantages of this type of counselling, because there are some lessons to be learned from it. Thirdly, the wrongdoings of the counselling conducted by pastors, particularly the abuses of congregants by the pastors during the sessions, will be discussed in detail. Fourthly, professional counselling will be introduced and differentiated from the counselling conducted by pastors without proper theological qualification (henceforth, untrained pastors). The last section of this article will look at the benefits of integrating professional marriage counselling among neo-Pentecostals and some recommendations will be made.

This article is a literature review on two forms of counselling: firstly, the one conducted by untrained pastors; and secondly, the professional counselling in marriage. This article is based on integration theory, as it helps scholars to combine more than two elements in a study or research. When using the theory of integration, the elements being combined by the researcher should be closely related to each other (ed. Smart 2008:137). The theory is also used when there is a need to

combine two or more strategies that can complement each other (eds. Tinsley, Lease & Wiersma 2015:459). This theory is the same as mixed approaches, because it can bring together different approaches to a subject area to come up with the best theory or practice. In this article, an integration theory will assist the reader to be able to combine counselling as conducted by pastors and professional counselling. This theory will help to identify the disadvantages of the counselling conducted by pastors and identify areas in which professional counselling can mitigate such limitations. The main aim of using the theory is to explore ways in which the counselling conducted by pastors can easily be combined with professional counselling. In the next section, the article discusses the counselling conducted by pastors in Neo-Pentecostal churches.

Counselling conducted by pastors in neo-Pentecostalism

This article makes a distinction between the counselling conducted by untrained pastors mainly in neo-Pentecostalism and pastoral counselling in classical Pentecostalism. Classical Pentecostalism refers to the denominational Pentecostal churches that were established by Western missionaries whose main beliefs are the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the initial evidence of speaking in tongues (Anderson 2013). Neo-Pentecostalism is different from classical Pentecostalism in terms of its focus on the miraculous as well as the person of the pastor and their charisma rather than the person of Christ (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005;). They also focus on the use of titles such as Apostle and Prophet which they normally call the fivefold ministry (Resane 2021b). In addition, many neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa would go by the title Doctor or Professor without the necessary training or qualification (Kgatle 2022). Some of them have associations and networks in the United States and receive ordinations to become bishops and archbishops. This article focuses on this type of Pentecostalism which is relevant to the discussion about counselling outside its profession.

In practical theology, pastoral counselling is professional and mostly conducted by trained pastors; some of whom with expertise in psychology and pastoral therapy. Benner (2003:43) explains that pastoral counselling is at the advanced level of psychotherapy, and most pastors conducting such counselling will have done modules on psychology and therapy; hence, qualified to conduct professional counselling. Some of the pastors leading congregations are also trained in mental health and can deal with the mental problems of their congregants not only from a spiritual side, but also from a professional side (Johnson & Johnson 2014). Although in some instances there is a difference between general psychology – the scientific focus of the study of human behaviour and pastoral psychology – and the study of human behaviour with a spiritual focus, the objectives of professional counselling would still be met in this regard. Of course, most pastoral counsellors would be ministers of the gospel, but it does not disqualify them to conduct professional counselling (eds. Maynard & Snodgrass 2015). Therefore, the local church

is more likely to benefit a lot from a local pastor who is also trained in counselling and psychology, as he or she will be able to offer both spiritual help and professional counselling to their members. It is also up to these pastors to remain professional in conducting their counselling and to go beyond the precinct of their churches to be able to serve the community.

Counselling conducted by an untrained pastor is in fact not a professional one. The pastors who normally conduct such counselling do not even have basic theological qualifications let alone psychology, psychiatry, mental health and counselling qualification. This kind of counselling is more like advice offered to the congregants, as there is no professional analysis conducted by the pastors. On the contrary, the counselling is only based on the life and experiences of the one conducting the counselling rather than an objective analysis. The unbiased analysis here refers to the ability to look at a situation from both sides of the story of those consulting the counsellor. This is because most neo-Pentecostal churches, particularly New Prophetic Churches, do not have theological training as opposed to classical Pentecostals (White & Pondani 2022). This lack of theological training contributes to a lack of professional counselling, because pastors, unlike psychologists and psychiatrists, only study counselling during theological studies. Therefore, theological training among these pastors contributes a lot to the professionalising of counselling among these churches. In the next section, the article discusses the theological contribution of the counselling conducted by Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches.

Counselling by Pentecostal pastors and its theological contribution

Prayer filled counselling

This counselling is conducted by untrained Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostalism. In some instances, however, they are still able to make a theological contribution to solving the problem faced by the counselee. This kind of contribution can bring inner and spiritual healing in the counselling room even if, at times, it is offered by those who are theologically shallow (McMinn 2012). In addition to advising the counselee, Pentecostal pastors also offer some prayers that help to deal with the root of the problem. They will also teach their congregants to be prayerful so that they can deal with their problems in the absence of their pastor (Clinebell & Mckeever 2011). This kind of prayer is called deliverance, because they believe that some, if not most of the problems are caused by the spiritual world; hence, the need for a strong prayer to exorcise demonic forces behind the challenges of the counselee. Pentecostals believe that some of the problems are caused by witchcraft and misfortune in the spiritual world which is a motivation for the inclusion of prayer in a counselling room (Anderson 2018; ed. Togarasei 2018). However, the challenge with this kind of prayer is that it spiritualises every challenge faced by married couples. Whereas not all problems are caused by the spiritual world,

some of it is psychological and psychiatric. Therefore, the counselling room cannot only concentrate on the spiritual, but should also look at the mental, financial, physical and otherwise.

Spirit-led counselling

Pentecostal pastors rely much on the work of the Holy Spirit whom they invite in a counselling session to be part of the solution to the problems faced by their congregants. Anderson (1991) explains that Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit is able to speak to them through their pastor. According to Anderson (1991), Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit first speaks to their pastors and then they can communicate the same message to them. Pentecostals believe that, in everything they do, they should involve the work of the Holy Spirit in what is known as pneumatology. The Holy Spirit is the centre of Pentecostal theology, because Pentecostals believe in a direct relationship with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Kgatle (2019:23) explains that 'Since the early church, Pentecostalism became a form of Christianity that emphasised the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God by the believer.' In addition, Pentecostals believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of speaking in other tongues. Similarly, in the counselling session, the Pentecostal pastor invites the presence of the Holy Spirit to take charge of the session. Therefore, successful counselling to them is to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit and act as per the instructions of the Holy Spirit. Again, the challenge is that, instead of looking at the problem and analysing it cognitively, this work is delegated to the Holy Spirit who might not necessarily be able to address other aspects of the problem such as psychological and psychiatric. This is not to undermine the role of the Holy Spirit in counselling, but to point out that there exist other aspects of counselling that requires professional and scientific approaches.

Bible-based counselling

Not only do Pentecostal pastors rely on the work of the Holy Spirit, but also on the use of the Bible as a tool in a counselling session to guide those who require help. Tan (2011:334) states that 'the Bible is the basic guide for dealing with problems as well as its extended applications to the complex problems with which people struggle'. Therefore, pastors would use the relevant biblical text in assessing the problem and providing the solution to the couple. This is because, among Pentecostals and other Christian denomination, the Bible is viewed as an authoritative and God-inspired word to guide them in every situation (Nel 2018). Pentecostals believe that each Scripture applies to life challenges including marital problems faced by the couples in their churches. Therefore, the Bible is used as a guiding tool to locate the solution to the problem faced by the counselee. Hence, the counselee would normally be asked to bring their Bibles to the counselling room whenever they consult the pastor with their marital problems. However, the challenge is that, among Pentecostals, there is a tendency

toward a literal interpretation of the Bible and proof-texting instead of thoroughly interpreting the Bible by using exegetical methods of Bible study and interpretation (Kgatle 2021). This kind of interpretation can contribute to giving wrong biblical texts to couples in the counselling room; hence, the call and importance of theological training among Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches as a way of providing skills for counselling and other duties in their churches.

Counselling offered by pastors, abuses and gaps

As discussed in the preceding section, counselling offered by Pentecostal pastors has some theological contributions such as prayer-filled counselling, spirit-led counselling, and Bible-based counselling. However, in this section, there are some identified abuses and gaps that occurs during counselling by untrained Pentecostal pastors which can be challenging. Unfortunate incidences such as sexual misconduct during counselling sessions or when congregants visit their pastors for prayer sessions often occur. At times, the pastors do take advantage, because they are alone with the congregant. This is one way in which an opportunity is created for a pastor to abuse their congregants. Agazue (2016), as quoted in Kgatle and Frahm-Arp (2022:2), mentioned some pastors who would abuse their congregants by stating to 'the female victims that the sex acts will save them from being possessed by an evil spirit or simply enable them to fulfil the will of God'. Many other cases of abuse occur in South Africa where the pastor inappropriately touches or even rapes and sexually harasses female counselees (Banda 2020). While there is no justification for sexual misconduct, the point raised here is that many of these pastors involved in the abuse of women have never been trained on how to professionally conduct counselling. However, this does not mean that there are no abusers among the trained pastors, but to reiterate that training can help the pastor in terms of professionalising the practice of counselling.

The neo-Pentecostal churches, particularly the New Prophetic Churches, tend to bridge the confidentiality and integrity of the counselee. Some prophets would listen to their congregants in the counselling room, but later share the discussions with other congregants in the form of a prophecy. In this way, the rights of the counselled congregants to confidentiality and integrity are being bridged by the prophet. In other words, when the counselees confide with the prophet in matters that include sexual problems, they do not expect the matters to be shared with others by their prophets. On the contrary, they expect the prophet to maintain high levels of confidentiality regarding their dignity and integrity. However, it is not so among New Prophetic Churches, as some prophecies broadcast on public and free air stations have exposed the secrets of some couples in these churches (see Kgatle 2020a). On another occasion, a prophet asked a couple to undress in front of the cameras and their video was later shared on different social media platforms (cf. Kgatle 2021; Resane 2021a).

The abuses and issues of confidentiality are not the only misconducts, but the outcome of such a counselling session is usually unsuccessful and does not meet the needs of the counselee. In other words, when a pastor is untrained in counselling matters, they will not be able to conduct a proper diagnosis of the problem and they will not be able to offer a proper solution. Rather, they have the propensity to spiritualise the problem instead of identifying causative factors that can deal with the challenges. It is only a trained counsellor that can look at various aspects in a counselling room rather than always associate problems with the spiritual world which is but one aspect of the problems faced by people. It is only after a few sessions with the pastor that the counsees finally decide that they will have to visit a professional counsellor to thoroughly address the problem. In most cases, it would be too late to consult a professional counsellor, because the marriage would have suffered so many challenges that it is on a brink of collapse. In consulting their pastor, the married couple is not wrong, but it would have been better if the pastor is a well-trained counsellor or if the counselee can consult both the pastor and professional counsellor to find appropriate remedies for their problems. Hence, in this article, the proposal is an integration of professional counselling with the counselling provided by untrained Pentecostal pastors to bring a concrete solution. In the next section, professional counselling is investigated to integrate it with the counselling conducted by untrained Pentecostal pastors.

Professional counselling

The rising prevalence of marital problems is causing an increase in the demand for professional counselling (Gazzola & De Stefano 2016). Through the process of professional counselling, a knowledgeable and skilled professional collaborates formally with a client to support them as they try to find a way through a difficult situation (Wango, Wairire & Odiemo 2018:40). Professional counsellors are committed to promoting the value, dignity, potential and uniqueness of everyone. They are also committed to provide a service to society (Nwadinobi 2019). Professional counselling gives the couple a variety of options for improvement that they would not typically know how to implement on their own. It offers a secure and encouraging environment for the couple to discuss any problems in their marriage and identify the feelings, behaviours and problems they are having with each other. This promotes understanding and leads to constructive change. To help couples learn new skills to strengthen their relationships, qualified marriage and family counsellors can offer guidance, coaching and feedback.

Professional counsellors are regulated under different professional bodies, which offer ethical codes that members should adhere to (Maree & Van der Westhuizen 2011; Sori & Hecker 2015). The mandate of professional bodies such as the South African Council of Social Service Professionals (SACSSP) established in terms of the *Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978* (South Africa 1978) and the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) established in terms of

the *Health Profession Act 56 of 1974* (South Africa 1974) are there to protect the integrity of the professions and to safeguard people from harm while promoting their welfare as embedded in the legislation under which the professional bodies carry out their work. Professional counsellors follow a code of ethics that establishes expectations for appropriate conduct. According to Nwadinobi (2019), some benefits of a code of ethics include the ability to direct the image of the counselling association by discouraging members from any behaviour likely to tarnish the association's image. They further and enhance the dignity and worth of the counsellor and the professions so that people are likely to take their work more seriously. Professional body members who violate the guiding principles, values, rules and standards may be subject to investigations under the laws about improper conduct (SACSSP 2013). Members of the community who make use of the services of professional counsellors are protected under the law and can report any member who bridges the code of conduct.

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of professional counselling and is required by all rules of ethics for those in the mental health field (Sori & Hecker 2015). Although confidentiality is important in professional counselling, the challenge is that the obligation to protect and report cases of abuse and neglect may force them to violate client confidentiality (Sori & Hecker 2015). The South African Association of Counsellors (SAAC), which represents community and workplace-based counsellors in the informal sector who serve as life skill counsellors, pastoral counsellors and marriage counsellors, has indicated on their website that there is a need to regulate the counselling profession (SAAC 2021). The regulation of the counselling profession according to SAAC (2021) will ensure that:

[C]ounsellors know their scope of practice, behave, ethically in a counselling context, conform to minimum standards, know when to refer clients and understand the consequences for clients if counsellors are inadequately trained or overstep their scope of practice. (p. 12)

Although professional counselling in South Africa is regulated and members are under a code of conduct that protects the clients, there are still only few people who make use of the services of professional counsellors. This could partly be influenced by the fact that professional counselling is Euro-American and employ theoretical models developed by Western individuals (Bantjes, Kagee & Young 2016:176). Professional counselling in South Africa has a historical bias towards Euro-American psychological theories and models, and a lack of psychological access to most black South Africans (Bantjes et al. 2016).

Professional counsellors need to be open to acquiring the necessary skills to improve their interaction with clients (Ahmed 2016). Ahmed (2016) claims that:

The skills developed over the years for training counsellors to build good relationships and use them in therapeutic processes provide a useful starting place for applying skills to social work practice. (p. 194)

Wango et al. (2018:40) declares that the of various tactics and approaches to improve relationships and counselling process communication is referred to as counselling skills. The application of counselling abilities can be expanded in circumstances other than that of professional counselling such as when a pastor helps married couples work through marital problems. The distinction between counselling and the application of counselling skills is significant, because it preserves the practice of 'counselling' (therapy, psychotherapy, or psychology) for specific circumstances in which there is a formal counselling contract (Wango et al. 2018:40).

Integrating professional counselling

The upsurge in interest in spirituality and religion in the fields of mental health and helping occupations such as social work reflects the various ways pastoral care and counselling are viewed and used (Streets 2014:2). South Africa has seen the neo-Pentecostal churches growing over the years (Kgatle 2020b). The growth of neo-Pentecostal churches is a clear indication that the role of the church in marriage counselling cannot be ignored. Religious institutions are better positioned to promote and strengthen the capacity of families and communities due to their involvement in the lives of members of the community (United Nations Children's Funds [UNICEF] 2021). However, due to some challenges highlighted in the preceding sections, this is not the case among neo-Pentecostal churches, as married couples, particularly women, suffer abuse. Married couples prefer being counselled by their pastors instead of professional counselling. The study on 'conflict management in black African marriages' (Spaumer 2017), found that couples who are facing marital challenges would consult with their pastors before consulting professional counsellors. This is confirmed by Potgieter (2015:1), who indicates that 'many people with mental health problems will first turn to a pastor or other religious leaders before seeking psychological service from a professional therapist'. Hence, this article proposes an integration with professional counselling. Professional counsellors can play a complementary role in this regard. According to UNICEF (2012:5), collaborating with religious organisations will improve family well-being by utilising and learning from the advantages of religious communities to create priority programmes.

Integrating professional counselling is to understand that, in a counselling session, the pastor has a client-therapist relationship with the congregation's members (Mălureanu 2014:25). In a professional environment, pastors must provide for individuals in their suffering, trauma, uncertainty and confusion (Potgieter 2015:2). Pastors in Neo-Pentecostalism need to become equally adept at psychological methodology as they are at theological methodology (Mălureanu 2014:25). As indicated in Pearce (2014:243), those who have the credibility to add counselling to their other skills enhance their normal practice. In other Christian traditions, some pastors have demonstrated to possess a high level of interpersonal skills, which is one of the important skills that professional counsellors should have while working with

counselees. Pastors in neo-Pentecostalism should also extend their work beyond the church and become relevant to the whole community by professionalising their counselling (Mălureanu 2014:25). Furthermore, it is important that counselling be extended through encouraging a more universal understanding of the skills involved and the impact on the current work of the professional person (Pearce 2014:243). Congregants in neo-Pentecostalism have faith in their pastor and they can trust him or her with their marital challenges. Therefore, pastors can build on this trust and the aim to support their church members who are having existential problems. However, they will not be able to do so by only relying on their theology of spirit, prayer and the Bible. There are times, according to Mălureanu (2014:30), 'when pastors should understand that the most caring pastoral act is a referral to other persons or agencies better qualified to act', or to improve their skills by becoming professional counsellors instead of only relying on their experience and theology. Therefore, the integration of professional counsellors with pastors can be achieved through training the pastors on counselling skills. Once the pastor has acquired the necessary counselling skill, they will be able to understand that certain cases should be referred to professional counsellors.

Potgieter (2015:5) says: 'Due to a lack of qualified counsellors or professional mental health workers, the number of people receiving mental health services has increased by the usage of regular counsellors.' Training the pastors on counselling skills could bring self-awareness and help them to recognise the value of being counselled by another person and the vulnerability involved in being a client (Pearce 2014:243). Wango et al. (2018:40) indicated that expanding the use of counselling skills among the population increases the number of people obtaining the support they require in difficult circumstances. In a community where a wide range of people are ready and willing to become helpers and interact with community members, they must be equipped with counselling skills so that the profession will at least be able to deal in a creative way with the traumas people experience (Pearce 2014:241). By training neo-Pentecostal pastors, there will be the same illumination, blessing and strengthening of the care offered by professional counsellors (Potgieter 2015:40).

It is reiterated, according to Moore, Mansfield and Onsomu (2022) that:

Pastors are viewed as trusted sources to provide accurate and important information and they feel responsible for making important decisions about church members' overall health. (p. 8926)

Professional counsellors cannot ignore the role of the church in addressing mental health matters in society including the marital challenges couples face. Communities and church members have confidence in the leadership of the pastors which is a good thing, and the opinion of pastors concerning the member's relationships has more authority than that of a professional counsellor. It is to the benefit of professional counsellors to find ways to work together with the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches. On the other hand, neo-Pentecostal pastors can also benefit from incorporating professional counselling in their engagements with their congregants.

Discussion and recommendations

Neo-Pentecostal churches have a great influence on marriages in the form of counselling, as they are the first point of contact for their members. However, the counselling they conduct requires professional counsellors' services to deal with current abuses and lack of confidentiality. Therefore, empowering pastors with the necessary basic counselling skills will benefit married couples in neo-Pentecostal churches. Professionals such as social workers, psychologists and pastoral counsellors need to develop short counselling courses for pastors. This can help building a relationship with professionals, while encouraging pastors to refer the cases that need professional counselling. The failure of neo-Pentecostal pastors to become professional in their conduct, might result in continuous abuse and lack of confidentiality in counselling. Pastors should not take advantage of their members' trust, but rather pursue professionalism by upskilling or referring difficult matters to other professionals.

Conclusion

Married couples in neo-Pentecostal churches prefer to visit their pastor when facing marital problems as opposed to visiting a professional such as a social worker, psychologist and so forth. However, the challenge is that, due to a lack of training, some pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches have been abusing their congregants, especially women who are sexual abused during counselling sessions. Some prophets in New Prophetic Churches tend to expose the secrets of married couples to the public; thus, bridging a confidentiality code of conduct. Other than these misconducts, the counselling offered by pastors has shortcomings due to a lack of professional skills in psychology, psychiatry and so forth. Providing training to pastors and creating partnerships with churches has the potential to empower church members with the necessary skills of understanding that their problems are not only spiritual in nature or caused by disobedience towards biblical principles or commandments; they are also psychological and psychiatric. When professional counsellors create working relationships with the neo-Pentecostal churches, it provides the opportunity for referral and learning from each other.

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Authors' contributions

M.S.K. contributed to the conceptualisation, formal analysis and writing of the article of the neo-Pentecostalism part.

A.S. contributes to the conceptualisation, formal analysis and writing of the article of the professional counselling part.

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Data availability

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