1988

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Counseling Attitudes and Involvement of Pastors in Georgia and Eastern Tennessee

Wilma Zalabak
Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists
Abstract

This study investigated the counseling attitudes and involvement of pastors from two groups, Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) pastors in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference and non-SDA pastors in the Chattanooga area. The hypothesis stated that there would be no difference between the two groups regarding their counseling attitudes and involvement. A questionnaire was developed and given to SDA pastors at a workers' meeting and sent to non-SDA members of the Chattanooga Clergy Association. In return, 44 SDA and 31 non-SDA responses came back. The basic hypothesis was evaluated by use of t-tests, while other potentially extraneous factors were checked through analysis of variance and correlation tests. For six out of ten of the questionnaire items, the t-test proved the difference to be reliable at least to the .05 level, showing that there is a difference between the two groups and refusing support for the hypothesis. The results, generalizable to pastors in Georgia and eastern Tennessee, would suggest the benefit of further studies both for confirmation and exploration of reasons.
Recently someone called me long distance to ask if I would enter into a counseling relationship or could recommend an Adventist counselor. The request is common in my ministry.

In similar interview studies Robbins (1980) and Muck (1987) noted the increased pastoral workload in counseling. Both found a strong referral system among surrounding professionals and the training of lay counselors among church members highly recommended.

The purpose of this study was to compare the counseling attitudes and involvement of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) pastors in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference with those of non-SDA pastors in the Chattanooga area. Thomsen and Hart (1985) have recognized some of the counseling involvement and needs in the SDA church, affirming that work toward spiritual maturity can come "as naturally out of the counseling room as out of the pulpit."

Previous studies have shown that pastors having had more education and more personal therapy are less likely to depend on religious exercises for help for their clients (Ruppert & Rogers, 1985) and are more likely to interact with the mental health facilities of the community (Rumberger & Rogers, 1982). These
same investigators also found more formal courses in counseling and the pastor's collegial (not isolated) approach to ministry to be important indicators of counseling involvement (1982; 1985).

Wright (1984) identified a moderate difference between the counseling activities of clergy of differing denominational affiliation, with Roman Catholics doing the most, and fundamentalist Protestants the least. More specifically, Rumberger and Rogers (1982) found significantly more counseling involvement on the part of pastors from Evangelical Free, Assemblies of God, and Calvary Chapel churches than on the part of those from Independent, Baptist, Congregational, and Lutheran churches.

Previous research in the field of pastoral counseling has not specifically positioned SDAs among other denominations regarding their counseling attitudes and involvement. For purposes of this initial study focusing on SDA pastors, I hypothesize no significant difference between those pastors in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference and non-SDA pastors in the Chattanooga area regarding their attitudes toward and involvement in counseling.

Method

Subjects

The subjects participating in this study were from two groups. First, the SDA pastors gathered for a workers' meeting in
August, 1987, were asked to participate. At that time 109 questionnaires (Appendix A) were distributed with cover letters (Appendix B) and the request to return the questionnaire to me within the remaining two days of the meeting. The pastors were offered the opportunity of receiving a copy of the results of the study if they so requested.

Secondly, questionnaires were mailed to non-SDA pastors in the Chattanooga area. A listing was obtained from the Chattanooga Clergy Association, which was dated July 14, 1987. Pastors listed with this Association are ordained or licensed religious leaders in Hamilton County. Membership is open to any such leaders who apply and pay the dues. For purposes of this study, listings which addressed only the church or an unnamed pastor were eliminated as being less likely of response, and SDA listings were eliminated since they should have participated in the first group. Then 123 pastors were sent a questionnaire and cover letter (Appendix C) with a self-addressed, stamped envelope and the offer of the opportunity to receive a copy of the results.

Materials

The data-gathering instrument for this study was a questionnaire which included six questions to determine biographical demographic data, five fill-in-the-blanks questions regarding counseling activities, and five Likert-scale questions aimed at discovering attitude.
Procedure

In this two randomized group, posttest only, quasi-experimental study, a questionnaire was used to compare the predictor variables, SDA and non-SDA for counseling attitudes and involvement. More specifically, the procedure of this study was to distribute the questionnaire with its cover letters and compile the resulting data. Using a t-test for independent groups, the means of the two groups were analyzed to determine whether or not a significant (or reliable) difference existed, and in which direction.

Results

In the first group, the SDA pastors, out of 109 questionnaires distributed, 44 (40%) were returned with 3 requesting a copy of the results. In the second group, the non-SDA pastors affiliated with the Chattanooga Clergy Association, out of 113 questionnaires distributed (10 were returned by the Post Office as "deceased" or "moved, no address"), 31 (27%) were returned with 8 requesting a copy of the results. Two of the respondents were professionals in the counseling field. In addition, 3 noted their belief that the study would not apply to them, being either retired, teaching, or a lay member.

Age distribution among all respondents represented a fairly normal curve with its mode (24 respondents) at 41 to 50. One noted being retired and making his or her responses from
reflections. The majority of respondents (41) had been in the ministry more than 15 years; however, the length of time reported in the current church was obviously slanted (36 respondents) for one to three years with most of the others distributed rather evenly all the way up to 33 years. Thirty respondents reported having taken from two to four hours of counseling courses, while some reported having taken 20, 30 or 36 hours. In both groups, all reported having at least a B.A. degree. Besides SDA pastors, the Presbyterians (12) were best represented in this sample, with one to five from each of the Baha'I faith, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, Salvation Army, and United Methodist affiliations.

The mean scores for each group on each questionnaire item are shown on Table 1. The difference in the means of the two

Insert Table 1 about here

groups is significant \( p < .05 \) for four items out of five in the first section. The one item carrying a probability too high to be reliable referred to the number of sessions given for pre-marital counseling. In fact, SDA pastors rated that item even slightly higher than did the non-SDA pastors.
The difference in the means for the two groups was not great enough to be significant for three of the items in the second section. However, the item regarding referrals to a counselor outside the pastor's own denomination showed a highly significant difference ($p < .001$) between the two groups. In fact, when the responses of each respondent were averaged for the entire second section and then compared, the means also revealed a reliable difference ($p < .01$). Thus the findings of this study do not support the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between SDA pastors in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference and non-SDA pastors in the Chattanooga area regarding their attitudes toward and involvement in counseling.

Discussion

Contrary to my hypothesis, this study showed a difference between SDA pastors and non-SDA pastors in counseling attitudes and involvement. This difference is neither disputed nor supported by previous studies, although some investigators did note counseling needs in the SDA church and also differences between other denominations.

Analysis of variance checks on age and years in the ministry, showed neither of these to be factors in the difference. Correlation between the final average and number of counseling hours taken was also not significant. Correlation between the final average and time in current church, however,
was quite significant ($t = 3.12, p < .01$). This might be explained by the transient nature of the SDA pastor's tenure (2-4 years in a church), which might also contribute to the difference in referral network, either known or used.

One non-SDA respondent carried full-time involvement in private-practice counseling and another carried a chaplaincy position in a mental health facility. Their responses could have skewed the results, but ultimately were not excluded since they seemed to represent a variation in attitudes and involvement but not in the primary selection criteria for the sample.

The low rate of return from both groups was some cause for concern, although its significance was unknown. The difference between the rate of return in the two groups might be explained by the difference in data-gathering method, the SDA pastors returning their questionnaires almost immediately, while the non-SDA pastors had to return theirs by mail. This difference in data-gathering method might also have acted as a selection bias in the non-SDA group toward those more motivated to participate.

Of interest was the fact that, for the three items which showed unreliable differences in the second section of the questionnaire, the difference in the means tended in the same direction as for the other two items ($p < .10$). This was reflected in the significance of the difference in means for the final average.
This having been only an initial study and very small, one should not attach too much meaning to the results. On the other hand, the results do suggest that further research could prove both enlightening and stimulating.

Follow-up studies should include an even broader geographical-population area to determine if this difference exists in other parts of the United States besides just Georgia and part of Tennessee. Also of interest should be the development and refinement of instruments to elaborate further the reasons for differences.


Table 1

Mean Response Scores for SDA and Non-SDA Pastors Regarding Counseling Attitudes and Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Item</th>
<th>SDA*</th>
<th>Non-SDA**</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n = 44)</td>
<td>(n = 31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Section—FILL IN BLANKS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent work time</td>
<td>12.53</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>2.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessions per week</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>3.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per couple, pre-marital</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals made, past year</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>10.04</td>
<td>3.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral resources known</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>15.35</td>
<td>3.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Section—DISAGREE OR AGREE (Likert Scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would spend more time</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would refer family member</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important to break stigma</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer outside denomination</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted more study earlier</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average on Likert scale</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>2.85**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
APPENDICES

(A - Questionnaire)

(B - Cover letter, SDA)

(C - Cover letter, non-SDA)
COUNSELING SURVEY (A)

COUNSELING AS USED HERE REFERS TO pre-marital, marital, family, social, and emotional discussion and support encounters. It DOES NOT REFER TO discussions which are primarily doctrine-, finance-, or career-oriented.

BIографICAL DATA—to help us evaluate the results.

1. Age? (circle one) 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61+
2. Years in the Ministry? (circle one) 1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26+
3. Length of Time in Current Churches?
4. Education/Degree:
   Last completed?
   Working Toward? Subject?
   Hours Lacked?
5. Number of Counseling Courses Taken?
6. Denominational Affiliation?

FILL IN BLANKS—quick approximations.

7. Counseling requires approximately what percent of your work time and energies? ______
8. Approximately how many counseling sessions do you undertake per week? ______
9. If you do pre-marital counseling, approximately how many sessions are usually involved with each couple? ______
10. Approximately how many referrals to other counseling resources did you make in the preceding 12 months? ______
11. How many referral sources do you know of in your area? ______

DISAGREE OR AGREE—circle number most nearly representing your reaction.

12. If I could rearrange my time and energy priorities, I would spend more time and energy on counseling.
   disagree— 1 2 3 4 5 —agree
13. I would gladly refer one of my family members for counseling to someone besides myself if he or she requested it.
   disagree— 1 2 3 4 5 —agree
14. I consider it very important to try to break down the stigma often attributed to those who seek counseling for some problem.
   disagree— 1 2 3 4 5 —agree
15. I do not hesitate to make referrals to counselors outside my own denomination.
   disagree— 1 2 3 4 5 —agree
16. I would have appreciated more training and awareness in the counseling field earlier in my career.
   disagree— 1 2 3 4 5 —agree
August 7, 1987

Seventh-day Adventist
Pastors in the
Georgia-Cumberland Conference

Dear Pastor:

This is a project for an honors Religion course at Southern College.

I have served as Bible Instructor on the staff at the Collegedale Church for the last two and one-half years and am now, by the grace of God, only two semesters from graduation with a BA in Religion at Southern College.

For my Southern Scholars directed study, I chose to do research under Dr. Gerald Colvin in the field of pastoral counseling. Hence this short survey.

If you will, please just remove this page and take a few minutes to respond to the items on the next page.

Your participation is very important and appreciated. Many thanks.

Sincerely,

Wilma Zalabak
Bible Instructor

P.S. If you wish to receive a copy of the results of this survey, simply write your name and address on the back of this page, and return it to me. (Please separate it from the survey page to ensure anonymity.)
October 8, 1987 (C)

Chattanooga Pastors

Dear Pastor:

This is a project for an honors Religion program at Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, where I am finishing this year my BA in Religion. I also serve on the staff of the Collegedale Seventh-day Adventist Church.

By your affiliation with the Chattanooga Clergy Association, you have been selected for participation in this research in the field of pastoral counseling. Supervising professor is Dr. Gerald Colvin, chairman of the College's Education and Psychology Department.

If you will, please just take a few minutes to respond to the items on the next page. Then use the self-addressed, stamped envelope to return it to me, in the next mail if possible. Cut-off time for responses received will October 22.

Your participation is very important and appreciated. Many thanks.

Sincerely,

Wilma Zalabak
Bible Instructor

P.S. If you wish to receive a copy of the results of this survey, simply write your name and address on the back of this page, and return it to me.