

Unpacking the role of religious counselling services in Ghana

January 13 2020, by Annabella Osei-Tutu and Vivian Afi Abui Dzokoto



Religious counsellors are an important part of society. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

In the past when most Ghanaians lived in rural areas, most would typically consult an elder, a respected member of the family, or someone of good social standing in their community when they faced problems in

their life. Today, more people are living in cities. It is [estimated](#) that as of 2016, 54.68% of Ghana's population lived in urban areas. When city-dwellers do not have family members to talk to in times of difficulty, or do not wish to talk about their problems with close family members, they may turn to a source of support that is available in their church or mosque.

Ghanaian religious counsellors play a major role in helping people negotiate everyday problems. Most churches and mosques have volunteers as religious counsellors. In addition to providing guidance on religious matters, they provide support and advice to those who need help in dealing with personal problems.

These volunteers, including elders, lay ministers, clerics and other worshippers, may not have formal education in counselling. But they use their personal experiences and understanding to help others in distress. A population census done in 2010 showed that [18 million Christians](#) and 4.4 million Muslims across Ghana could have access to lay counsellors within their religious organisations.

In our [study](#), we asked religious counsellors in four cities in Ghana about the kind of problems people approached them about. Our aim was to try to determine the overlap—if any—between services sought at places like psychiatric hospitals, professional psychological services and prayer camps, and those provided by religious counsellors.

Our study suggests that religious counsellors provide a very important service in the country.

What we found

We interviewed 81 Christian and 19 Muslim counsellors in four cities in Ghana. Seventy-five of the participants were men and 25 were women.

The oldest person was 80 years old and the youngest was 24.

Most of the people we interviewed were members of congregations who chose to serve as counsellors as their way of supporting their religious communities. In addition, some of the people we interviewed were priests, reverend ministers, pastors, deacons, or Islamic clerics who provided counselling services as part of their responsibilities.

We found that most of the problems people take to religious counsellors are about marriage. For those approaching marriage, concerns include differences in education, finances or age of the prospective partners. Other premarital issues are related to choice of spouse and parental consent.

This suggests that religious counsellors may be occupying an area of interpersonal concerns not addressed in psychiatric and prayer camp settings. However, some of what they do overlaps somewhat with the goals of psychological services.

Problems at home

Over 72% of those we interviewed saw people who had concerns about their marriage. Married people sought help with conflicts between spouses. For example, some of the conflicts were about how to divide household chores. A few of the help-seekers who were in Muslim marriages reported problems related to a husband's decision to take an additional wife, or conflicts between the wives. Married people also brought problems relating to distrusting their spouse over finances, and disputes about property acquired in the marriage.

Some married people also came for counselling to seek help for sexual issues. Some reported problems about a spouse being impotent. Others sought help when they felt that they could not meet some of the sexual

demands of a spouse. Others suspected or had become aware that their partner was having sexual relations outside the marriage. A few people also went to see religious counsellors when they experienced domestic violence in the marriage.

Over a third of the religious counsellors we interviewed had provided help on parenthood. Infertility and parenting responsibilities were among the issues raised. Conflicts between parents and children; relationship with stepchildren; and concern about children's friends were also presented to the counsellors.

Only a few of the religious counsellors we interviewed reported that people sought their help for dealing with mental health problems. Some said they'd been asked for help on issues related to substance abuse such as smoking marijuana.

Education was another area where people looked for support. For example, some people needed help in deciding which courses to take at senior high school, or which career path to follow.

An avenue to help

Religious counsellors form one of several avenues where people seek help for problems that they encounter in life. They are a distinct, accessible, largely volunteer resource used to navigate marriage and parenting difficulties. A few provide help for educational and career issues. Most of the religious counsellors we interviewed did not report seeing people with severe mental health issues. Most of the problems they saw were not life-threatening, in our view.

Nevertheless, religious counsellors offer an important avenue for people to seek help in Ghana.

More information: Annabella Osei-Tutu et al. Common presenting problems in religious lay counselling practice in Ghana, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/13674676.2019.1666096](https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1666096)

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