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# Pastoral Counseling Among Chinese Churches: A Canadian Study\*

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This article reports the results of a survey of Canadian Chinese pastors (N=20) regarding their experiences and attitudes related to pastoral counseling. It identifies common concerns encountered during pastoral counseling, as well as key areas of church concerns. Results of the survey indicate that pastoral counseling may be more important than is currently recognized by Chinese pastors, particularly in key areas of marriage, family life, and general relationship issues. The authors discuss possible implications of the survey relative to training and equipping Chinese pastors to engage more in pastoral counseling as an integral part of their parish ministry.

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**A**s readers of this journal well know, pastoral counseling as a discipline is well recognized and constitutes an important part of a pastor's ministry in the western world. Certainly there is ample research documenting pastoral counseling as an active part of ministry in western church context. However, there is little research on pastoral counseling in the ethnic church context within North America. In Canada, as well as in the United States, Chinese churches flourish in the large metropolitan cities according to the flow of the immigrant population.

It would seem, therefore, that a study of the churches in any one of these cities would tend to be a fair representation of the North American Chinese church in general. In this current study, we investigated a sample of churches in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with the purpose of identifying the experiences and attitudes of Chinese church pastors towards pastoral counseling. Also, we sought to ascertain the nature of counseling needs within these churches. In particular, we hoped to identify any areas that might need improving so that we might be able to offer suggestions as to how the Chinese churches in North America may be able to serve better the counseling needs of these congregations.

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***The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling, Winter 2003, Vol. 57, No. 4***

\*This survey was supported partly by a grant from the Hudson Taylor Centre for Chinese Ministries, Tyndale Seminary. The second and third authors were the research assistants to the principal author. The statistical expertise of Mr. Francis Cheng in helping to analyze the data, and the editorial assistance of Mr. Johnben Loy in the preparation of the manuscript, are much appreciated.

A pastoral counselor is defined in different ways. According to Barry Estadt, a pastoral counselor is “a religiously integrated person who approaches others with a sense of mystery, along with an ability to enter into communion with others in a therapeutic alliance, with the goal of reconciliation and personal religious integration.”<sup>1</sup> Along with Estadt’s definition, we would add that counseling ought to cover both the spiritual as well as the non-spiritual aspects of life.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as Worthington suggests, a pastoral counselor should be competent in two disciplines: theology and psychology.<sup>3</sup> In our study, we defined pastoral counseling as follows: pastoral counseling takes place when a pastor enters into a structured counseling relationship—one that involves a specific time commitment in a designated place, with one or more persons from the church and for the purpose of reconciliation and personal faith integration, using both Christian theology and social sciences.

### Sample of Study

A list of all the Chinese churches in the Greater Metropolitan Toronto area was obtained through the Ministerial Fellowship of Chinese Pastors. At the time of the our study, there were a total of 80 Chinese churches in the registry. We stratified and categorized these churches according to the size of regular attendees (less than 200, 201-400, 401-600, 601-800, 801-1000, over 1000). We then randomly selected 25% of churches from each category, resulting in a sample of 20 churches. Ten churches had less than 200 regular attendees; 6 churches had between 201-400 attendees; one church had an attendance of 401-600; two churches 601-800 attendees; and one church had an attendance of over 801 people.

### Method Utilized for the Study

We developed a questionnaire to examine three different aspects of pastoral counseling among Chinese pastors. First, we surveyed their experience and attitudes toward pastoral counseling, including level of training, amount of time spent counseling, comfort level with counseling, perceptions of the importance of pastoral counseling, and the desire to pursue more training in counseling. Second, for those pastors who engaged in counseling, we gathered from them a report of the common concerns they encountered in pastoral counseling. Lastly, we obtained from *all* the pastors an indication of the relevance of different areas of church needs related to counseling. Specifically, these needs were as follows: faith issues, social/cultural adjustment, friendship and relationship problems, parenting young children, problems between parents and teens, problems with in-laws, problems with siblings, care for the elderly, grief and unexpected loss, death and dying (cancer/aged), emotions and depression, drug problems, physical abuse, sexual abuse, sexual problems for singles (including

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<sup>1</sup>Barry K. Estadt, *Pastoral Counseling* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Everett L. Worthington, Jr., “A Blueprint for Intradisciplinary Integration,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1994, Vol. 22, pp. 79-86.

<sup>3</sup>Gary W. Moon, Judy W. Bailey, John C. Kwasny, and Dale E. Willis, “Training in the Use of Christian Disciplines as Counseling Techniques within Christian Graduate Training Programs,” in Everett L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Psychotherapy and Religious Values* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), pp. 191-203.

youth), sexual problems for married couples, marital problems, and marriage preparation.

Many of these questions were scaled according to a Likert-type approach; that is, 1 being the highest score and 7 being the lowest score; for example, 1 = most important, 7 = least important.

Demographic data were also obtained through the questionnaires.

Individual churches were approached and direct contact was made with the pastors to explain the proposed project. The direct contact was followed by a personalized cover letter, delivered to the pastors, along with the questionnaires. Shortly after these deliveries, we either visited the pastors on site or talked with them over the telephone to answer any questions they might have or to encourage them to complete the questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were returned to us by mail or by FAX. The response rate was 100%.

Data from the questionnaires were then analyzed.

## Results from the Survey

### Demographics

The demographic profile of our sample is shown in Table 1. Of the sample, 18 pastors (90%) were male and 2 (10%) were female. The mean age of the pastors was 47 years with a range from 28 to 58 years. All of the pastors possessed graduate degrees (with three at the doctoral level) with the

TABLE 1  
Demographic Profile of Pastors

Group Names	GTA	GpA	GpB	GpC	GpD	GpE
Number	20	10	6	1	2	1
SEX: Male	18	9	5	1	2	1
Female	2	1	1	0	0	0
AGE: Mean	47	45	44	53	53	53
YEARS OF MINISTRY: Mean	15	13	15	25	23	25
HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED:						
D.Min., Ph.D./Th.D.	3	0	1	1	1	0
Th.M.	1	1	0	0	0	0
M.Div.	12	5	5	0	1	1
M.T.S.	3	3	0	0	0	0
B.Th.	1	1	0	0	0	0
MAJOR AREAS OF STUDY:						
Pastoral	15	7	5	1	2	0
Counseling	1	0	1	0	0	0
Mission	0	0	0	0	0	0
Christian Education	2	2	0	0	0	0
Youth & Family	1*	0	0	0	1*	0
Chinese Ministry	1	1	0	0	0	0
Biblical	1	0	0	0	0	1

\*This pastor in Group D majored in both pastoral and in youth and family areas.

exception of one who had only a bachelor's level of education. The pastors possessed an average 15 years of church ministry experience. Eighty percent of the pastors focused their seminary education on pastoral studies, with 5% (one pastor) reported focusing on counseling.

### Experience and Attitude Towards Pastoral Counseling

The experience and attitudes of the pastors towards pastoral counseling are shown in Table 2. Our sample of pastors reported to have taken an average of 2.5 counseling courses during their training. Pastors who engaged in pastoral counseling reported spending an average of 1.2 hours per day (SD=0.6) on pastoral counseling. They also reported a fairly high comfort level with counseling—an average score of 2.7 (2 being “quite comfortable” and 3 being “somewhat comfortable”)—with a Standard Deviation of 1.8. Comfort level was attributed more to experience (mean score = 2) and training (mean score=2.1) in counseling, and less to the availability of supervision or peer case discussions.

**TABLE 2**  
**Experience and Attitudes of the Pastors Towards Pastoral Counseling**

	GTA N=20	Group A N=10	Group B N=6	Group C N=1	Group D N=2	Group E N=1
No. of pastoral counseling courses taken	2.5	1.7	3.5	0	3.5	5
No. of hours doing pastoral counseling per day	1.2	1.0	1.5	1.0	1.5	1.0
Comfort level in doing pastoral counseling	2.7	3.1	2.0	2.0	1.5	6
Perception of importance of individual ministry areas:						
Preaching	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.0	1.0
Evangelism	1.5	1.4	1.7	3.0	1.0	1.0
Visitation	2.2	2.1	2.7	2.0	1.0	1.0
Mission	3.1	2.9	4.0	1.0	1.5	1.0
Teaching/Christian Ed.	2.2	2.4	2.3	1.0	1.0	1.0
General caring	2.2	2.6	1.7	1.0	1.5	1.0
Pastoral counseling	2.8	2.7	3.2	4.0	1.5	1.0
Ranking of importance of all areas of ministry:						
Preaching	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.0	1.5	NA*
Evangelism	2.3	1.9	2.8	5.0	1.5	NA
Visitation	4.3	4.6	4.3	2.0	4.5	NA
Mission	5.6	5.0	6.5	6.0	5.5	NA
Teaching/Christian Ed.	3.5	3.4	3.0	3.0	5.5	NA
General caring	5.3	6.0	4.5	4.0	5.5	NA
Pastoral counseling	5.4	5.6	5.3	7.0	4.0	NA
Willingness to participate in continuing ed.	2.3	3.3	2.7	4.0	1.0	1.0

\*No Answer

With regard to pastoral perception of the importance of counseling as compared to other areas of ministry, the pastors rated pastoral counseling as only somewhat important (M=2.9, S.D.=1.1). In other words, they did not consider counseling to be a very important function in their ministry. Compared to other ministry areas, the respondents *rated* evangelism (M=1.5) and preaching (M=1.2) as very important, followed by visitation (M=2.2), teaching of Christian education (M=2.2), general caring (M=2.2), pastoral counseling (M=2.8), and missions (M=3.1). When we asked the pastors to rank the areas of their ministry in order of importance, they ranked preaching as the most important (M=5.4), followed by evangelism (M=2.3), teaching (M=3.5), visitation (M=4.3), caring (M=5.3), pastoral counseling (M=5.4), and missions (M=5.6).

Despite the relatively lower ranking of pastoral counseling compared to other expressions of ministry, when asked whether they would be interested in participating in continuing education in pastoral counseling, the mean score indicated that would be quite interested (M=2.3, S.D.=1.8). Of those who indicated that they were interested, the following top five concerns were mentioned and ranked (from most needy to least needy): (1) marital relationship; (2) family life education; (3) friendship/relationship; (4) depression; (5) counseling techniques. Six pastors indicated that they were not interested in pursuing continuing education in pastoral counseling. Out of these six, four belonged to churches with less than 200 attendees, one belonged to a church with 201-400 attendees, and one belonged to a church with 801-1000 people. The major reason given for their disinterest was "no time." In the case of the large church, the reason given was that another pastor was handling pastoral counseling.

### Common Concerns Encountered in Pastoral Counseling

With regard to common issues encountered during pastoral counseling (Table 3), pastors who engaged in pastoral counseling reported the following as the top five common concerns (from the most common to the least common): (1) marital relationship; (2) family education; (3) friendship/relationship; (4) parenting young children; and (5) personal growth and direction.

TABLE 3  
Top Five Concerns Encountered in Pastoral Counseling

	GTA N=20	Group A N=10	Group B N=6	Group C N=1	Group D N=2	Group E N=1
1	Marriage relationship	Marriage relationship	Marriage relationship	Self	Family Education	Marriage relationship
2	Family Education	Family Education	Parenting young children	Friendship & relationship	Sickness	Emotion
3	Friendship & relationship	Friendship & relationship	Marriage preparation	Parenting young children	Parenting young children	Family education
4	Parenting young children	Direction & Growth	Career	Marriage relationship	Marriage relationship	Faith issues
5	Direction & growth	Grief	Direction & Growth	Communication Skill	Aging	Friendship &

## Areas of Church Needs

Other areas of church needs in relation to counseling were also surveyed (see Table 4). Overall, in the GTA, the respondents reported the following areas to be quite relevant or very relevant: marriage preparation, faith issues, marital problems, problems between parent and teens, parenting young people, emotions and depression, friendship and relationship problems. When forced to rank the top five most needy areas, the respondents answered as follows: (1) marriage problems; (2) parenting teens; (3) parenting young children; (4) faith issues; and (5) friendship and relationship problems.

**TABLE 4**  
**Ranking of the Top Five Needs in the Churches**

	GTA N=20	Group A N=10	Group B N=6	Group C N=1	Group D N=2	Group E N=1
1	Marriage problems	Parenting young children	Marriage problems	Parenting young children	Parenting teens	Marriage problems
2	Parenting teens	Parenting teens	Faith issues	Faith issues	Faith issues	Faith issues
3	Parenting young children	Friendship & relationship	Parenting teens	Parenting teens	Emotions	Parenting teens
4	Faith issues	Marriage problems	Parenting young children	Friendship & relationship	Care of the elderly	Faith issues
5	Friendship & relationship	Faith issues	Care of the elderly	Emotions	Parenting young children	Friendship & relationship

## Discussion

### Demographics

In our sample, the average age of pastors in the GTA was 47. The age group represented primarily the senior pastorats as we solicited the views of only one pastor per church, and usually the senior pastor was the one who responded. The gender proportion of 90% male to 10% female pastors is representative of the population of Chinese churches in the GTA. The high level of education of our sample is indicative of the fact that the basic bachelor's degree in theology is no longer adequate to pastor a Chinese church in the North American setting. A master's degree—particularly with a pastoral focus—is the norm.

### Experience and Attitudes Towards Pastoral Counseling

The average pastor took 2.5 pastoral counseling courses during his or her theological education. However, a typical seminary graduate majoring in counseling or pastoral counseling will have taken at least 6 counseling courses (including 2 years of counseling internship) in order to be adequately trained. Thus, an average of 2.5 counseling courses is inadequate to prepare a pastor to do regular pastoral counseling.

The average pastor spends 1.2 hours per day on pastoral counseling. Counselors, on the other hand, spend about 75% of their time on direct

service to clients, teaching, and supervision, with only 25% on other areas such as research, writing, consulting service, and administration.<sup>4</sup> If there were 6 working hours per day, this would translate to 4.5 hours of direct client service per 6-hour working day. Compared to counselors, the average pastor spends only 20% of their working hours on pastoral counseling.

For those pastors engaged in pastoral counseling, they reported a relatively high level of comfort in doing pastoral counseling, and they considered training and experience as two important factors in determining comfort level. However, they did not think supervision and peer discussion of cases as important contributors to learning. This may be an area worth exploring. In almost all professional fields of counseling and clinical social work, supervision by qualified supervisors and peer discussions are integral parts of learning and practice. Not placing importance on supervision and peer discussion of cases shows us that the pastors may not be fully aware of the significance of these areas in enhancing their counseling practice.

Of great interest in our study are the attitudes of Chinese pastors towards pastoral counseling: they rated pastoral counseling as only somewhat important and ranked it as second last only to missions. Given the fact that missions is not a regular function of a pastor, if we discount missions from the list, we can interpret the results as indicating that pastoral counseling is perceived as the least important pastoral function. Yet, strangely, Chinese pastors spend twenty percent of their time doing pastoral counseling. The discrepancy causes one to wonder if pastors are being forced to counsel out of the needs arising from the congregation. It is interesting to note that the pastors' average response to continuing education in pastoral counseling was "quite interested." Indeed, if pastoral counseling was not an important area, one wonders why they would be quite interested in further training—unless, of course, it is a need brought about from the congregation.

Of the twenty-five percent who responded that they would not be interested in continuing education due to a lack of time (not including the senior pastor from the large church who delegates counseling to another pastor), their lack of time to pursue continuing education may be related to the smaller church size in which pastors are required to be more active and busy as generalists.

Our survey of the experience and attitudes towards pastoral counseling show us that, generally speaking, Chinese pastors regard pastoral counseling as subsidiary, less important, but a necessary function in their overall ministry portfolio.

### **Common Concerns Encountered in Pastoral Counseling/Areas of Church Needs**

With regard to common issues encountered during pastoral counseling (Table 3), most of the cases of pastoral counseling dealt with relationship problems and issues, either within the marriage and family, or with other people. These common concerns were consistent with the areas of church needs (Table 4): marital issues, family/parenting matters; and general relationships.

It is interesting to note that issues related to the aged—death and dying (cancer/aged); care for the elderly; grief and unexpected loss; and social/cultural adjustments—were only mildly relevant overall. A possible

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<sup>4</sup>Morris Taggart. AAPC Membership Information Project: Part 1. Academic and Professional Background of Pastoral Counselors. *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 1972, Vol. XXVI, No. 4, p. 233.

explanation is that the age distribution of the Chinese congregations is not sloped towards the elderly, thereby rendering issues related to the elderly as not a salient concern at present. However, in churches with congregations between 600-800 people, these issues were considered to be important areas of need. We are not certain why this was the case, as the bigger churches did not indicate them as needy areas.

Surprisingly, drug problems, sexual abuse, and physical abuse were not relevant areas of need. This may be explained by the higher socio-economic status of the congregations in the GTA, as well as the relatively strong moral emphasis in the Chinese churches against illicit sex, drugs, and violence. Conversely, it may also be possible that the Chinese culture, with its emphasis on “face” and “shame” may cause members to be more silent on such issues, even with their pastors. With regard to sexual problems in singles and married couples, the pastors reported that these were not very relevant. However, the number one counseling concern and the most important area of church needs were both reported to be *marital issues*. It seems highly unlikely that problems within the marriage would not also include sexual problems. Given this discrepancy, the more likely explanation for the reported low relevance of sexual problems within the Chinese church is the cultural “face” and “shame” factors.

## Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore pastoral counseling within the ethnic Chinese church in the North American context, and to provide suggestions as to how the churches may be able to better serve the counseling needs of their congregations. From the findings of this initial exploratory study, we see that pastoral counseling may be a more important area of ministry requirement than our respondents recognized.

In response, pastors may choose to engage counseling professionals into their ministries, to refer their members to outside agencies (*e.g.*, Christian counseling centers), or to equip themselves with further training since, as is shown in our data, the overall current level of training in pastoral counseling is inadequate. Given the reports of the common concerns and areas of needs, specific training would need to be catered towards marriage and family counseling, as well as general relationship education.

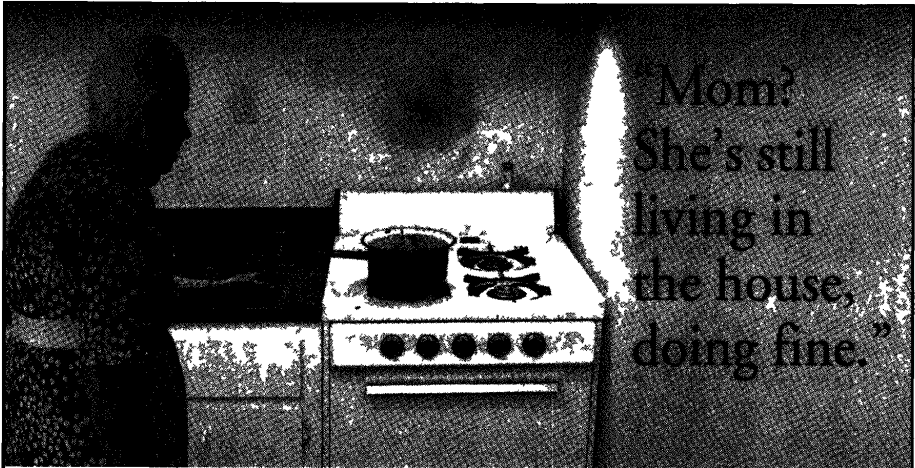
This study may also be helpful to seminaries that cater to the preparation of Chinese church pastors in evaluating and adjusting their present curriculum to meet the ministry needs of the Chinese church. Our study demonstrates that preparation and studies that help the pastors to strengthen the family would be a priority. This may include preventive measures, remedial measures, and enrichment strategies. In addition to the existing programs and courses, seminaries may wish to provide opportunities for continuing education in pastoral counseling for the busy, in-ministry pastor.

There are, of course, limitations in our study. For instance, unofficially it is estimated that there are about 120 Chinese churches in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). However, a number of these churches—the smaller ones in particular—are not a part of the Chinese Ministerial Fellowship. The list we obtained contained only 80 churches. Therefore, our results may not be truly representative of all the churches. Furthermore, our sample size was small. The ideal study would include a survey of all 80 church-



es in the GTA. In addition, some of the churches have more than one pastor, but our study surveyed only one pastor—usually the senior pastor. As such, there will be limitations in extrapolating the results to the entire population. Nevertheless, we believe our stratified sample is a good representation of the population.

Another possible weakness of the study is its self-report format. The answers were dependant upon the degree of honesty as well as the subjectivity of the viewpoints of the respondents. ♣



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