

When Compassion Is Not Enough: Why Every Pastor Must Be Trained in Counselling

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“The pastor, regardless of his training, does not enjoy the privilege of electing whether or not he will counsel with his people... His choice is not between counseling or not counseling, but between counseling in a disciplined and skilled way and counseling in an undisciplined and unskilled way.”

— W. E. Oates, ed., *An Introduction to Pastoral Counseling* (1959)

The Reality Every Pastor Faces

Whether a pastor is prepared or not, people will still come. They come with marital conflict, depression, addiction, grief, suicidal thoughts, childhood trauma, sexual struggles, domestic violence, anxiety, family crises, spiritual confusion, and emotional exhaustion. Ministry places pastors directly in contact with human pain. The pulpit may attract crowds, but private conversations reveal brokenness.

This is the truth W. E. Oates emphasized decades ago: pastors cannot escape counselling. The real issue is whether they will counsel competently or carelessly.

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

Many pastors genuinely love people. They pray sincerely. They know Scripture deeply. They desire to help. However, compassion alone does not automatically produce counselling competence.

An untrained pastor may unintentionally give simplistic answers to complex trauma, spiritualize severe mental health conditions, mishandle abuse disclosures, worsen marital conflicts, break confidentiality, or miss suicide warning signs.

In many churches, people have been wounded not by wicked pastors, but by untrained pastors. A sincere heart without proper training can still produce harmful outcomes.

The Church Is Facing More Complex Problems Than Ever Before

Today's pastors encounter trauma from abuse and neglect, substance dependency, pornography addiction, self-harm behaviors, anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal ideation, marital instability, social media pressures, childhood emotional neglect, domestic violence, and emotional burnout.

Many of these issues require careful listening, assessment skills, ethical awareness, crisis response knowledge, and referral competence. Quoting one Bible verse without understanding the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of a problem may not bring healing.

Counselling Training Does Not Replace the Holy Spirit

Professional counselling training does not remove dependence on God. It strengthens responsible ministry. The Holy Spirit works through prepared vessels.

Training sharpens discernment, improves listening, strengthens ethical practice, develops emotional intelligence, and equips pastors to respond wisely to suffering.

Certificate-Level Training Is the Minimum, Not the Maximum

Not every pastor must become a licensed therapist or clinical psychologist. But every pastor should possess at least foundational counselling competence.

Certificate-level training can provide basic helping skills, active listening techniques, ethics and confidentiality, crisis intervention principles, trauma awareness, marriage and family counselling foundations, suicide risk recognition, referral systems, and understanding of common mental health conditions.

The Cost of Untrained Counselling Is Too High

Poor counselling can destroy trust, worsen emotional wounds, and damage lives. Some people leave church permanently because their pain was mishandled. Others remain spiritually confused because serious mental health conditions were labeled merely as spiritual weakness.

Pastors carry enormous influence. That level of influence demands preparation.

A New Generation of Wise and Skilled Shepherds

The church needs shepherds who can sit with pain wisely and responsibly. The future of pastoral ministry requires biblical depth, emotional intelligence, ethical maturity, trauma awareness, relational wisdom, and counselling competence.

People are no longer asking only, “Can the pastor preach?” They are also asking, “Can the pastor understand?”

HOLISTIC COUNSELLING & COACHING INSTITUTE

HOLISTIC COUNSELLING & COACHING INSTITUTE is committed to raising emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and professionally trained Christian leaders, counsellors, pastors, and caregivers. The Institute provides practical and professional training in counselling, coaching, emotional wellness, pastoral care, trauma awareness, mediation, and mental health advocacy.

Under the leadership of Counsellor James Kofi Abbrey, the Institute continues to champion the integration of faith, emotional wellness, professional competence, and responsible helping practices within churches and communities.

About the Author

Counsellor James Kofi Abbrey is a Professional Counsellor, Coach, Ordained Minister, Mediator, Trainer, Facilitator, and Mental Health Advocate. He is the Executive Director of HOLISTIC COUNSELLING & COACHING INSTITUTE and is passionate about strengthening emotional wellness, pastoral care, counselling education, and ethical helping practices within churches, institutions, and communities. His work focuses on integrating faith, professional counselling skills, mental health awareness, leadership development, and practical interventions for healing and personal growth.

Conclusion

Pastors cannot escape counselling responsibilities. Ministry itself guarantees those encounters. The question is not whether pastors will counsel people, but whether they will do so with wisdom, discipline, skill, ethical awareness, and professional preparation.

The shepherd who truly loves the sheep must also prepare to handle wounded sheep wisely.