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Challenges to sanctuary: The clergy as a resource for mental health care in the community

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Abstract

The transfer of psychiatric care from the institution to the community has presented community structures including faith-based organisations (FBOs) with an additional burden of care. In recent years there has been an increasing policy interest among government departments, public and non-statutory agencies for the inclusion of FBOs as partners in health and welfare services. However, despite their long historical involvement in healing and healthcare, clergy are seldom viewed by mental health professionals as partners in healing and restitution but with suspicion [Koenig, 1988. *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* San Diego: Academic Press; Larson, Hohmann, & Kessler, 1988. The couch and the cloth: The need for linkage. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 39, 1064–1069]. This may be compounded by ignorance about mental health care provision within FBOs in the UK and the

tolerance about mental health care provision within FOC in the UK and the preparedness, confidence and willingness to undertake such care. This paper is based on a study which examined clergy contact with people with mental illness. Thirty-two interviews were conducted with male clergy (Christian ministers, rabbis, and imams) most of whom were London-based. We examine barriers and dilemmas for clergy in caring for people with mental illness. We found that they play an important but often confined role the scale and impact of which is not recognised by their central organisation and training bodies. Low confidence about managing psychiatric problems, underscored by anxiety, fear and stereotyped attitudes to mental illness restrain their willingness to formalise their function. We argue that any proposed extension of clergy involvement in mental health will require further research and thorough deliberation by mental health services and religious organisations.



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Keywords

UK; Mental health; Clergy; Help-seeking; Counselling; Faith-based organizations

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