

Mental Health and Pastoral Care in Migrant Churches

Dr. Danielle Phillips-Koning

In my research I investigate the place of 'mental health' in the health conceptualisations and care practices of migrant pastors in the Netherlands. Previous research suggests that migrant churches in this country are highly engaged in a wide variety of social work in their communities, including support with housing, employment, documents, finances, and language learning. Much less is known about how these churches conceptualise and engage with issues of mental health and well-being, such as grief, anxiety, shame, depression, and trauma.

Mental Health and Migrant Communities

The place of mental health in the pastoral views and care of migrant ministers is of particular interest, as research suggests that in some migrant communities there is stigma around professional mental health care, and that some migrant groups make less use of this kind of care.



Literature proposes different possible reasons for this, such as shame, cultural differences in interpreting illness, suspicion of formal care institutions, and reliance on traditional/ social forms of healing and support.

At the same time, there is some research that suggests that migrant churches can play important roles in providing counselling to church members. A quantitative study on the various societal contributions of migrant churches in the Dutch city of The Hague showed that migrant churches in this city alone provided 51,000 hours a year of psychosocial care, including marital therapy and supporting victims of abuse and those who mourn¹.

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There is also a body of literature on the role of black churches in mental health in the United States. This literature describes the invaluable roles that black clergy play in counselling church members on topics ranging from bereavement to depression, marital and family issues, and alcohol and other forms of substance abuse. These clergy may have certain advantages over mental health professionals in that they have established trust relationships and that their counselling is not perceived as stigmatising and is free of charge.

Scope of Research

In this research I explore these dynamics among migrant pastors in the Netherlands. I will focus on three main questions.

- How do migrant ministers conceptualise health in general and mental health in particular?
- What issues of mental health and well-being do they encounter in their work and how do they diagnose, interpret and engage in healing in regard to these issues?
- How do they assess possible partnerships with others, in particular mental health professionals?

In this coming year, I will interview migrant pastors throughout the country to explore these questions. I have developed a special conversational tool that allows for the discussion of mental health and well-being without imposing pre-defined understandings of these concepts. As this research unfolds, fruitful links with other academic and societal parties are being developed such as the Centre for Research and Innovation in Christian Mental Health Care in the Netherlands and 'Thrive', a social movement for a 'mentally healthy' Amsterdam.

I look forward to learning how the care practices of these pastors can inform discussions about public mental health and the role of religion and spirituality in mental health care.

I look forward to keeping you updated as this research progresses.

Biography

With a background in cultural anthropology, Dr. Danielle Phillips-Koning works as a lecturer and researcher at the Center for Theology of Migration (www.cthm.nl) at the VU University in Amsterdam. This center offers a postgraduate program for migrant pastors and leaders, thematising topics such as multicultural pastoral care, contextual missiology and the theology of migration.

