

Using the spirit to heal the mind

By Tim Louis Macaluso

In the city's underserved African-American and Hispanic communities, ministers often encounter people suffering from serious mental health problems. And frequently, it's before anyone else, including family members and physicians, says Silvia Sorensen, a researcher in the University of Rochester's Department of Psychiatry.

"Ministers are faced with people who have mental health issues on a regular basis because of the work they do," says Sorensen. "And they don't necessarily have the training or background to recognize what's going on, or the information needed to refer people."

As part of the Department of Psychiatry's Aging Well Initiative, Sorensen developed a seminar in conjunction with the city's African-American faith community to help provide ministers, pastors, and lay counselors with the counseling tools they need.

Failure to recognize mental health problems can have tragic consequences, says Bishop Herman Dailey of the Outreach Community Center. Dailey is one of the seminar's earliest graduates. When an African-American teen went to her church pastor because she was having suicidal thoughts, the pastor told her to go home and pray, says Dailey.

"I'm not against prayer, but that is sad," says Dailey. "She even had cut marks on her hands. When we see something happening in a person like this, we have to at least refer that person to a place where she can get the professional help she needs."

About 20 people attended Sorensen's first seminar. Entering its fourth year this fall, the seminar, which the UR offers for free, has an enrollment of 54 people and a long waiting list. The 12 sessions cover a range of mental health topics including alcohol and substance abuse, suicide prevention, youth violence, and psychotic and bipolar disorders. Sessions are taught by UR faculty and professionals in the community.

The minority communities have been underserved for a number of reasons, Sorensen says. Many people do not have easy access to health care. And mental health counseling has sometimes collided with religious doctrine. But the seminar stresses nonjudgmental listening.

"We all come with history," says Dailey, who freely discusses his own substance abuse as a young soldier returning from the Vietnam War. "People come to you for help, not to be judged or made to feel guilty."

Drugs and alcohol abuse are the most prevalent problems the ministers see, but substance abuse can be symptomatic of something deeper in poor communities, they say.

"Hopelessness is the worse thing that can happen to somebody because when a man feels hopeless, life is not worth living," says Bishop Orville Beckford of the Higher Ground Church of Prophecy, another



Silvia Sorensen, with the UR's Department of Psychiatry, developed a seminar to teach counseling skills to ministers..



Bishop Orville Beckford and Bishop Herman Dailey discuss the benefits of training to recognize mental health problems.

graduate of the seminar. "Some of the young people don't reach out for what is out there or see themselves rising to a higher level."

Evaluating the seminar's success has been illusive because tracking a congregation can be like following a moving target, says Sorensen.

"People come and go," she says.

But feedback from the ministers who have taken the seminar indicates that they go on to make more referrals and even organize their own group counseling sessions and follow-up procedures.

"If we can just show interest, I believe we can eliminate so much violence and suffering," Dailey says.