

PASTORAL REFERRAL GUIDE

When & Where to Refer

U.S. National Resources



Created by Soul Discovery Mental Health Counseling Services, PC for Artios Christian College

Empowering Pastors and Church Leaders to Identify Needs, Recognize Limitations, and Refer Responsibly

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"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."
– Proverbs 15:22 (NIV)

Leading with Wisdom: A Resource Guide for Pastors and Church Leaders

Knowing and understanding when a situation is outside of your scope of practice is a valuable and essential leadership skill—one that requires wisdom, discernment, and humility. Leading effectively demands wisdom, and when leaders operate from a place of wisdom, the reach and impact of healing within the congregation expands.

This **Resource Guide for Pastors and Leaders** is designed to help you acknowledge your limitations, increase congregational healing, and reduce both **spiritual** and **physical malpractice**.

What is Spiritual Malpractice?

Spiritual malpractice occurs when religious leaders misuse their spiritual authority in ways that harm others—whether emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually. This can include giving counsel outside of one's training, using scripture to manipulate, failing to recognize trauma, or ignoring the mental health needs of congregants. It involves overstepping the bounds of spiritual care and neglecting the ethical responsibility to do no harm.

What is Physical Malpractice?

Physical malpractice in a church context refers to actions or neglect by leaders that compromise the physical safety or well-being of congregants. While traditionally a medical term, in ministry it may involve neglecting to refer someone in a medical or mental health crisis to appropriate professionals, failing to report abuse, or providing unqualified physical interventions that put others at risk.

Scripture reminds us in **Jeremiah 23:1** – “*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!*” One way leaders can remain faithful to their spiritual mandate is by recognizing the **physical limits** of that mandate. This guide is an invitation to lead with purpose, integrity, and humility, modeling for your church and fellow leaders what effective, responsible, and wise leadership truly looks like.

As leaders, you will encounter individuals with a wide range of spiritual, emotional, and practical needs. Effective leadership includes the ability to **discern, triage, and refer**. When this process is embraced, it fosters sustainable growth and healing in the church community.

This resource is written with **love, understanding, and compassion** for the tireless work that leaders carry out. It is not just a tool, but a release—permission to say, “*I don’t have to know everything,*” and encouragement to do what we often ask of others: to seek help when needed.

What You Will Find Inside This Resource Guide:

- **Definitions** of key terms and roles
- A **list of typical human concerns** encountered in ministry
- Guidance on **what to look for** and **when to refer**
- A **curated list of referral resources** (national and community-based)
- A **sample referral letter** for individuals and your church management system
- **Education materials** including:
 - PowerPoint presentation
 - Leadership training video

Should you desire further training, consultation, or customized resources, please reach out to the **Education Department of Soul Discovery Mental Health Counseling Services, PC**.

Let this guide be a partner in your leadership—one that supports you in leading wisely, lovingly, and well.

● **1. Domestic Violence (DV)** - A pattern of coercive, controlling behavior that may include physical, emotional, financial, or sexual abuse used to gain or maintain power over an intimate partner. Pastors should be aware that victims often minimize their experiences and require sensitive, trauma-informed support and referral.

What to Look For:

- Unexplained bruises/injuries
- Fear of partner, hypervigilance
- Partner controls finances, communication, transportation
- Isolation from friends/church

When to Refer:

- Concerns of physical, emotional, or financial abuse
- Person expresses fear or urgency to leave home
- Pastor is not trained in safety planning

Resources:

- **National DV Hotline:** 800-799-7233 | www.thehotline.org
 - **FaithTrust Institute:** www.faithtrustinstitute.org
 - **StrongHearts Native Helpline:** 844-762-8483
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● **2. Mental Health Crisis** - A situation in which an individual is at risk of harming themselves or others, or is experiencing a severe psychological breakdown. This may include suicidal thoughts, psychosis, or extreme emotional distress, and requires immediate intervention from trained professionals.

What to Look For:

- Persistent anxiety, sadness, fatigue
- Withdrawal, guilt, lack of motivation
- Trouble functioning at work/home
- Hopeless or “numb” statements

When to Refer:

- Symptoms persist for more than two weeks
- Suicidal ideation or self-harm
- Therapy is needed beyond pastoral counseling

Resources:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Dial 988 | 988lifeline.org
 - **NAMI:** 800-950-6264 | nami.org
 - **Psychology Today Directory:** www.psychologytoday.com
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 **3. Sexual Assault / Abuse** - Any non-consensual sexual contact, ranging from unwanted touching to rape. Leaders must respond with compassion, avoid victim-blaming, and refer to trained professionals while ensuring the individual's safety and autonomy.

What to Look For:

- Trauma symptoms (nightmares, hypervigilance, shame)
- Fear of physical contact
- Disclosure of past abuse (including childhood)
- Discomfort around certain individuals or environments

When to Refer:

- Emotional/psychological trauma is evident
- Survivor is in danger or pursuing legal action
- The person needs trauma-specific therapy

Resources:

- **RAINN:** 800-656-HOPE | www.rainn.org
 - **NSVRC:** www.nsvrc.org
 - **Safe Helpline (Military):** 877-995-5247
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 **4. Children & Youth Support** - Any act that endangers or harms a child physically, emotionally, or sexually. Pastors are often mandated reporters in these cases and must refer to child protective services or law enforcement immediately.

What to Look For:

- Regression, school refusal, aggression
- Talk of harm or sadness without reason
- Evidence of neglect or instability at home

When to Refer:

- Abuse or neglect suspected (MANDATORY REPORTING)

- Behavior disrupts development
- Parents need support or child discloses abuse

Resources:

- **ChildHelp Abuse Hotline:** 800-422-4453 | childhelp.org
 - **National Runaway Safeline:** 800-786-2929
 - **Trevor Project (LGBTQ Youth):** 866-488-7386
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● **5. Eating Disorders** - Serious conditions related to persistent eating behaviors that negatively impact health and emotional well-being. These include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder. Signs may include extreme dietary restriction, obsessive thoughts about food, or shame after eating.

What to Look For:

- Obsession with food, weight, or body image
- Noticeable weight changes
- Excessive exercising or purging behavior
- Avoidance of meals or secretive eating

When to Refer:

- Health is at risk (weight loss, malnutrition)
- Any signs of bingeing/purging
- The person exhibits denial about severity

Resources:

- **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA):** 800-931-2237 | www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
 - **ANAD (Eating Disorders Peer Support):** www.anad.org
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● **6. Substance Use & Addiction** - A chronic disease characterized by compulsive drug or alcohol use despite harmful consequences. Pastors should refer to clinical or rehabilitation services, especially when withdrawal or detox is necessary.

What to Look For:

- Secretive behavior, financial issues, mood swings
- Decline in appearance, hygiene
- Trouble maintaining work or relationships

- Denial or minimization of use

When to Refer:

- Withdrawal symptoms, relapse risk, or health decline
- Legal, family, or financial consequences
- Person is open to recovery but needs structured support

Resources:

- **SAMHSA Treatment Locator:** 800-662-HELP | findtreatment.gov
 - **Celebrate Recovery (faith-based):** www.celebraterecovery.com
 - **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):** www.aa.org
 - **Narcotics Anonymous (NA):** www.na.org
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● **7. Grief & Bereavement** - Grief is the natural emotional response to loss, particularly the loss of a loved one. It may also occur after other significant life changes such as the end of a relationship, loss of health, employment, or a dream. Symptoms can include sadness, anger, guilt, numbness, confusion, and even physical symptoms such as fatigue or insomnia. While grief is a normal process, **complicated or prolonged grief** may require referral to a mental health professional for additional support. Pastors are often called upon to provide spiritual comfort during grief but should recognize when the grieving person's ability to function is significantly impaired or if their spiritual beliefs are being negatively affected by the loss.

What to Look For:

- Inability to function after a loss
- Prolonged or complicated grief beyond 6 months
- Spiritual crisis or disconnection from God
- Withdrawal, depression, or loss of identity

When to Refer:

- When grief interferes with daily life
- If suicidal thoughts emerge
- If person is stuck in cycles of guilt, anger, or detachment

Resources:

- **GriefShare (faith-based support groups):** www.griefshare.org
 - **Dougy Center (Child Grief):** www.dougy.org
 - **Open to Hope:** www.opentohope.com
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● **8. Suicide Risk** - Thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. This is a mental health emergency and requires immediate referral to crisis support services, mental health professionals, or emergency intervention.

What to Look For:

- “I can’t go on,” “They’d be better without me”
- Giving away belongings
- Isolation, hopelessness
- Sudden calm after depression

When to Refer:

- IMMEDIATELY if suicide is mentioned
- Always take ideation seriously, even if vague
- Do not promise confidentiality—**call 911 if in imminent danger**

Resources:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** (24/7 support)
 - **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741
 - **Local Emergency Room or Mobile Crisis Unit**
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● **9. Human Trafficking / Exploitation** - Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery where individuals are exploited through force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of labor or sexual exploitation. Victims may be children or adults, U.S. citizens or immigrants, and often do not identify themselves as victims. Signs may include lack of personal identification documents, evidence of physical abuse, working excessively long hours under poor conditions, being accompanied by someone who controls them, or fear of law enforcement.

If human trafficking is suspected, **immediate referral to specialized law enforcement or trafficking hotlines is essential**. Do not attempt to intervene directly, as it may place the victim or yourself at risk.

What to Look For:

- Youth with unexplained money/gifts
- Fearful, submissive, overly controlled
- No control over ID or documents
- Isolated, overly monitored

When to Refer:

- If exploitation is suspected

- If the person lacks autonomy or seems “coached”
- If the individual is a minor—**MANDATORY REPORT**

Resources:

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 888-373-7888 | Text “BEFREE” to 233733 | humantraffickinghotline.org
 - **Polaris Project:** www.polarisproject.org
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PASTORAL CARE REMINDERS

- **Refer early.** You are a spiritual guide—not a clinician.
- **Use warm handoffs.** Offer to walk with them through the process.
- **Collaborate.** Build relationships with local Christian counselors and social services.
- **Keep confidentiality but follow laws.** In cases of abuse, suicidal ideation, or danger to others—you must report.
- **Care after the referral.** Check in spiritually and emotionally.

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