

Exploring the Intersection of Spirituality and Mental Health among Filipino Christian Pastors

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the intersection of spirituality and mental health among Filipino Christian pastors, a group whose psychological well-being is influenced by ministry demands, spiritual expectations, and cultural norms related to faith and resilience. The research aimed to investigate how Filipino Christian pastors conceptualize their spirituality and mental health, interpret the relationship between these constructs, and develop a culturally grounded psychospiritual framework from their lived experiences. Employing a phenomenological research design, the study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews with Filipino Christian pastors actively engaged in ministry. Thematic analysis identified two primary themes for spirituality: spirituality as dimensions of personhood and human existence, and spirituality as a Christ-centered faith manifested in life and service. Mental health was described through two themes: mental health anchored in spirituality, and mental health as holistic well-being. Five themes emerged regarding the intersection of spirituality and mental health: spiritual practices as sources of psychological strength; experiencing divine comfort and peace; faith as a source of resilience in the face of life's demands; transformation and renewal through divine alignment; and faith as a framework for strength and meaning. These findings reveal limitations in Western-centric models of pastoral spirituality and emphasize the culturally specific ways Filipino pastors integrate faith and psychological well-being. Based on these insights, the study introduces the Psychospiritual Framework for Filipino Christian Pastors, a culturally responsive model intended to inform biblically grounded, psychologically informed pastoral mental health programs, seminars, and interventions that reflect the lived spiritual realities of Filipino Christian pastors.

Keywords: Psychology; spirituality and mental health, psychospiritual integration, pastoral well-being; qualitative phenomenological study, in-depth interviews, thematic analysis; Philippines, Asia

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Introduction

The psychological well-being of spiritual leaders represents a critical yet often overlooked aspect of religious life, especially in societies where faith is integral to personal identity and community functioning. Christianity continues to influence the moral, cultural, and spiritual lives of more than 2.3 billion people worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2023). Existing research demonstrates that spirituality can foster resilience, facilitate meaning-making, and support adaptive coping. However, the same spiritual commitments that sustain individuals may also generate pressure, emotional strain, and existential challenges. This complexity is particularly pronounced among pastoral leaders, who are expected to exemplify spiritual strength while addressing diverse ministerial responsibilities.

In the Philippines, where religiosity is central to social life, Christian pastors fulfill multifaceted roles as spiritual guides, counselors, educators, and community leaders. This vocation is commonly regarded as a sacred calling that involves significant moral responsibility and relational accountability. Despite their essential role in offering emotional and spiritual support, pastors often experience chronic stress, burnout, and psychological distress. Cultural and ecclesiastical norms that equate vulnerability with spiritual weakness may inhibit help-seeking behaviors and further marginalize clergy mental health within church systems.

The relationship between spirituality and mental health among pastors is dynamic and multifaceted. Spiritual beliefs and practices can serve as protective resources, promoting resilience and vocational commitment. Conversely, psychological distress may disrupt spiritual engagement, reduce a sense of purpose, and intensify spiritual struggles. Globally, limited access to formal mental health support and inadequate training in psychological care further heighten pastors' vulnerability. These challenges underscore the importance of examining pastoral well-being within specific cultural and ministerial contexts, particularly in collectivist societies where spiritual leaders serve as primary sources of guidance during personal and community crises.

In the Philippine context, existing literature has primarily examined spirituality and mental health as distinct domains, with limited attention to how pastors interpret their intersection in daily ministry. Addressing this gap necessitates an approach that captures the subjective meanings pastors attribute to their emotional, spiritual, and vocational experiences. Therefore, this study employs a phenomenological orientation to investigate how Filipino Christian pastors understand and navigate the relationship between spirituality and mental health.

Informed by existential and humanistic perspectives that emphasize meaning-making, authenticity, and emotional awareness, this study conceptualizes spirituality and mental health as distinct yet interconnected dimensions of pastoral life. Spirituality is defined as encompassing faith orientation, spiritual practices, and a sense of calling, while mental health includes emotional functioning, coping strategies, and psychological well-being. Based on participants' narratives, the study introduces a psychospiritual conceptual framework that demonstrates the bidirectional interaction between these

domains. By situating this interaction within Filipino cultural values and ministerial contexts, the research offers a contextually grounded understanding of pastoral well-being and establishes a foundation for future scholarship and intervention development in faith-based settings.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the intersection of spirituality and mental health among Filipino Christian pastors through a phenomenological lens. Specifically, it seeks:

1. To examine the lived experiences of Filipino Christian pastors in relation to their spirituality and mental health.
2. To identify the meanings pastors attribute to spiritual practices, emotional struggles, and psychological well-being within their ministerial roles.
3. To analyze the factors that influence the dynamic interaction between spirituality and mental health in pastoral life.
4. To develop a psychospiritual conceptual framework grounded in the themes emerging from pastors' narratives.

Methodology

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how Filipino Christian pastors experience and interpret the intersection of spirituality and mental health within their ministerial contexts. Phenomenology was selected to capture the subjective meanings that pastors attribute to their emotional, spiritual, and psychological experiences, thereby enabling an in-depth understanding of pastoral well-being grounded in lived realities.

Participants and Sampling. Twelve Filipino Christian pastors were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling. Participants were required to be male, married, aged 43–75 years, currently serving as full-time pastors in Batangas Province, and to have at least ten consecutive years of pastoral ministry experience. These criteria ensured that participants possessed substantial exposure to the spiritual, emotional, and psychological demands of ministry and could provide reflective insights relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide validated by two licensed psychologists with expertise in qualitative research and one Christian pastor with theological and pastoral care experience. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted over three weeks. Follow-up conversations were undertaken when necessary to clarify responses and verify emerging interpretations.

Data Analysis. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. This process involved iterative coding, categorization, and theme development to identify

patterns reflecting participants' lived experiences. The analytic approach emphasized both descriptive and interpretive engagement with the data to generate themes aligned with the study objectives.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee, and the study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Psychological Association of the Philippines and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage were ensured throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with Filipino Christian pastors, analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. Through the identification of significant statements and the formulation of meanings, key patterns emerged that reflect how pastors experience and interpret spirituality and mental health, and the interaction between these dimensions in their ministerial lives. Member checking was conducted to enhance the credibility of the interpretations. The findings provide insight into pastors' lived realities and inform the development of a culturally grounded psychospiritual framework for understanding pastoral well-being.

1. Emerging Themes on How Filipino Christian Pastors Describe Spirituality

Based on participants' descriptions of spirituality, two (2) themes were extracted. The emerged themes are Spirituality as Dimensions of Personhood and Human Existence, and Spirituality as Christ-Centered Faith in Life and Service.

1.1 Theme 1: Spirituality as Dimensions of Personhood and Human Existence

Findings indicate that Filipino Christian pastors experience spirituality as a fundamental dimension of personhood, shaping identity, meaning-making, and engagement in ministry. Rather than being limited to religious practices, spirituality functions as an inner orientation that guides emotional responses, decision-making, relationships, and interpretations of life events. Participants described spirituality as permeating everyday functioning and grounding vocational commitment, reinforcing its role as a central resource in navigating pastoral responsibilities.

Spirituality was also understood as a dynamic developmental process marked by cycles of struggle, renewal, and growth. Pastors emphasized that personal trials and ministry demands contribute to spiritual maturation and meaning-making, consistent with perspectives that view spirituality as evolving through lived experience (Ahmadi, 2023; Anderson et al., 2020). Within the Filipino context, spirituality is closely linked to relational identity and collective values, reflecting the integration of spiritual and psychological dimensions emphasized in Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Del Castillo, 2023; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

1.2 Theme 2: Spirituality as Christ-Centered Faith in Life and Service

Filipino Christian pastors described spirituality as a Christ-centered orientation that shapes identity, purpose, and ministerial engagement. Rather than an abstract theological idea, spirituality was experienced as a lived commitment grounded in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that informs emotional responses, decision-making, values, and relationships. Participants emphasized that faith integrates inner devotion with the practical demands of pastoral leadership, functioning as both a source of personal meaning and a framework for vocational responsibility.

Pastors also highlighted Scripture and ministry as central expressions of spirituality. Biblical engagement provided moral direction, clarity during uncertainty, and strength in navigating pastoral challenges, supporting findings that relational spirituality and scriptural reflection enhance resilience and role stability (O'Reilly et al., 2020; Kim & Park, 2021). Spirituality was further embodied through service, including preaching, counseling, and community leadership, reflecting a holistic integration of devotion, faith practice, and engagement in ministry that sustains psychological resilience and long-term commitment.

2. Emerging Themes on How Filipino Christian Pastors Describe Mental Health

Based on participants' descriptions of mental health, two (2) themes were extracted. The themes that emerged are Mental Health Anchored in Spirituality and Mental Health as Holistic Well-Being.

2.1 Theme 1: Mental Health Anchored in Spirituality

Filipino Christian pastors described mental health as deeply anchored in spirituality, viewing psychological well-being as inseparable from their relationship with God. Rather than defining mental health solely in clinical terms, participants understood it as a spiritually sustained state marked by inner stability, meaning, and resilience. Spiritual reliance was identified as a key resource in managing ministry pressures, shaping how pastors interpret stress, adversity, and vocational responsibility.

Within the Filipino context, beliefs in God's care and in relational spirituality further influence how pastors understand and sustain mental health amid the demands of ministry.

2.2 Theme 2: Mental Health as Holistic Well-Being

Filipino Christian pastors conceptualized mental health as a holistic state characterized by inner harmony, balanced functioning, and a sense of wholeness. Rather than defining it as the absence of distress, participants described mental well-being as the integration of emotional stability, spiritual grounding, relational connectedness, and vocational purpose. This perspective reflects mental health as an interconnected experience shaped by personal faith and the demands of ministry.

Pastors emphasized emotional awareness, stress management, and reflective engagement with life challenges as essential for sustaining psychological well-being. Mental health was viewed as dynamic and developmental, strengthened through vulnerability, growth, and supportive relationships. These findings align with research highlighting the role of emotional regulation, meaning making, and spiritually informed coping in pastoral resilience (Jankowski, 2023; Del Castillo, 2023). Within the Filipino context, communal

support and family relationships further reinforce holistic well-being, enabling pastors to maintain personal stability and engage in effective ministry engagement.

3. Emerging Themes on How Filipino Christian Pastors Make Sense of the Intersection Between Spirituality and Mental Health

Based on participants' responses regarding the intersection between Spirituality and Mental Health, five (5) themes were extracted. The themes that emerged are: Spiritual Practices as Sources of Psychological Strength, Experiencing Divine Comfort and Peace, Faith as Resilience Amid Life's Demands, Transformation and Renewal through Divine Alignment, and Faith as a Framework for Strength and Meaning.

3.1 Theme 1: Spiritual Practices as Sources of Psychological Strength

Filipino Christian pastors described spiritual practices as central mechanisms that support mental health in ministry. Disciplines such as prayer, scriptural reflection, worship, and devotional routines were experienced as stabilizing resources that foster emotional regulation, psychological endurance, and sustained vocational commitment. Rather than ritual obligations, these practices functioned as lived coping strategies that helped pastors navigate the demands and pressures of pastoral leadership.

Scripture was frequently identified as an anchor providing cognitive clarity and emotional grounding during periods of anxiety or uncertainty, while reflective prayer enabled emotional processing, meaning-making, and restoration of inner peace. Participants also described experiences of divine empowerment that strengthened resilience and renewed hope. Through continued engagement with spiritual disciplines, pastors actively integrate faith into psychological functioning, supporting both mental stability and spiritual vitality in their ongoing ministry roles.

3.2 Theme 2: Experiencing Divine Comfort and Peace

Filipino Christian pastors described divine comfort and peace as central experiential pathways through which spirituality supports mental health in ministry. Emotional well-being was grounded in a sustained awareness of God's presence during periods of stress, uncertainty, and pastoral burden. This spiritual assurance was experienced as an inner calm that stabilizes emotions, strengthens hope, and enables continued engagement in vocational responsibilities.

Supportive relationships within faith communities and families further reinforced this experience of comfort through prayer, scriptural encouragement, and communal connection. Participants noted that surrendering struggles to God reduced anxiety and restored psychological clarity, indicating that spiritual trust functions as both emotional and cognitive coping. These findings align with research linking spiritual awareness and transcendence with resilience, life satisfaction, and emotional stability (Khai & Medina, 2024; Malinakova et al., 2024). Overall, divine comfort emerged as a faith-based resource sustaining mental balance and long-term endurance in ministry.

3.3 Theme 3: Faith as Resilience Amid Life's Demands

Filipino Christian pastors described faith as a primary source of resilience, enabling them to navigate the emotional, relational, and vocational pressures of ministry. Humility and dependence on God were viewed as protective orientations that help pastors acknowledge personal limitations while sustaining confidence in their calling. Faith functioned not only as a theological belief but as an active resource providing strength, stability, and endurance during periods of adversity.

Participants highlighted spiritual surrender as an important coping practice through which worries and emotional burdens are entrusted to God, restoring inner calm and reducing psychological strain. Through faith-based meaning-making, challenges were reinterpreted as opportunities for growth, reinforcing emotional regulation and long-term perseverance. These findings align with research showing that spiritual dependence and reflective prayer enhance resilience among religious leaders (Hendron et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023). Overall, faith emerged as a culturally grounded psychospiritual resource that supports well-being and sustained vocational commitment.

3.4 Theme 4: Transformation and Renewal through Divine Alignment

Filipino Christian pastors described transformation and renewal as central processes that support mental health in ministry through spirituality. Repentance was understood as more than confession, involving a realignment of the inner self with God's will that brings emotional relief, mental clarity, and renewed vocational purpose. This experience of spiritual recalibration helped pastors release guilt, resolve internal tensions, and restore psychological stability amid ongoing ministry pressures.

Ministry engagement was also perceived as a pathway to emotional renewal and growth. Activities such as preaching, counseling, and service were experienced as meaningful expressions of faith that reinforced identity, provided constructive outlets for stress, and strengthened resilience. These findings align with research indicating that spiritual realignment and involvement in reflective ministry enhance emotional regulation and psychological clarity among religious leaders (Holt & Kelly, 2021; Liem & Chua, 2023). Overall, divine alignment emerged as a dynamic psychospiritual mechanism that supports continuous transformation, mental renewal, and sustained pastoral commitment.

3.5 Theme 5: Faith as a Framework for Strength and Meaning

Filipino Christian pastors described faith as a central framework that shapes how they interpret challenges, regulate emotions, and sustain vocational commitment. Participants emphasized that faith functions not only as belief but also as a cognitive and emotional orientation that fosters hope, strengthens purpose, and supports psychological stability amid the demands of ministry. Through faith-based perspectives, pastors can reframe adversity, maintain a positive outlook, and remain engaged in their responsibilities despite personal and relational difficulties.

Pastors further highlighted that trust in God's sovereignty and belief in purposeful suffering contribute to resilience and emotional endurance. Faith was experienced as an interpretive lens that gives meaning to hardship while reinforcing identity and calling.

Within both global and Filipino ministerial contexts, faith-centered narratives have been shown to promote perseverance and strengthen psychological functioning by grounding individuals in a sense of divine calling and direction (van der Walt & Swart, 2023; Dizon & Valdez, 2023; Martinez & Castillo, 2024). Overall, faith emerged as a psychological scaffold that supports resilience, clarifies meaning, and enables pastors to navigate complex realities of ministry with sustained hope and inner coherence.

Findings reveal that Filipino Christian pastors experience spirituality and mental health as deeply interconnected dimensions of pastoral life. Spirituality emerged as an integrative foundation shaping identity, emotional regulation, resilience, and meaning-making within ministry contexts. Rather than functioning as a separate religious domain, spirituality operates as a central framework through which psychological well-being is understood and sustained.

The results further highlight culturally grounded expressions of spirituality characterized by Christ-centered identity, relational connectedness, spiritual practices, and faith-based interpretations of adversity. These experiences demonstrate how humility, surrender, and divine alignment support psychological endurance and vocational commitment. In contrast to Western models that often position spirituality as one component of well-being, the findings suggest that spirituality serves as an organizing structure for mental health among Filipino pastors.

In response, the proposed Psychospiritual Framework offers a contextually informed model that integrates spiritual identity, coping processes, and psychological functioning. The framework contributes to the clergy well-being literature by presenting pastoral well-being as a holistic, evolving process shaped by the dynamic interplay between spirituality and mental health within specific cultural and ministerial contexts.

Proposed Psychospiritual Framework

Below is the figure that presents the psychospiritual framework.

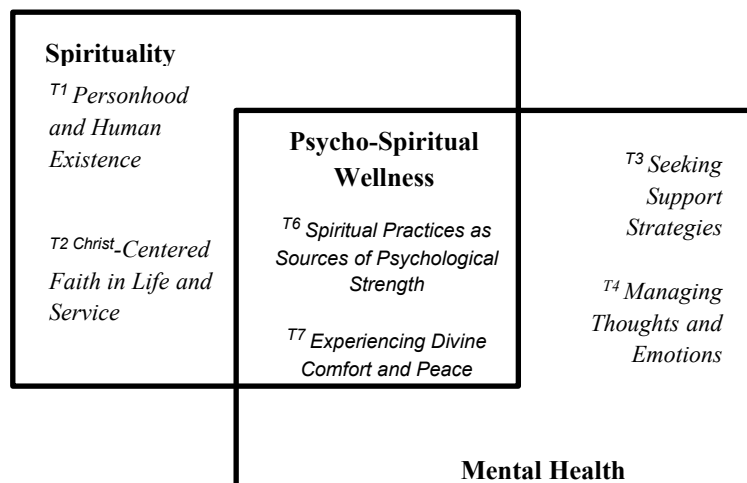


Figure 1. Psychospiritual Framework for Filipino Pastors

The Psychospiritual Framework was developed from the lived experiences of Filipino Christian pastors to illustrate how spirituality and mental health interact within the context of pastoral life. The framework addresses the limited availability of culturally grounded, pastor-specific models that integrate psychological well-being with spiritual functioning in ministry settings. It conceptualizes pastoral well-being as a dynamic process shaped by the continuous interaction between spiritual meaning-making and psychological coping.

The framework positions spirituality and mental health as distinct yet interrelated domains. Spirituality includes faith orientation, spiritual practices, relationship with God, and sense of calling, while mental health encompasses emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, stress management, and adaptive coping. Their intersection represents the space in which psychological strengths such as resilience, clarity, and emotional stability are cultivated. Rather than functioning as parallel systems, these domains mutually influence one another in shaping pastors' experiences of well-being and vocational sustainability.

Within this integrative space, five key dimensions characterize psychospiritual functioning: personhood and identity, Christ-centered faith in ministry and daily life, strategies for seeking relational and spiritual support, cognitive management of stress and challenges, and emotional processing of ministry experiences. These dimensions reflect how pastors interpret their roles, maintain spiritual commitments, regulate internal experiences, and respond to ministry demands. The framework further recognizes the influence of contextual factors, including pastoral workload, cultural expectations, and values such as *hiya* and *pakikisama*, which shape help-seeking behaviors and expressions of vulnerability.

The framework represents pastoral well-being as an ongoing, contextually situated process that may lead to adaptive outcomes, such as resilience and ministry sustainability, or to maladaptive experiences, such as burnout and psychological distress. As an empirically grounded model, it serves as an analytical guide for understanding Filipino pastors' psychospiritual experiences and provides a foundation for developing culturally responsive pastoral wellness programs and interventions.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Filipino Christian pastors experience spirituality and mental health as deeply interconnected dimensions of pastoral life. Grounded in Christ-centered identity and expressed through spiritual practices, faith-based meaning-making, and relational support, spirituality functions as a central resource for emotional regulation, resilience, and holistic well-being amid the demands of ministry. Pastors interpret psychological challenges through spiritual frameworks that sustain hope, reinforce vocational commitment, and promote inner stability.

The proposed Psychospiritual Framework contributes a culturally grounded perspective on pastoral well-being by integrating spiritual identity, coping processes, and psychological functioning within Filipino ministerial contexts. By highlighting the dynamic interaction between spirituality and mental health, the study provides a conceptual foundation for future research and the development of contextually responsive support initiatives for pastors.

Implications and Future Research

The findings highlight the importance of culturally grounded approaches to pastoral well-being. Churches, seminaries, and ministry organizations may consider using the Psychospiritual Framework as a

guiding perspective in designing pastoral support programs, leadership training, and mental health initiatives that integrate biblical foundations with psychological principles. Strengthening institutional awareness of pastoral mental health may contribute to more sustainable engagement in ministry.

At the organizational level, denominational leaders and ministerial associations may explore integrating structured wellness practices, such as reflective supervision, mental health education, and opportunities for rest and renewal, to support pastors' holistic functioning. These initiatives can help normalize help-seeking behaviors and promote supportive ministry environments.

Future research may expand this work by including female pastors, younger ministers, and leaders from diverse denominational and cultural contexts. Further studies may also examine the applicability and refinement of the Psychospiritual Framework across varied ministry settings to deepen understanding of spirituality–mental health integration in pastoral life.

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