

# Congregational Ministry to Problem Gamblers

BY DEBORAH G. HASKINS

**When Christians experience the effects of problem and pathological gambling, to whom do they turn for help? As congregations become more aware of the spiritual and emotional struggles that gamblers face, they can provide holistic supportive ministries to their members and to the wider community.**

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**W**hen Christians experience the effects of problem and pathological gambling, how do they understand their situation and to whom do they turn for help? While some names and details have been changed in the following two stories, they represent typical scenarios reported by counselors who have helped people of faith respond to the negative consequences of gambling.



Mr. and Mrs. North call the Problem Gambling Hotline and are referred to a certified gambling counselor. They share that their family is in crisis because their son, a senior college student, appears to have an online gambling problem. The Hotline recommends that they seek counseling. When they call the counselor, Mrs. North shares that they are uncertain whether their bright, entrepreneurship-focused son is a pathological gambler. She requests a consultation because “we are very concerned about him. We have other relatives who are gamblers, and we are afraid that he may be a gambler. He has isolated himself from everyone.”

When the Norths come in for counseling, they acknowledge that they have questioned their son's mental status. But, they emphasize, "we are concerned about his moral standing" most of all. The wife states, "We are Christians and we are worried about what is going to happen to him morally if he is gambling. That is our job. We provided his foundation as God called us to do. If he is gambling, how will this affect his relationship with the Lord?"



Mrs. Jordan is a fifty-year-old African American who is married and has two young adult children. She has a stable and satisfying career in management. During the counseling intake session, she states that she has the "coveted" job of collector for the company lottery pool. Mrs. Jordan spends \$20.00 weekly and has won many times. She has been grieving and trying to adjust to the recent death of her mother, and says "I'm playing the lottery daily since mom died." She admits using her company expense account to fund her gambling. "When I win, I planned to put it back," she says. "Unfortunately, my losses exceeded my wins." Mrs. Jordan was referred to the Employee Assistance Counselor for gambling addiction evaluation and treatment after her company became aware of the missing money because she had been an excellent employee.

Mrs. Jordan shares that she is a Christian and sings in the choir. She is very remorseful about embezzling company funds to gamble, feels shame about her gambling, and does not want anyone to know that she gambles. When the counselor explores how Mrs. Jordan can rely on her Christian support system, she responds, "I can never tell my pastor or anyone in my church. What will they think of me? It's hard enough wondering what God will think of me. I can't handle them knowing I gamble."

Mrs. Jordan admits she has stopped attending church and when church members call her house she will not answer the phone or talk to them. The counselor reflects after the session that it is unfortunate that Mrs. Jordan is not accessing her spiritual strengths and faith community.



These two stories are based on the experiences of Christians who have sought help from professionals and volunteers who treat problem gambling. What are the experiences of the numerous individuals, families, and communities who *never* see a counselor, visit Gamblers Anonymous meetings, or participate in problem gambling support programs?

Pathological gambling and problem gambling are prevalent in the United States. "Pathological" or "compulsive" gambling is "a progressive addiction

characterized by increasing preoccupation with gambling, a need to bet more money more frequently, restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop, 'chasing' losses, and loss of control manifested by continuation of the gambling behavior in spite of mounting, serious, negative consequences." About two million people in the United States (i.e., one percent of adults) satisfy these criteria in a given year. Another four to six million people (i.e., two to three percent of adults) do not meet these full diagnostic criteria, but they suffer from problem gambling as they exhibit "gambling behavior patterns that compromise, disrupt or damage personal, family or vocational pursuits."<sup>1</sup>

Gambling is a widespread activity, involving individuals and families of diverse races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, occupations, functional and dysfunctional family systems, and religious and unreligious backgrounds. It is estimated that eighty-five percent of American adults have gambled at some time, and sixty percent participate in gambling each year.<sup>2</sup> In one disordered gambling prevalence study conducted in Oregon, sixty percent of the sample reported Christian religious preferences and the author noted, "There was no significant difference in the representation of disordered gamblers among the categories of religious preference."<sup>3</sup>

Often Christians and persons of faith who gamble will hide when they experience problems with gambling. They frequently comment that they cannot disclose their gambling and its consequences to their family, friends, pastors, or church members. And for their part, many pastors and laypersons admit they lack understanding and skills to provide pastoral care and support for problem gambling.

Family members also struggle with sharing problem gambling crises with others. When their mental status and lifestyle change as a result of a gambling crisis (e.g., the gambling spouse or partner loses a job, the house goes into foreclosure, the family cannot pay their rent and bills, they are stressed and depressed, the marriage is falling apart, the children are acting out, and so on), many share that they are embarrassed and feel alone.

So to whom can Christians go when they struggle with gambling problems? The psalm assures us "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Yet when many religious persons (or their families) realize there is a gambling problem, they fear that the last place they can turn is to God and the Church.

Many of our congregations speak loudly in opposition to legalized gambling, but our voices are noticeably muted in instructive and encouraging response to church members, their families, and others in the surrounding community with gambling problems. How do congregations shift their priorities to minister to those who face this type of spiritual struggle?

## **UNDERSTANDING PROBLEM GAMBLING**

Many people in America today, including many church members, no longer consider gambling to be a problem. Having been socialized by the

images of popular media and by their experiences of seeing adults, youth, family members, schools, and communities participating in gambling, they tend to view all gambling as a form of entertainment or play. Even in congregations that teach that gambling is a sin, members may “nod and agree” with the instruction but continue to gamble. As we have seen, they suffer from pathological and problem gambling at about the same rate as nonmembers.

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Christ prays that the Father would protect his disciples who live “in the world” from “the evil one,” so that they would not “belong to the world” (John 17:11-16). He recognizes that his disciples will continue to struggle with many challenges including depression, anxiety, stress responses, trauma, and addictions (substances, gambling, sexual) that require spiritual *and* psychological attention.

Noting how little research has been done to evaluate the impact of religious practices or beliefs on gambling behavior, John Hoffmann set out “to test the proposition that attendance at religious services and importance of faith in God attenuate the likelihood of problem gambling.”<sup>4</sup> Hoffmann discovered that frequent attendance at religious services decreased the incidence of problem gambling, but that a subject’s acknowledging the importance of faith in God had no effect. He does not find this result surprising, since studies on the impact of religion on other problem behaviors have found a similar result. The communal aspect of religious practice is crucial. Hoffmann suggests participation in religious services provides social integration that may ease problem behaviors, including the development of gambling problems. On the other hand, personal religious importance is an internal valuing which may not reduce problem gambling behaviors without the dimension of social integration.

Typically when gambling becomes a compulsive and addictive behavior, the person spends more time on gambling and gives less attention to personal relationships and regular activities, including church activities. Persons who are diagnosed as pathological gamblers often report that gambling participation, especially after the “big win,” is so exhilarating that they continually try to re-experience the euphoria of winning. As this pursuit becomes a compulsive focus, they experience many losses and few gains because the games are designed for more people to lose than win.

Many church members who become compulsive gamblers may be no different than others in this regard. They will “chase” gambling losses and focus on the “fantasy of winning” too. Even if they have been consistently active in church, they may over time disengage from participation as the “win” becomes their new “spiritual” pursuit.

One’s relationship with God can be lost or transferred to a relationship with the game. Many gamblers report that the slot machine becomes their partner or “lover.” Often these persons have suffered a void or loss—for example, the death of a loved one, separation from a partner, divorce, job loss, or ill-health—and their gambling is a welcome distraction from the existential, emotional, and spiritual crisis. They can become entangled in a web of seeking pleasure and relief from spiritual, emotional, financial, relational, and other vulnerabilities. It is a challenge for congregations to support church members who are struggling with pathological or problem gambling, as well as their families and communities, returning them to health and wholeness.

### **CARING FOR THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED**

Congregations are called to practice the example that Jesus modeled. Much of his ministry focused on those who are poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised. Today, problem gambling is a disease that targets persons and families who are struggling to meet the bare necessities of survival. As state governments increasingly justify legalized gambling or sponsor gambling games in order to raise revenues, gambling has been identified as a tax on the materially poor.

Many materially poor persons have developed their own methods of coping with poverty in order to support their families. They have learned to survive insurmountable challenges and are resilient. Sometimes these persons are so used to struggling with a lack of finances that a gambling loss seems to be no different than the struggling “I’m already accustomed to.” These persons say, “I’ve suffered losses in my life already; this is no different.” How can congregations minister more effectively to persons who struggle to survive and may view gambling as the answer to their financial needs?

As one client stated to me, “I have this dream that all I need is one *big* win! All I need is one win. When I hit the lottery or hit the jackpot, I can quit this deadbeat job, pay off my bills, have some money in the bank, and take care of my family.” This fantasy of the big win keeps my client engaged in the cycle of gambling, even when gambling is negatively affecting every area of the person’s life.

Thus, there are thousands of materially poor and disenfranchised persons, many of whom may not attend church, who are hurting and in need of healing from the damaging effects of gambling. To minister effectively to them, congregations will benefit from increased awareness and understanding of problem and pathological gambling.

## RESPONDING AS A CONGREGATION

When we experience problems of any sort—including the effects of problem and pathological gambling—we first typically employ our normal coping strategies for dealing with the difficulties. However, our coping skills may not be effective in facing a gambling crisis. In this case, we have our own “ecosystems” that we access for help and support. Many religious people will say, “Well I’ve been handling my problems this way all my life and it seems to work—why would I need to see a counselor? I always talk to my pastor or priest when I’m having difficulties.”

Suppose a church member shares with the congregation, “I am feeling depressed or sad. I am about to lose my home because I have not paid my bills, having used the funds to gamble.” While there is limited research on faith community responses to problem gambling, I and others who work in counseling or recovery support systems have heard that the encounter may go like this:

When I told my friend from church that I had a gambling problem, she quoted scriptures. I did not feel any better after disclosing my gambling. I thought I would feel relieved. Instead, I felt guilty and shameful because I was told that I needed to just turn away from my sin and ask God to be my source of strength.

Others have heard “You must not be prayed up,” “You are spending too much time with worldly activities—you should be spending more time in Bible study and prayer,” or “Don’t you know that depression is from the Devil, not from the Lord? God will heal your depression.” When congregants receive this sort of “non-supportive” response within their faith communities, they may really feel adrift because they cannot seek support from the persons they normally turn to.

Over the years a number of congregations have sponsored substance abuse recovery programs, such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholic Anonymous. Some also provide space for similar programs that address problem gambling, such as Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon (which provides support for family members and friends of the gambler). But many more congregation-centered meetings are needed, particularly in rural communities and ethnic sub-communities where they are rare. They must be well advertised and widely accepted, because people in crisis typically lack motivation to identify and attend these local twelve-step groups on their own.

Why do some congregations, but not others, offer recovery support resources? Some may not offer them because they continue to view gambling as only a moral problem. (Likewise, during the early years of substance abuse awareness the view that “the person should know better and just stop” was popular until research revealed that substance abuse/dependency is an illness and necessitates a disease model for treatment.) Thus, if more faith communities are going to prioritize these recovery ministries in their mission

statements, an essential first step is increased understanding by their clergy and lay leadership of the nature of problem and pathological gambling.

To accomplish this, mental health education should be integrated within seminary and ministry education. Clergy candidates should anticipate that problem and pathological gambling will be among the emotional and mental health difficulties experienced by their congregants. Institutions that prepare them for leadership in congregations and communities should partner with mental health professionals to offer formal pastoral care field experience to all seminarians.

Sadly, there are few model programs of gambling recovery for faith communities. One that I can recommend is Gambling Recovery Ministries (GRM) sponsored by the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church. Led by Reverend Janet Jacobs, the mission of this non-profit ministry is “to extend the life-saving Christian outreach to persons directly and indirectly impacted by the devastations of pathological gambling and to spread the good news of hope, help, recovery, and renewal.”<sup>5</sup> GRM provides supportive consultations for individuals, including spiritual support and sharing of referral information on treatment and recovery programs; publishes a variety of educational materials about problem gambling for persons seeking help, congregations, and mental health professionals; and offers a variety of educational programs about problem gambling and recovery for church and community groups, including clergy training sessions and professional continuing-education events. GRM

also provides a checklist for faith communities that want to develop problem gambling ministries. This is an excellent example of a gambling recovery ministry prioritizing outreach to individuals, faith institutions, and communities.

Churches should also develop mental health training programs for their congregants since they tend to be in the “front-line” of observing

mental health struggles. When laypersons are taught about problem and pathological gambling, they can recognize the signs and symptoms, listen to those who struggle with gambling problems, provide effective responses to them, encourage them to seek professional help, and journey with them (without engaging in enabling behaviors or financial bailouts). Church leadership should offer this type of lay ministry training on an ongoing basis

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and integrate problem gambling awareness into a comprehensive health and welfare ministry plan.<sup>6</sup>

The National Council of Problem Gambling offers many prevention and educational resources that can be helpful in ministry training programs.<sup>7</sup> Resources include a directory of certified counselors in the United States and other countries, information about the 1-800-Gambling Hotline (which problem gamblers and those concerned about them can call for help), contact information for the Affiliate Councils of Problem Gambling that offer education, training, and support in many states, and literature that can be used individually or in small groups to enhance problem gambling awareness.

As congregations become more aware of the spiritual and emotional struggles that gamblers face, they can provide holistic supportive ministries to their members and to the wider community.

## NOTES

1 These definitions and statistics are from “FAQs—Problem Gamblers” (Washington, DC: National Council of Problem Gambling, 2011), available online at [www.ncpgambling.org/i4a/pages/Indx.cfm?pageID=3315#whatispg](http://www.ncpgambling.org/i4a/pages/Indx.cfm?pageID=3315#whatispg), accessed May 20, 2011.

2 Ibid.

3 Thomas L. Moore, *The Prevalence of Disordered Gambling among Adults in Oregon: A Replication Study* (Portland, OR: Oregon Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation, 2006), available online at [www.gamblingaddiction.org/PREV2006/ogatfprevalencestudy2006\\_072506.pdf](http://www.gamblingaddiction.org/PREV2006/ogatfprevalencestudy2006_072506.pdf), accessed May 20, 2011. Moore reports, “Nearly 47% indicated their religious preference was Protestant, 13.2% Catholic, 1.3% Jewish, 1.2% Buddhist, 0.2% Muslim, and 37.1% indicated other religious preferences.”

4 John P. Hoffman, “Religion and Problem Gambling in the U.S.,” *Review of Religious Research*, 41:4 (2000), 488-509, here citing 488.

5 To learn more about Gambling Recovery Ministries, see [www.grmumc.org](http://www.grmumc.org).

6 For example, I recently gave a workshop at a church that trains its lay leaders in pastoral care ministries. The workshop topic was suicide prevention, but as we talked about the reasons persons become suicidal, we considered how they might become despondent after experiencing gambling losses and depressed from their addiction crises. We need more churches responding in this way to mental health issues.

7 For more information about the National Council on Problem Gambling, see [www.ncpgambling.org](http://www.ncpgambling.org).

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