



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Congregational Ministry to Problem Gamblers
(The Gambling Culture, pp. 65-72)

Suggested Article:

📖 Problem Gambling
(The Gambling Culture, pp. 82-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Congregational Ministry to Problem Gamblers

When Christians experience the effects of problem and pathological gambling, to whom do they turn for help? Congregations speak loudly in opposition to legalized gambling, but often their voices are muted in responding with instruction and encouragement to members and their families, or to others in the community with gambling problems.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-12

Meditation

Gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic, and spiritual life, destructive of good government and good stewardship. As an act of faith and concern, Christians should abstain from gambling and should strive to minister to those victimized by the practice. Where gambling has become addictive, the Church will encourage such individuals to receive therapeutic assistance so that the individual's energies may be redirected into positive and constructive ends.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (2008), ¶163

Reflection

"With the growing plethora of gambling venues throughout the United States, there is an increasing awareness of persons affected, directly and indirectly, by problem gambling," Janet Jacobs writes. About two million people in the U.S. (one percent of adults) satisfy the following criteria for "pathological" or "compulsive" gambling each year: "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." Another four to six million people (two to three percent of adults) suffer from "problem" gambling—"gambling behavior patterns that compromise, disrupt or damage personal, family or vocational pursuits."

Christians suffer from disordered gambling at about the same rate as others, Deborah Haskins notes. These disciples "frequently comment that they cannot disclose their gambling and its consequences to their family, friends, pastors, or church members," she writes. Their families "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, and the children are acting out, and so on), many share that they are embarrassed and feel alone." She concludes: "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."

Haskins has observed that gambling problems often impact her Christian clients in the following three ways.



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- ▶ *Less attention is given to personal relationships and regular activities, including church activities. Chasing gambling losses and seeking a “big win” becomes one’s new “spiritual” pursuit. Yet studies show it is precisely one’s attendance at religious services and spiritual friendships, not the professed importance of faith in God, which decreases the incidence of problem gambling. So, those with gambling problems are cutting themselves off from communal relationships they need.*
- ▶ *A relationship with God is transferred to a relationship with the game. “Many gamblers report that the slot machine becomes their partner or ‘lover,’” Haskins notes. Suffering a loss—a loved one’s death, separation or divorce, job loss, ill-health—they turn to gambling as a welcome distraction from grief.*
- ▶ *Following their normal coping strategies, Christians may reject professional counseling and turn to their pastor or priest for advice. If they are told to just turn from their sin, pray harder, study the Bible more, reject the depression caused by the Devil, and so on, they “may really feel adrift because they cannot seek support from the persons they normally turn to.”*

Haskins wishes that more churches would develop comprehensive health and welfare ministry plans since their congregants “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 bail-outs).”

Study Questions

1. How do pathological (compulsive) and problem gambling affect the gambler? The gambler’s family and friends?
2. How do pathological and problem gambling impact Christians in their discipleship?
3. According to Deborah Haskins, why do some congregations fail to offer gambling recovery support services to their members and to others in the community? What remedy does she recommend for this lack of needed ministry?
4. Review the story of “Mr. And Mrs. North” told by Haskins. How would your congregation support this couple?
5. Review the story of “Mrs. Jordan” told by Haskins. How does it illustrate the impacts of gambling on Haskins’s Christian clients? How would your church support Mrs. Jordan?

Departing Hymn: “O God, Who Won Our Hearts in Love”

O God, who won our hearts in love
by sending grace down from above,
help us in joys, secure and true,
to risk our lives to worship you.

David G. Miller (2011)
Tune: O WALY, WALY

Congregational Ministry to Problem Gamblers

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To define pathological and problem gambling and notice their increase in the United States.
2. To consider how gambling problems often impact Christians in their discipleship.
3. To discuss how congregations can minister to problem gamblers and to their families and friends who are affected by their gambling.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Gambling Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O God, Who Won Our Hearts in Love" locate the familiar tune O WALY, WALY in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Janet Jacobs, who directs the Gambling Recovery Ministries sponsored by the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church, reminds us that compulsive gambling can devastate entire families and friendship networks. She notes that "Professional counselors have suggested that for each compulsive gambler, another five to ten persons are directly affected."

She tells the following story to illustrate this point. "Several years ago, 'Mary' and 'John' attended their first meeting of Gam-Anon, an auxiliary group of Gamblers Anonymous for the spouses, family members, and close friends of problem gamblers. The couple was filled with pain: their looks were pained, they spoke of pain; simply put, raw pain was all they felt. A very close loved one had turned *their* world upside down with his life of addiction to gambling. Their lives had been shattered and they were in desperate need of healing and wholeness. For years, they had struggled with ways to deal with the gambling problem in their home. To the many questions about gambling addiction, they had no answers. To their unending struggles, they had no solutions or strategies for coping. In the months following the meeting they began to learn about pathological gambling and healthy ways to respond to their loved one. In turn, the family member would also begin to face and deal with his gambling problem."

How can a congregation grow in understanding of and compassion for problem gamblers and for their families and friends who suffer with them? That is the question Deborah Haskins helps us to address in this study.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for guidance in ministering to individuals in your congregation and wider community who are addicted to gambling.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Timothy 6:6-12 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study shifts our attention slightly away from critique of the gambling culture and toward ministry to its victims. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* balances these two concerns when it says, “As an act of faith and concern, Christians should abstain from gambling and should strive to minister to those victimized by the practice.” Deborah Haskins urges congregations to be more involved in ministry to problem gamblers because she sees the spiritual dimensions of their condition. She notes how it undermines her Christian clients’ discipleship.

When your group or congregation is ready to develop a problem gambling ministry, Haskins recommends that you contact Gambling Recovery Ministries (GRM) sponsored by the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church (www.grmumc.org). The director of this pioneering ministry, Janet Jacobs, commends resources in the suggested article “Problem Gambling.”

Study Questions

1. Begin by clarifying the difference between pathological and problem gambling. Deborah Haskins emphasizes the shame and increasing isolation that those with gambling problems experience. They may resort to deception or theft to hide their gambling, and become inattentive to relationships, distracted and unproductive at work, and unable to deal with other problems in their lives. Many suffer from other addictions as well.
She notes that families and friends may share in these symptoms. “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, and the children are acting out, and so on), many share that they are embarrassed and feel alone.”
2. Haskins highlights three ways that gambling problems impact her Christian clients’ discipleship: they withdraw from church activities and relationships with spiritual friends; they turn toward gambling for spiritual relief; and when they refuse to seek professional counseling, they often receive inadequate help from their pastor or priest.
3. Some churches “continue to view gambling as only a moral problem,” ignoring its psychological dimension as an addiction. Haskins suggests “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.”
4. Ask a member to read aloud the story of “Mr. and Mrs. North” (*The Gambling Culture*, pp. 65-66) as a case study. Here are some salient issues in the case: this Christian couple suspects but is uncertain that their son, a bright senior in college, is addicted to Internet gambling; they recognize the symptom of increasing isolation from friends and family because they’ve watched other relatives struggle with gambling; as they seek professional counseling, they are concerned not only for their son’s mental health, but also his relationship with God. Discuss why the North’s might need understanding and ministry support from their congregation. Consider how your church would support the couple if they were members.
5. Ask a member to read aloud the story of “Mrs. Jordan” (*The Gambling Culture*, p. 66) as a case study. Here are some salient issues in the case: Mrs. Jordan is exposed to gambling in a low-stakes, friendly office betting pool; she increasingly turned to gambling as a distraction from her grief over the recent death of her mother; she has embezzled money from her company to support her gambling; she has received professional counseling through her company, where she is a valued employee; she was a very active church member in the past, but now she has quit attending church and refuses to talk with her friends there because she is ashamed to tell them about her gambling problem. Discuss why Mrs. Jordan might need understanding and ministry support from her congregation. Consider how your church would support Mrs. Jordan if she were a member.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.