

**THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS IN CREATING AN UNDERSTANDING OF
MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WITHIN CHURCHES IN
BULAWAYO**

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ABSTARCT

One in four people worldwide are affected by a mental or neurological disease in their lifetime making mental health disorders one of the leading causes of global disease burden. There is evidence to indicate that religion may be a great resource to people experiencing both physical and psychological distress as it may help the individual to cope with the stress of their illness, promote recovery, influence help-seeking and compliance with treatment. This study aims to explore the role of church leaders in creating an understanding of mental health and mental health issues within churches in Bulawayo. The purpose of the study is to explore the views of the church towards people with mental illnesses. This exploration aims to provide insights from local churches on how the church can contribute to the health needs of their congregation as well as the community, either as the only contact or as a step towards formal mental health care. The study was conducted in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. 22 community level leaders (pastors, bishops, deacons and ministers) were sampled through focused group discussions as well as individual interviews. Hand written notes were used to transcribe and code the data and the interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. Mental illness was seen as any other sickness that can be managed by treatment. The community level leaders indicated that mental illness needs professional assistance through mental health institutions and that it should be given priority in all settings, including the church.

Key Words: Health, Mental illness/disorders, Health seeking behaviours, Stigma, Emotional wellbeing, Global disease burden