

# New head of Southdown Institute treatment centre helps minister to the ministers

The vocation of serving vocations is little understood and rarely appreciated, but it's something that appealed to Rev. Stephan Kappler like nothing else.

"From the beginning I was drawn to the pastoral counselling aspect of pastoral ministry," said Kappler in his modest office at the Southdown Institute north of Toronto.

Kappler took over as president of the world-renowned treatment centre for priests and religious on Feb. 1. The former parish priest brings a PhD in psychology and five years experience in private practice to his new job.

The first-ever graduate of Southdown's own post-doctoral program in psychology in 2013, the German-born Kappler fully embraces Southdown's mission to foster "healthy ministers for a healthy Church."

As a diocesan – as opposed to religious order – priest, Kappler knows he's a rare bird. Given that over 55 per cent of Southdown's clients are diocesan clergy, he believes it gives him an advantage.

"What I bring as a diocesan priest to this is, I think, an insight into the unique needs and struggles that diocesan clergy go through," he said. "Many diocesan clergy are struggling with loneliness – more so than religious priests."

While the religious order men usually have community and accountability built into their living situations and into the culture of their orders, diocesan priests face unique challenges as soon as they are ordained, according to Kappler.

The seminary experience is very community-centred, with a well-ordered, structured life of study and prayer. A brotherhood develops among the seminarians who are there for each other as they struggle through essays and exams, go out on their first ministry assignments and explore prayers of the Church that will accompany them the rest of their lives.

On ordination, some young priests can find themselves alone or nearly alone in a parish facing tasks with little or no guidance.

"That's when it kind of opens a bit of fertile ground for temptations, issues, problems, challenges," said Kappler. "And then, who is there that you are accountable to?"

While in the seminary, Kappler took an extra year to add a certificate in clinical pastoral education (CPE) to his suite of priestly skills.

“There was something about that direct client contact, one-on-one counselling, being there pastorally, listening,” he said. “My sense was early on that pastoral ministry goes hand-in-hand with counselling, listening to people.”

After ordination, Kappler petitioned more than once to be permitted to return to graduate school for studies in psychology.

As a young priest, he experienced the loneliness of priestly ministry and saw how many of his contemporaries struggled.

But Kappler’s bishops were not initially enthusiastic about his ambitions in psychology. Given the shrinking priestly workforce, bishops need men focused on keeping parishes up and running.

When he was finally allowed to study at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, Calif., northeast of Oakland, he had to squeeze studies in between parish work. He had to pay his own way.

After he graduated, Oakland Bishop Michael C. Barber assigned Kappler to a small, urban parish that would afford him time to pursue private practice. It allowed Kappler to establish Kairos Psychology Group in Oakland, which the diocese then used early and often.

Even before he began his studies, Kappler knew he wanted not just to practise psychology, but to serve the men and women in ministry.

“From the get-go, it was with the idea of doing this – getting the psychology experience to help other clergy and religious,” he said.

Southdown is a perfect fit. With over 60 men and religious women completing 14-week residential programs each year, and nearly 9,000 engaging its services via the Internet, Southdown is uniquely equipped to help the ministers of the Church.

In the residential program, 61 per cent are dealing with mood disorders such as depression, 51 per cent are struggling with a transition or phase-of-life problem, 22 per cent are faced with substance abuse problems, 18 per cent have personality disorders, 14 per cent have been caught up by anxiety disorders, six per cent have sexual disorders, four per cent come with gambling and impulse control problems and two per cent were abused when they were children.

Obviously, a large number who come to the 22-bed facility are experiencing more than one of these conditions.

“We’re accompanying those folks through a challenging and difficult part of their journey,” said Kappler. “We’re doing that by helping them take a close

and honest look at themselves in a supportive, loving, but also challenging environment... We're allowing people to be healthy again, and with that to be healthier ministers."

While helping a priest or sister emerge from a crisis is important and satisfying, Kappler emphasizes that Southdown serves the Church in other ways.

"A big part of what we do is preventative work. We're not just waiting until somebody comes and knocks on our door," he said.

Education through outside consulting for dioceses and religious orders helps priests examine what they're doing and shows them how to live a healthy, balanced life. Southdown staff lead workshops for clergy and religious communities on healthy sexuality, sexual identity formation, boundaries in ministry and more. Southdown also provides dioceses and religious orders with seminary candidate assessments.

"That is, I think, vitally important, especially today," said Kappler.

"Candidate assessment is as much a screening-in as it is a screening-out. It's a process that allows us to really screen in the most capable, prepared, qualified people and to screen out those who might be looking for a vocation as a way to hide or escape, or use it for whatever twisted reasons."

Kappler would like Southdown's reach to extend even further. He hopes to establish an outpatient clinic closer to Toronto, since the hour-plus drive to Holland Landing, Ont., can dissuade some clients. There he would like to engage lay pastoral associates and others working in the Church.

Longer term, Kappler has even greater ambitions that would help the Church respond more fully to the sexual abuse crisis.

"I don't want to lean too much out of the window, but my hope is – this is not ready yet – but my hope also would be that at that outpatient centre we would be able to offer maybe some sort of ministry for survivors," he said.

Healing is a ministry the whole Church is called to, and not just for its own sake.

"In the long term, I think it's a conversation that we need to look at – how do we offer what we offer, but to a larger group?" he said.

Psychology and spirituality have plenty to say to each other. Psychologists, like pastors, learn to listen closely with a positive, sympathetic ear – because that's how people are encouraged, held and kept safe, said Kappler.

"When you are being held and you know you are safe, a lot of challenging exploration can happen," he said. "That's where change can happen."