

COVENANT

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COURAGE IN CONNECTION

60 YEARS OF BUILDING HOPE THROUGH RELATIONSHIP



For 60 years, the enduring strength of Southdown's work has not been found simply in clinical models, policies, or programs, important as those are, but in relationships. With decades of accompaniment and support, one truth has consistently emerged: hope is restored where courage meets connection. The courage to tell the truth. The courage to ask for help. The courage to remain present to suffering. The courage to examine oneself so that others may be safe. If Southdown's history has a heartbeat, it is this relational bravery.

Authentic connection begins with the refusal to judge. In *Do Not Judge Anyone* (Slater, 2025), Isaac Slater, OCSO, reminds us that judgment closes the heart, while mercy creates space for truth. Judgment is not merely moral condemnation; it is the subtle stance that says, "You should be different." In therapeutic and ministerial settings, that stance pushes suffering underground. When a priest hides burnout, when a religious conceals depression, when a leader masks moral struggle, it is often not a lack of faith but fear of exposure. Courage begins when judgment ends. To say, "I am not well," or "I need help," is not weakness; it is moral maturity.

Yet shame makes such courage costly. In *The Soul of Shame* (Thompson, 2015), psychiatrist Curt Thompson describes shame as the persistent sense that "I am not enough." Shame isolates and reorganizes the brain around secrecy and self-protection. It urges concealment: hide, perform, control the narrative. Thompson insists that shame cannot survive being spoken in the presence of an empathic other. This reflects neurobiological reality. When vulnerability is met with attuned, nonjudgmental presence, the nervous system calms and defensive circuitry softens. Integration becomes possible, and with it, hope.

But relational courage is not only about personal healing; it is also about responsibility. In *Risque et dérives de la vie religieuse* (de Lassus, 2023), Dysmas de Lassus warns of distortions that arise when immaturity hides beneath spiritual language. Fusion can masquerade

as communion. Control can be justified as obedience. Emotional dependency can be spiritualized as charity. When psychological work is avoided in the name of piety, relationships distort and safety erodes. Seeking help, therefore, is not merely self-improvement; it is a pastoral responsibility.

This leads to a critical truth: maturity protects. Every ministry is relational, and every relationship requires safety. Safety, in turn, requires self-awareness. Those who serve must cultivate interior stability so that others encounter a secure presence rather than unexamined wounds. To say, "I need support," is not self-indulgence; it is stewardship.

Over time, Southdown has also learned that courage spreads. When leaders normalize therapy, supervision, and honest conversations about mental health, stigma decreases. When priests speak openly about struggle, communities soften. When institutions embed psychological maturity into formation, trust deepens. Silence, by contrast, fragments. Connection is not sentimental; it is structural.

Consider a senior cleric who arrived exhausted, publicly admired yet emotionally constrained. He described his ministry as "efficient but empty." Within a steady, nonjudgmental therapeutic relationship, he began to name fear and shame. As vulnerability became possible, his inner world reorganized. Months later, he reflected, "I preach differently now. I listen more. I am less guarded." Courage in connection did not only restore him; it reshaped his ministry.

60 years into Southdown's history, this remains our defining insight: hope is built through relationship. Courage to admit limitations. Courage to confront shame. Courage to invite accompaniment. Courage to reform what harms. Connection restores dignity, strengthens integrity, and safeguards communities.

Sincerely,

Rev. Francois Diouf, O.S.B., Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

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Walking the Desert with Those Who Serve

A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STRESS, INTEGRATION, AND RECOVERY IN CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

By Rev. Francois Diouf, O.S.B., Ph.D.



The experience of psychological distress among priests and vowed religious women and men is often described in spiritual terms, frequently framed as a “desert.” While this metaphor has deep roots in the Christian tradition, it also aligns with identifiable psychological and neurobiological processes. From a clinical perspective, the desert can be seen as a state of accumulated stress, resource depletion, and reduced integrative capacity. This condition arises not only from individual vulnerability, but also from role expectations, relational demands, and sustained exposure to emotionally demanding environments.

Clergy and religious life are marked by continuous interpersonal engagement, often involving asymmetrical relationships in which individuals are expected to provide emotional, spiritual, and moral support while minimizing personal need. This pattern leads to prolonged activation of stress-response systems, particularly the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Chronic activation is associated with elevated cortisol levels, which impair hippocampal function, disrupt memory, and reduce prefrontal regulatory capacity (McEwen, 2007).

Repeated exposure to emotionally charged environments without adequate processing may also alter limbic system function. Increased amygdala reactivity heightens threat sensitivity, contributing to withdrawal, overcontrol, or relational distancing. These responses are often misinterpreted as personality traits or spiritual dispositions, rather than adaptive stress responses.

A central feature of this process is reduced neural integration. Under conditions of chronic stress, prefrontal regulatory capacity weakens, resulting in more reactive and less integrated functioning. Subjectively, this is experienced as emotional numbing, disconnection, or operating “on autopilot”—states that closely resemble the lived experience of the “desert.”

Shame plays a significant role in maintaining this cycle. Thompson (2015) describes shame as a relationally formed neurobiological process that reinforces negative self-referential states. Neuroimaging research associates shame with increased midline cortical activity and reduced regulatory connectivity. This creates a cycle of self-criticism, withdrawal, and reduced relational engagement.

In clerical contexts, this is intensified by role expectations that prioritize stability and competence, often discouraging help-seeking until distress becomes severe. Early intervention is therefore essential, both for psychological well-being and for preserving neural plasticity.

Interpersonal neurobiology emphasizes that recovery occurs within relationships. Siegel (2012) highlights how attuned relational exchanges support neural integration, while Porges (2011) demonstrates that perceived safety activates the ventral vagal system, enabling social engagement and co-regulation.

Clinically, this translates into consistent, attuned, nonjudgemental relationships that support the gradual restoration of regulatory capacity. Verbalizing previously unspoken experiences integrates implicit and explicit systems, strengthening coherence and emotional flexibility.

Recovery is not only individual but systemic. Clergy and religious individuals function within relational systems; therefore, their integration directly affects community dynamics. Greater internal stability fosters healthier relational environments.

While this analysis is primarily neuropsychological, it does not replace spiritual interpretations of the “desert.” Rather, it complements them, offering an additional lens through which to understand suffering and transformation in ministry. ■

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Courage in Connection: Embracing Diversity, Inspiring Change

A THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITY OF HEALING AND GROWTH THROUGH CONNECTION

By Sr. Marie Josée Akom, SSCM, MA,
RP (Qualifying), CCC



For 60 years, our residential mental health community has been guided by the principle that healing emerges through relationships. This theme, **Courage in Connection: 60 Years of Building Hope Through Relationships**, honours our legacy while highlighting an important development in our approach to care.

We are expanding our services to welcome French-speaking individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Residents arrive for many reasons, including anxiety, depression, burnout, grief and loss, trauma, life transitions, sabbaticals, and periods of personal reflection. Each person brings unique strengths, vulnerabilities, and lived experiences.

“Every interaction provides an opportunity for residents to nurture resilience and self-efficacy across body, mind, and spirit.”

As a therapeutic community, transformation does not occur in isolation. It unfolds through consistent and compassionate relationships with clinicians, staff, and peers. Within this relational environment, residents gradually build trust, develop coping strategies, and strengthen resilience.

Everyday interactions—shared meals, therapeutic sessions, community activities, and moments of informal support—become opportunities for growth across body, mind, and spirit. Peer relationships further reinforce this process by fostering belonging, empathy, and relational confidence.

Residents often describe the community as different from the outside world. This difference is intentional. A therapeutic residential setting provides structure, safety, and relational depth that allows individuals to rehearse healthier patterns of connection. In doing so, they strengthen emotional regulation and self-efficacy before returning to their broader communities of life and service. This is not withdrawal from reality, but preparation for it.

Through courage in connection, we continue to cultivate a community where diversity enriches healing, relationships inspire transformation, and hope is restored in lasting ways. ■

RENEWAL PROGRAM

THREE-WEEK COMPREHENSIVE RENEWAL FOR CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Periods of sustained ministry can bring both meaning and fatigue. The Renewal Program offers a three-week structured experience for clergy and women and men religious seeking personal and spiritual renewal.

This program provides a holistic approach to wellbeing through intentional reflection, self-knowledge, and guided exercises focused on resilience, mindfulness, and integration.

Participants are invited to step back from the demands of daily ministry in a supportive environment that fosters clarity, renewal, and deeper awareness of self and vocation.

UPCOMING DATES:

JUN 7–27, 2026

JUL 19–AUG 8, 2026

Men's Only Sabbatical

SEP 13–OCT 3, 2026

NOV 1–21, 2026

For more information email administration@southdown.on.ca
or visit southdown.on.ca/renewal-mini-sabbatical/

ANNUAL BENEFIT DINNER 2026

60 YEARS OF HEALING: BEYOND STIGMA, BUILDING HOPE

CONTINUING HUMAN FORMATION SEMINARS

NAVIGATING ESSENTIAL BOUNDARIES

Strengthen your ministry through self-awareness, practical skills, and sustainable self-care.

This seminar in Southdown's Continuing Human Formation Program helps clergy navigate healthy boundaries in ministerial settings, safeguard relationships, and deepen insight into personal and professional growth.

UPCOMING DATES:

MAY 25–28, 2026

OCT 5–8, 2026

JAN 25–29, 2027

For more information email administration@southdown.on.ca or visit southdown.on.ca/consultation-and-education

Scan to Learn More



As Southdown marks 60 years of service, we continue to recognize that healing is sustained through relationships, shared commitment, and collective generosity. Our Annual Benefit Dinner offers an opportunity to gather in gratitude, reflect on our shared mission, and look ahead with renewed hope.

The 2026 Annual Benefit Dinner will take place on **Thursday, May 28, 2026, at the Pearson Convention Centre in Brampton, Ontario**. We are honoured to welcome **His Eminence Gérald Cardinal Lacroix, Archbishop of Quebec**, as Guest Speaker for this milestone evening.

This year's theme, *"60 Years of Healing: Beyond Stigma, Building Hope,"* reflects Southdown's longstanding commitment to supporting the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of ordained clergy, vowed religious, lay pastoral ministers, and people of faith. It also reflects our ongoing dedication to making care accessible to those in need.

During the evening, Southdown will also recognize **John McGrath**, long-standing Board Member, in appreciation of his many years of leadership, guidance, and service in strengthening Southdown's mission and programs.

Proceeds from the Annual Benefit Dinner directly support Southdown's clinical and therapeutic services, helping to ensure that individuals who require care are able to access it regardless of financial circumstances. In this way, the evening becomes not only a celebration, but an extension of the work of healing itself.

The gathering will include moments of reflection, shared conversation, music, and dining, offering space to honour 60 years of care and to look forward with hope toward the future of this work.

We invite members of our community to join us in marking this milestone year, as we give thanks for all that has been and remain attentive to what continues to unfold in the life of Southdown.

PARTICIPATION & REGISTRATION

To register for the Annual Benefit Dinner, purchase tickets, or donate in support of Southdown's programs, please use the QR code below:



Online access:

www.southdown.org/benefitdinner

For additional information or assistance, please email events@southdown.on.ca

Rev. Francois Diouf, O.S.B., Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

Covenant is produced and published by The Southdown Institute. Its purpose is to inform and educate the readership about clinical issues that surface in our work and to invite integration of the emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives.

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