

Mental Health and the Local Church

■ by Rev. Mark Timmer



Local Church a Refuge

The local church can and should be a refuge for those with mental illness. We know that it has often not been that. My own life has been significantly impacted by the mental illness of several of those close to me. It has put it on the "radar" of my life and ministry and given me a greater softness for and awareness of mental illness that I did not have earlier in my ministry.

Public Acknowledgement and Supplication

My experience is that the pastor's posture with mental health matters. Our Sunday morning service includes a congregational prayer. This is the congregation's voice to

God. It obviously brings us to the throne of grace where there is mercy and grace "to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Additionally our congregational prayer molds us as a congregation and as individual pray-ers before God. We bring praise and thanks, and also many needs to our God. The chronic needs include joblessness, physical healing, ongoing pain, marriages and relationships that are in disarray, those who are apart from Christ, and the grieving. To this list I have added mental illness. These particular prayers have been for those who suffer, for families and friends who suffer with them, and occasionally for those who do not understand the pain.

That we pray about this need and what we pray about this need shows that this is part of our church's life and struggle. As I have lifted up these prayers in our congregation over the years, the congregation has certainly noticed. It consistently reminds our church community that this is real, that this affects us, and that our prayers are needed. Though it is difficult to judge these things, I think that the heart of the church has grown softer. Others who lead the congregational prayer and other prayer groups have included mental health too. I have also taken a few opportunities over the years to speak briefly and pointedly about the real, silent and often lonely suffering that those who deal with mental illness experience. As we have put this in front of the congregation, those with mental illness and their family members have communicated to me that this public acknowledgement and supplication to God are important to them.

From being public about mental health issues, members and attendees within the church have let me know their personal struggles. I have become "safe" I suppose, and consequently surprised by how many suffer. A few of those who suffer have also, for a time, come together in a loose support group.

Stop Stigma

It increasingly distresses me that those who suffer with mental illness do so in silence and loneliness. The stigma must continue to die away and we must find ways to kill it. Mental illness is, in some ways, like any other health challenge. But it is also something quite different. Mental illness seems to insulate itself against treatment. The treatment of mental illness can itself be trying. Though treatment is often effective, finding what is effective can be a lengthy and frustrating process. There are many who possess this "limp" for the rest of their earthly days. God's people must continue to respond.

May our churches be a God-given refuge for those in need. ■

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