

A Call to Mental Health Ministry

by Craig Rennebohm, D. Min.
Mental Health Chaplaincy
Seattle, Washington

We are “bodied” souls. The life of our soul can include developmental disabilities in our brain, head injuries, neurological disorders, biochemical imbalances, substance abuse, psychological wounds, social distress, and spiritual struggle. The causes of our suffering can be deep and complex, difficult to comprehend.

Yet in faith, at the most profound and intimate level of our life together, we understand that Love, a tender spirit of growth and renewal, is at work in and among us, addressing our suffering. This gentle, holy power is present from the most elemental moments of life to the most complex occasions of creation, constantly offering well-being and seeking our salvation.

This spirit of love welcomes us into lives of wholeness, encourages us to understand our vulnerabilities and brokenness, and calls us to share our gifts of healing in creating communities of care.

A call to a mental health ministry recognizes that the most complex organ of the body is the brain: billions upon billions of cells organized in intricate flotillas of specialized activity; a vast ocean of operation; almost infinite lines and amplifiers and modulators and waves of communication issuing in the rich experience of human feeling, thought and behavior. A call to mental health ministry understands that the brain and the mind can malform and malfunction, be in disorder and distress, and be in need of healing. A call to mental health ministry invites us to care for those of us who suffer in brain, in mood and thought, in fear and anxiety, in addiction and isolation. A call to mental health ministry invites congregations to be centers of emotional, personal and social well-being.

Mental health ministry calls us to four basic tasks: *education, companionship, family support, and the building of a healing neighborhood.*

The task of education can start with a simple series of presentations – sharing from individuals and families who have faced mental illness in their lives; a discussion led by a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist; a conversation with a mental health chaplain or pastoral counselor; and an exploration of what others have done in the way of mental health ministry. Add mental health resources to the church library. Organize a forum during mental illness awareness week (Oct.) and Mental Health Month (May). Include mental health as a topic in the youth program and as a subject in preaching. Invite mental health practitioners to speak, teach and share their wisdom.

Offer companionship, a ministry of presence with those who face mental illness and profound psychological struggle. Have a person available each week at worship to welcome the stranger who comes in distress or confusion. Organize a team of people equipped to provide one to one, long term support to individuals who are in recovery. Develop small groups – house churches, bible studies, prayer and other spiritual practice groups supportive of healing the whole person. Create services of healing and encouragement.

Provide supportive opportunities for families as well. Organize an ongoing parent support group. Take care for spouses and siblings, and children who have a mother or father facing mental illness. Host a NAMI “Family to Family” program. Visit on the psychiatric units and in the home. Be prepared for the episodic nature of mental illness; support families and individuals in being proactive with their mental health, but be prepared also for a crisis. Be part of the circle of care, collaborate with others who are part of the healing process.

Go into the community. Find your nearest mental health center or facility and build a relationship there. Create a roster of mental health referral resources for your congregation and neighborhood. Develop a “community companion” program. Host an AA group. Welcome NAMI meetings in your building. Open a House of Healing. Become involved in creating supported and independent living opportunities in your neighborhood for individuals in treatment and recovery. Fight stigma. Help develop opportunities for employment. Support research. Monitor legislation and public policy and insure that city, county, state and federal budgets include sufficient funding for mental health care. Advocate for a community mental health system that is readily accessible and effective, and does not leave individuals facing mental illness wandering the streets or languishing in jails. Make mental health care a matter of basic justice.

Mental health ministry is a heart, core call for each of us and our congregations. It is a call to welcome the stranger, to understand the fullness of what it means to be human, and share deeply in the journey toward wholeness. Mental health ministry honors our vulnerability as human beings and invites us to explore the ways that make for healing and growth. Mental health ministry is a call to community, asking us to stop by the neighbor who is suffering and insure that there are inns of care and support for the most isolated and vulnerable among us.

One in ten individuals struggles with a major mental illness. One in four families faces mental illness with a loved one. Mental health ministries reach out to those of us who are on this often difficult and challenging pilgrimage. But it is not a one way street. Those of us who have faced depression, battled mania, been subject to hallucinations or delusions, fought paranoia, wrestled with deep fear and anxiety, lived through horrific trauma and struggled with alcohol or drugs – have a calling, have a part in ministry, and have a part in the healing of our world.

To heal, we must acknowledge our vulnerability, our brokenness, our need for others and for help. To be well, we know we need community and the love and care of others. We

know that we are not sufficient in ourselves, but have life and hope because we are held by a great tenderness and in a spirit of incredible grace. We are witnesses both to what makes for suffering and also to the ways which make for wholeness and peace. Let us be in a ministry together, for the sake of all souls.