

The Local Church's Obligation to Those Struggling With Mental Illness

God never wastes your pain. In fact, out of your greatest pain will come your greatest ministry.

It was in my role as a father that I heard the call to be an advocate for people living with mental illness. Our youngest son, Matthew, struggled terribly with mental illness almost his entire life; his suffering was immense. Then, in 2013, in an impulsive moment of despair, he took his own life. As a family, we were crushed and devastated.

Over the difficult months that followed, Kay and I decided to not waste our pain, but to allow God to use it to help others.

In Luke 4:17-21, Jesus talked about His model for ministry, which He has passed on to the church today:

"The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. When He had unrolled the scroll, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.' Then He rolled up the scroll, and He gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all those who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (MEV).

If we who follow Jesus are going to become like Him, we have to decide to stand with people who suffer, and some of the people who suffer most greatly in our society are people

living with mental illness. So if Jesus' mission was to stand with and for those who suffer, and the church is carrying out the mission of Jesus today, then one of the greatest ways the church can serve the world is by taking an active role to come alongside those who live with mental illness.

We've built our mental health ministry around a church-based strategy using an acrostic of the word CHURCH:

C – Care for individuals and families. The church should be the safest place in the world, emotionally speaking, for those who live with mental illness to go for help. It should be known and understood that we care about everyone's pain.

H – Help with practical needs. Often, mental illness can be debilitating. Often people living with mental illness have vocational and physical needs that are quite unique, and the church can help.

U – Utilize volunteers. While trained professionals are essential to the mental health field, the body of Christ itself is filled with people who have been changed by God's grace and who are a source of wisdom and encouragement. Lay counseling is another form of discipleship. Saddleback Church takes volunteers through a 52-week training course and then walks them through an initial observation period. It has been one of our strongest on-campus ministries.

R – Remove the stigma. We absolutely have to begin to treat mental illness as an illness like any other. Just as any part of our bodies can suffer illness such as diabetes or cancer, our brains can suffer illnesses as well. That illness can be caused by trauma, by chemical imbalances or by hereditary factors. Being sick isn't a sin, and neither is living with mental illness.

C – Collaborate with the community. The church can often be a bridge between hurting people and caring professionals in the community. It's a good idea for church leaders to get to know

local mental health providers and counselors for those who need more than an ongoing conversation about life.

H – Offer hope. Suicide is never God's choice for a person's life, but suicide rates are alarming because too many people are giving up hope. Because God loves every person and has a purpose for every life, there is always, always hope! Keep preaching it and sharing it!

Every church can play *some* role in the lives of people who live with mental illness, and there are few opportunities that come before the church as great as this one in our present cultural climate. The local church is the hope of the world, even for those struggling under the weight of mental illness!

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