

What ‘Joker’ Movie Reveals the Church Is Missing When It Comes to Mental Health

Last weekend, the highly anticipated film *Joker* opened in theaters, and to say it prompted a strong reaction from moviegoers would be an understatement.

Even before its opening, controversy swirled around the film’s dark tenor, and its portrayal of a character—Alfred Fleck, aka the “Joker”—who struggles with serious mental health issues and becomes a violent murderer.

Some critics warned the film could be a trigger to viewers who may have thoughts of harming themselves or others. In fact, fear of a movie theater shooting similar to the 2012 one in Aurora, Colorado, prompted the NYPD and other police forces to increase their security presence at select showings. The family members of the victims of the Aurora shooting even sent a letter to Warner Brothers asking the studio to advocate for gun safety ahead of the movie’s release.

On the other hand, supporters of the movie, including the film’s star Joaquin Phoenix and director Todd Phillips, argued that the aim is not to glorify violence but to start a conversation about the issue. “The movie makes statements about a lack of love, childhood trauma, lack of compassion in the world,” Phillips said.

Despite the controversy around it, *Joker* ended up earning \$93.5 million over the weekend, making it the highest-grossing October release ever.

Now, whatever your opinion on the movie may be—whether you already saw it or are planning on boycotting it—I think we all have something to learn from this.

One in five adults in America lives with a mental illness. Our nation is currently living through an epidemic of suicides, drug addiction and mental health issues that have reached record levels. Mental health is one of the biggest issues in America, yet we still struggle to talk about it openly and treat it with the urgency it deserves. Because of this, many people suffer alone and in silence, and we overlook those who desperately need help and intervention. The holidays especially can be a hard and stressful season for many Americans.

Movies such as *Joker* or even Disney's animated *Inside Out* are prompting us to address mental health more openly, but that's only the first step. We need to educate ourselves and work to remove the stigma long associated with mental illness, and we need to provide people access to trained mental health experts who can help them.

This is why, for more than 30 years, the American Association of Christian Counselors has been equipping mental health professionals and peer counselors to better treat mental illness. In fact, this week, nearly 7,000 mental health professionals are gathered in Nashville for our biennial conference, where they will hear from some of America's leading clinicians and medical experts. Underscoring the timeliness of this year's conference, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will join us to talk about his perspective on how mental health issues play a major role in conflict zones and places with high levels of religious persecution.

Our conference launches between the weekend of *Joker*'s release and World Mental Health Day, which is Thursday, Oct. 10. Perhaps these are mere scheduling coincidences, but it's no coincidence that mental health is becoming a more prominent national conversation. This is too important an issue for us to only pay attention when a movie like *Joker* causes a stir or when a dedicated day of observance comes around once a year. Now, maybe more than ever, it is vital we continue building

awareness and training professionals and pastors to care for people struggling with mental illness. {eo}

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