

Church Leaders Tackle the Stigma of Mental Illness

The Rev. Frank Page, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, was getting ready to work in the yard in the fall of 2009 when the phone rang. His daughter was on the line.

Daddy, I love you, she said. Tell Mama and the girls I love them, too.

Then she was gone.

Melissa Page Strange, 32, took her own life just after hanging up the phone with her dad.

"I do not want you to imagine what that is like," he said.

For years, Page did not share the painful details of Melissa's death, fearing that some Christians might speak ill of her if they knew. Mental illness and suicide were taboo topics for many churches, seen as a kind of spiritual failure.

But that may be starting to change.

Page and several other Baptist leaders plan to meet in Dallas this spring to address mental illness. The meeting was prompted by the Newtown, Conn., school shooting and has gained more urgency since the suicide of Matthew Warren, 27-year-old son of California megachurch pastor **Rick Warren**.

Matthew Warren's suicide last month has prompted a number of evangelical leaders to talk about how churches can better help those dealing with mental illness in their congregations.

Page, now president of the convention's Nashville-based executive committee, is telling his daughter's story in a forthcoming book called "Melissa."

He hopes the book will help other families who are grieving from suicide. He also hopes to take away some of the stigma and shame that surrounds mental illness.

“There is a sense that everything you have tried has failed,” he said.

The Rev. Bill Ritter, author of “Take the Dimness of My Soul Away: Healing After a Loved One’s Suicide,” said people affected by mental illness often steer clear of church. Some feel ashamed and others are just overwhelmed.

“For as much as we talk about the church as the place you turn when life is falling apart—the reality is that people often stay away from church when life is falling apart,” he said.

Ritter was pastor of First United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Mich., in the early 1990s when his 27-year-old son, Bill, took his own life. A few weeks after the funeral, Ritter talked about his son’s struggles in a sermon.

Sharing his story made it easier for other people in the church to talk about how mental illness had affected their own families, he said. “You can’t heal what you can’t name,” he said.

Ed Stetzer, president of Nashville-based LifeWay Research, wants to see more churches discuss mental illness openly. A longtime friend of Warren’s and Page’s, he knew of Matthew Warren’s struggles with depression, which resisted treatment.

In a blog post after learning of Matthew’s suicide, Stetzer wrote about how mental illness has affected his own family. Several of his relatives have taken their lives, as did a parishioner in a church that he served as a young pastor.

“We need to stop hiding mental illness,” Stetzer said.

Stetzer said some evangelical Christians think that if they pray enough or become more spiritual, then their mental

illness will go away. But they don't look at other health issues the same way.

"People who become a Christian and have a broken leg will still have a broken leg," he said. "We tend to think that Jesus fixes what is in our heads, and medicine fixes what is in our body. Sometimes what is in our heads needs medicine."

David McKnight agrees.

A physician by trade, McKnight leads the Celebrate Recovery support group at Belle Aire Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The group, which is about 10 years old, draws between 35 and 60 people to the church on Tuesday nights.

The program is part of a national movement, first started at Warren's **Saddleback Church**. Some members are dealing with addiction, while others have depression or other mental illness. Some had been told that faith could solve their problems, said McKnight – but it's not that easy.

"We would never tell someone who is nearsighted that it's because they don't have enough faith," he said. "We do that with people who deal with depression."

McKnight helped start Celebrate Recovery at his church because of a personal meltdown about 10 years ago. At first he was resistant, thinking his troubles weren't as bad as those of people dealing with drug addiction or other issues.

Then the light bulb came on, he said, and he realized that he, too, had struggles and it was OK to admit to them. McKnight said that growing up in church, he'd learned to keep up appearances, even when life was difficult.

"Too often in churches there is this belief that you have to be perfect – that you have to keep a smile on your face when your world is falling apart," he said.

David Thomas, director of men's and boys' counseling for

Daystar Counseling Ministries in Nashville, hopes churches will discuss the issue in church services as well as support groups. He said many churches have started talking about finances in recent years because of the economic downturn. Thomas thinks churches need to do the same for mental illness.

“We have very defined resources for families that are struggling financially,” he said. “We don’t have defined resources for families who are struggling emotionally – and we need them.”

Bob Smietana writes for USA Today and The Tennessean.