

Removing the Stigma: Mental Illness in the Church

Suicide kills more people in the United States every year than homicide, hypertension or motor vehicle crashes, yet it's seldom discussed in the church.

But now, mental health is moving to the forefront following suicides that rocked two prominent evangelical families.

Pastor Rick Warren, who leads Saddleback Church in Southern California, lost his 27-year-old son, Matthew, in April.

Also, Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, recently released a new book, *Melissa: A Father's Lesson's From a Daughter's Suicide*, about his daughter's death.

The Day Melissa Died

Page was alone at home when he received the call that would change his life. It was the day after Thanksgiving 2009, and his oldest daughter, 32-year-old Melissa, had just ended her life. Although she had struggled for years, Page knew something had changed that week.

During an interview with CBN News in his Nashville home, he explained, "Two days before she died I said, 'Melissa, no one loves you like your Daddy and nobody knows you like your Daddy and I know something's wrong, bad wrong, baby. Please ... '—and she was getting ready to go talk to her mental health professional—'You tell him that your Daddy thinks you need to be hospitalized.'"

As the top leader for the Southern Baptists, Page sets the direction for the denomination's 15.9 million members. He's also served as a successful megachurch pastor.

But Page calls parenting Melissa one of his most daunting challenges. It's why he wrote the book—to encourage others on a similar journey and challenge the church to reach out.

Page and his wife, Dayle, explained that although Melissa accepted Christ as a child, her life was not easy.

"We worried about her constantly, wanted to be able to help her," Dayle told CBN News.

Frank explained, "She struggled with addictive issues, behavioral issues, rebellion issues. She struggled in many ways relationally. She was gifted beyond words and struggled beyond words."

In her 20s, Melissa reached a period of stability. She married and seemed headed on a smoother path. But then a bout with cancer led to a prescription pill addiction, and she spiraled downward once again. The Pages say she never mentioned suicide, leaving them in shock the day she died.

For the first year, they remember feeling numb.

"People say, 'She committed suicide in November. What was it like that first Christmas?' I don't remember," Frank told CBN News. "Now the second Christmas, I well remember. Then the grief was even worse for me."

After more than three years, the Pages describe their grief like waves, continually rolling in but varying in frequency and intensity.

Suicide and Salvation

Their great comfort now is in knowing that Melissa is at peace in heaven. It's a biblical truth they say our culture has undermined.

"You've got some people who say, 'If you commit suicide, you're going to hell,'" Frank explained. It's a belief the

Pages want the church to challenge.

"I think you have to get to the point where if you belong to Christ, you are His child and nothing can separate you," Dayle said.

Frank added, "It's a family thing, and family never changes. Sometimes we act like we're not a part of the family, but the truth is when you're born and you're born again—it's forever."

Raising Awareness

Moving forward, the Pages hope to build on the growing national awareness of mental health issues. It started with last December's Sandy Hook Elementary shootings in Newtown, Conn., and continued in April with the suicide of Warren's son.

"I think the timing is fascinating," Frank said, "that indeed all these things have happened in a very short period of time, and I think God is going to use all these bad things to bring forth a movement among God's people."

At the Southern Baptist annual convention in Houston this year, the denomination promoted awareness of mental health issues. Page is hoping to begin to remove some of the stigma and encourage churches to more proactively minister to those who are suffering.

"These are legitimate, serious issues that people struggle with," he said. "And the church needs to be the place where we say, 'We understand.'"

Page says the local church can help through support groups, counseling or simply awareness of what the community has to offer. It's an enormous challenge, but with more than 36,000 people taking their own lives each year, it could meet an enormous need.