

What We Can Learn From Rick Warren's Mental Health Summit

Rick and Kay Warren of Saddleback Church; the Most Rev. Kevin Vann, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange; and the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Orange County (NAMI-OC) on Friday co-hosted the "Gathering on Mental Health and the Church" at Saddleback Church in Southern California, featuring religious, health and psychology professionals who reinforced the need to work together to address critical mental health issues.

Designed to encourage individuals living with mental illness, educate family members and equip church leaders to provide effective and compassionate care to any who face the challenges of mental illness, the gathering was a sold-out event, with more than 3,300 in attendance at the Saddleback Campus worship center and overflow rooms. Over 6,000 tuned in to a live webcast of the event at [saddlebackchurch.org](#). Additionally, the conference hashtag #Hope4MH trended on Twitter.

This event marked the first initiative in the Warrens' mission to remove the stigma of mental illness following the death of their son, Matthew, who took his life on April 5 last year after a lifelong struggle with mental illness.

"To be able to call together the larger faith community is bittersweet, as we had hoped to share this moment with our son, talking about concern for people with mental illness," Kay Warren told reporters. "We do this in honor and memory of our son and others lost to mental illness, realizing there is hope for others dealing with this condition."

Rick Warren noted that over 34 years as a pastor, he has struggled along with people dealing with compulsions and fears.

“I’m not an authority on mental illness, but I am an authority on living with mental illness,” he said. “We wanted to pull back the curtain and say, ‘It’s OK. I’m not OK, you’re not OK, but that’s OK because God’s OK.’”

Plenary and workshop presenters at the more than 12-hour event included 25 religious, health and psychology professionals who addressed theoretical issues and practical solutions on a critical issue affecting 25 percent of all adults in the U.S. and one in 10 children during their formative years.

Topics encompassed the role of the church in mental health; integrating physical, spiritual and mental health; crisis management for church staff; resourcing the church; and supporting those suffering.

In addition, they held 20 interactive workshops covering depression, stigma, suicide-risk reduction, church counseling, support groups and recovery ministries, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, addictions and other topics to bring hope to the challenges of mental illness.

“Western culture—or American culture—tends to rely on labels,” Vann said. “They’re limiting in a lot of ways, no matter what the label might be. We always have to let the Lord help us look and see the person behind the label who comes to us for help and healing.”

Several speakers noted that the first place to which many turn for help is their faith leader, because the heart of Jesus and the church has always been for those who suffer. The consensus was that the church has much to offer and needs to take the lead in the battle for mental health.

“There isn’t a church or parish anywhere in the U.S. or the world that is not affected by mental illness,” said Steve Pitman, president of NAMI-OC. “The only difference is that some churches want to lead, discuss it and shed light on it, and others don’t.”

Throughout the event, individuals living with mental health shared their personal stories of being diagnosed and overcoming challenges in everyday life. After David Mandani told his transparent testimony of living with schizophrenia, Rick Warren told him, "Your chemistry in your brain is not your character, and your illness is not your identity. You are a follower of Christ who struggles with mental illness, and your struggle does not define you. Jesus defines you."

"A thousand years before you were born, God knew you would be here today," Warren added, encouraging the more than 600 in attendance struggling with a mental illness. "He wanted to bring you here to say to you, 'You matter to Me. I love you, I created you, I formed you, I have a plan for your life greater than the pain you're going through. You are valuable, you are acceptable, you are lovable, you are forgivable and you are usable.'"

To watch archived footage of the event or for more information, visit [.](#)