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The Necessity of a Mental Health Ministry^[1]

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a good time to consider starting or expanding a mental health ministry in your church and community.

One in five^[4] Americans annually experience mental health issues ranging in severity from temporary psychological distress to serious depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Of this number, four in ten^[5] adults and just over half^[4] of children aged 8-15 receive appropriate care, often because of stigma associated with these illnesses and their treatments.

Pastors can help address this disconnect between need and appropriate care by preaching and speaking about mental illness with directness and compassion from the pulpit. As Megan Snell writes^[6], “when I speak frankly about depression from the pulpit, breaking the silence of mental illness, people respond with tearful gratitude for having their own life experience finally spoken about from the place of spiritual authority in our worship spaces.”

Speaking and preaching will only take a congregation so far. Real and sustained progress requires a change in cultures that demand people hide a part of who they are. “We must become congregations in which people are welcome to be their whole selves,” Snell writes. “When we do the work of making our congregations welcoming to those with mental illness, we can live into a vision of the fullness of the body of Christ, accompanying all and excluding none.”

There are several organizations and resources that can help.

The American Psychiatric Association's [Mental Health and Faith Community Partnership](#) [7] offers "Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders" and a companion quick reference guide. Interfaith Network on Mental Illness has produced a [video series](#) [8] for clergy and other resources.

[Real and sustained progress requires a change in cultures that demand people hide a part of who they are.](#)

[Mental Health Ministries](#) [9] offers educational resources, an e-newsletter, and links to denominational and national working group efforts on faith and mental illness.

[Pathways to Promise](#) [10], on whose board I serve, seeks to facilitate the faith community's work in reaching out to those with mental illness and their families. Through training, consultation, and other resources, Pathways encourages congregations to become supportive and caring communities for those with mental health conditions.

Only a few weeks removed from having been hospitalized for depression, Michael Gerson, a Washington Post columnist and former aide and speechwriter to President George W. Bush, spoke eloquently about the depths he had plumbed and about "the experience of transcendence we cannot explain, or explain away."

Towards the end of the sermon, he noted that, "Many, understandably, pray for a strength they do not possess. But God's promise is somewhat different: That even when strength fails, there is perseverance. And when perseverance fails, there is hope. And even when hope fails, there is love. And love never fails."

[READ: Suffering Is Not a Sin](#) [11]

That's a message we can embrace and extend to all, including those living with mental health conditions and their families. In so doing, we will help reduce stigma and increase the number of those receiving appropriate care.

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[2] <https://sojo.net/biography/curtis-ramsey-lucas>

[3] <https://sojo.net/print/228107>

[4] <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>

[5] <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

[6] <https://medium.com/christian-citizen/breaking-the-silence-of-mental-illness-f42de0d1e924>

[7] <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/faith-community-partnership>

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