
Bringing Mental Illness Into the Light

Aaron Cross



The Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder distributes mental health information at a NAMI Mental Health walk. Photo courtesy of Susan Gregg-Schroeder.

The church as one thinks of it serves different purposes in the lives of different people. For some, it is their opportunity each week to leave the outside world behind and reconnect with God. For others, it is a social occasion or perhaps even simply just an obligation. But what of those who absolutely *need* the church as a rock in their lives, those who struggle daily against the workings of their own minds? Are they able to see the church as not only a place to find spiritual wholeness, but mental wholeness as well? The hope of the Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder of [Mental Health Ministries](#) in San Diego, Calif., is that soon they will be able to do just that.

“As an ordained minister and a person who lives with depression, I am often asked why it is so difficult for many spiritual leaders to talk openly about mental illness,” Gregg-Schroeder said. “Having the support of the leadership in a congregation is essential in creating a caring congregation for persons living with a mental illness and their families. So why is it so difficult to get this support? It is a complicated issue.”

Gregg-Schroeder believes the difficulty stems from a lack of knowledge and preparation in dealing with the complexities of mental illness. Her ministry is about changing that.

“The mission is to produce media and print educational resources to help our churches become caring congregations for persons with a mental illness and those who love them. Our first DVD, *Creating Caring Congregations*, is based on a five-step model from a 1996 resolution from the

General Board of Church and Society that called for ‘caring congregations.’ These five steps include education, commitment, welcome, support and advocacy, and are not linear. Rather, the process of becoming a caring congregation is dynamic and unique to each community.”

Mental Health Ministries was founded in 2001, 10 years after Gregg-Schroeder’s initial personal experience with mental illness – depression.

“My depression began in 1991. I was in my third year of ministry at a large urban church. Despite my experience in pastoral counseling, I did not recognize or understand what was happening to me. Few people at church knew about my depression and hospitalization. For two years I suffered in silence, hiding my condition from the church community for fear of losing my job. It was my senior pastor who stood by me, who believed in grace and who believed in me. With his support, I finally decided to openly acknowledge my depression,” she said.

From there, Mental Health Ministries has grown into the thriving organization that it is today, becoming, in her words, “one of the few national and international Web sites where people can get resources to educate their congregations to become caring congregations for persons living with a mental illness and their families.”

The ministry also works with many national groups, especially NAMI FaithNet, and has become ecumenical and interfaith. NAMI FaithNet is a network composed of members and friends of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.



The Rev. Tom Carter, director of endorsement and pastoral care with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry’s United Methodist Endorsing Agency, says mental health tends to be a subject no one talks about in the church.

“Susan Gregg-Schroeder is a pioneer in providing vital information for United Methodist churches and churches in other denominations to initiate work and conversations in the mental health arena,” Carter said.

What should local churches know – and do – about those members who may be suffering from poor mental health?

“To start with, there needs to be education. Clergy and lay leaders need to educate themselves about mental illness, so they will be able to recognize the symptoms and make appropriate referrals to mental health professionals. There also needs to be commitment, meaning that the church leadership commits to be intentional in seeking ways to become a caring congregation,” Gregg-Schroeder said.

Beyond those steps, she also believes that there needs to be personal interaction and change. “In dealing with the members of the church, there has to be a sense of welcome and seeking ways to integrate persons with a mental illness into the life of the congregation. When we take the time to really get to know someone living with a mental illness, the barriers between ‘us’ and ‘them’ break down. As well, we must support our fellow church-goers. Christ calls us to bear each other’s burdens. Church members can provide support and enable the church to be a ‘vessel of

hope' for persons struggling in the darkness," she said.

Finally, churches need to support advocacy for mental health, Gregg-Schroeder believes.

"Mental illness is a social justice issue involving such basic human rights such as access to medical care and stable and supportive housing. Once a congregation is educated about mental illness, they are in a position to partner and collaborate with community-based groups," she said.

Mental health exists as an area of the church that many people still do not talk about or acknowledge. Gregg-Schroeder's ultimate goal is to change that in order to bring support and help to those who need it.

"Most all mental health outreach ministries begin small," she said, "When seeds are sown, some take root and continue to grow in surprising ways. When I first started sharing my story and connecting with faith communities, I never expected that Mental Health Ministries would have evolved into a national ministry. But I believe God uses my struggles with mental illness to help us find ways to be supportive of persons living with these brain disorders. Because of my experience with the church, I will continue to help congregations find ways to be a caring community for person living with a mental illness and their families. I pray that the time will come when families living with a loved one with mental illness will be silent no more!"

**Aaron Cross is a freelance writer currently in Nashville, Tenn., who has also written for United Methodist Communications.*