

# 'Comfort My People'

## Mental Illness Awareness Sunday

Isaiah 49:8-13    Luke 8:26-39  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Beethoven, Winston Churchill, John Denver, Harrison Ford, Audrey Hepburn, Ernest Hemingway, Abraham Lincoln, Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Sir Isaac Newton, Georgia O'Keefe, Norman Rockwell, Tchaikovsky, Mark Twain, Tammy Wynette.

What do all these incredibly diverse giants-in-their-field have in common? They all suffered with a diagnosable disease we categorize under the heading, mental illness – from anxiety disorder to major depression to bipolar disorder to schizophrenia.

What is mental illness? Unfortunately, way to many folks still conjure up in their heads images often stereotyped in TV and movies as “crazy” people who are often dangerous, disruptive or incoherent. But according to a new report entitled, **Comfort My People: A [Presbyterian] Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness**, which I will address in a moment, the following definitions are provided:

**Mental Illness** is a medical disorder characterized by disturbance in thought, mood, or behavior that causes distress or impairment of spiritual, interpersonal, behavioral, and emotional functioning.

**Serious Mental Illness** is distinguished as a more severe and persistent medical disorder, an enduring condition that affects one's ability to cope with everyday challenges. If left untreated all mental illnesses may impair one's ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, practice one's faith, worship God, attend school, go to work, or live independently.

Here are a few quick, and disturbing, statistics:

- Approximately one in four adult Americans, 25 %, has a diagnosable mental illness in any given year – that's about 60 million people!
- Approximately 40 million American adults in a given year have an anxiety disorder.
- Major depression affects approximately 15 million American adults in a given year.

- Mental illness in the form of major depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for those between the ages of 15 and 44.
- Up to 10 million children suffer with some form of mental illness.
- Approximately 18 million American adults, that's one in seventeen adults, or 6 percent of the U.S. population, has what can be called a "serious" mental illness.
- Roughly one in every five U.S. troops who have survived the bombs and other dangers of Iraq and Afghanistan now suffers from major depression or post-traumatic stress. The estimated is 300,000 or more military personnel. Only about half of those military personnel with mental health problems have sought treatment. Seeking help is difficult for veterans. They have been instilled with a "can do" attitude and fear the stigma of appearing weak to their peers. As an aside, nearly one third of homeless persons are veterans.
- This same stigma of appearing weak is what keeps so many men from seeking needed help.
- And for those who abuse alcohol, one-third has as mental disorder.

Well, with the widespread scope revealed by these dismal statistics, we learn that in its wake few families and congregations are left unaffected.

Here's a quick bit of history of how our denomination is dealing with all this. Going back twenty years, the 200<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (1988) addressed this issue by approving a Report and Resolution entitled, ***The Church and Serious Mental Illness. It called on Presbyterians to reach out and minister to those suffering from, or affected by, severe mental illnesses.***

In response, our denomination organized the **Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network**, part of our denomination's Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA). I have put a brochure about this organization out on the table in the entryway to the sanctuary. This umbrella association also includes the Presbyterian Disabilities Network, Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network, Presbyterian AIDS Network, Presbyterian Child Advocacy Network, and other organizations that focus on social welfare and justice issues.

Florence Kraft, a Presbyterian elder and the author of that 1988 General Assembly report and resolution, put it all into perspective this way when she addressed the church's response to those suffering from mental illness:

**Nobody wants to talk about it: it makes us uncomfortable. As Christians, as Presbyterians, as citizens, we *must* talk about it:** talk about specific biological illnesses that afflict [so many adults and children] in this country...disorders of brain functioning that disrupt faith, will, personality, family, that disrupt knowledge of truth, of logic, and of one's own true self.

We need to talk about mental illness to heighten our awareness of its nature and scope; to enable ourselves to reach out, without fear, to become instruments of grace and peace for those who suffer; to recognize that we are talking about ourselves, our families, [our congregation] not some mythical "others" in the house [or church] down the street.

We know that with the proper medical treatment for mental illnesses, functioning frequently improves and some people seem to recover completely. But medicine and technology cannot heal socially inflicted wounds. **Pills cannot overcome social ostracism, stereotyping, and stigmatizing.**

Only open dialog and the attitude of inclusiveness can reconcile the fear, uncertainty, even repugnance felt by "normal" persons in the presence of those recovering from mental illnesses - and the degradation, fear, hesitancy, doubt, and anger felt by those who have suffered psychiatric labeling."

In the inclusive view of Christian community, the *church* must provide a safe space setting of mutual trust and respect necessary for open and frank dialog. Ms. Kraft writes, "*As Christians*, we need to talk about mental illness out of our belief that God's design is for all humans to be born equal in dignity, rights, and freedoms. We know that God intends for us to lead lives of wholeness and fullness..."

But she continues, "**Individuals with psychiatric labels, their parents, wives, husbands, siblings, or children have seldom been able to find pastoral care or community support within the church to enable and sustain them.**"

**That's quite a serious indictment against the church** – and I'm afraid that it's more often true than not, and just as true today as it was when this statement was made 20 years ago in 1988.

Recognizing this, a newly completed 54-page report (which I referenced earlier) will be presented for approval at this year's 2008 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, which will convene in San Jose, California on June 21. The entire report is available on the pcusa.org website. I downloaded it this week and read all 54 pages. It is a remarkably moving, challenging and informative document.

The report focuses on two major themes. The first theme is “**The Land of Exile**,” which explores the difficulties and injustices endured by people with serious mental illness. The experience of mental illness disorders people’s lives in ways that exile them from themselves, their families, and their community.

The second theme, “**God’s Call to Comfort**,” focuses on appropriate ways congregations can minister with and to people with a serious mental illness.

Throughout this report, people are understood from the Christian perspective that calls for our deliverance from chaos and disorder into the wholeness and communion of salvation. At the same time, the report recognizes the validity of the “medical model,” with its gifts of biochemical medication and social-scientific analysis. The goal of restoration from exile includes the integration of both perspectives and the renewal of a healthier culture and society.

**Important to us is how to approach this from a biblical and faith-based perspective.** There are lots of scriptural passages that can give us guidance, but here are just a few.

**Isaiah 49:13 reveals God’s role** when the prophet declares: “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth...for the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.” **Isaiah 40:1 reveals our role**, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

God sent the prophet Isaiah to proclaim comfort to a people in exile – the people of Jerusalem that had been taken into exile in Babylon. Through the message of comfort, God affirmed that Israel was still beloved, though in exile. God had not forgotten them nor the covenant made with them.

Isaiah’s comforting was not to be in words only, however. His commission to comfort demanded personal involvement in preparing the way for the Lord to come to them. **Remembering both aspects of Isaiah’s call, the speaking and the doing, today our church acknowledges God’s call to be among and comfort persons with serious mental illness and their loved ones – persons who all too often have been exiled from the covenant community, the church itself.**

And why is this so? One reason is because it goes against the grain of our obsession of doing everything “decently and in order.” Many things dealing with mental illnesses aren’t particularly “decent and in order.”

**We must come to realize that exiling others alienates the majority and fractures the family of God.** In other words, the church, by its own actions, itself becomes exiled from its holier possibility, the covenant community that we are called to be.

Also, we must recognize that the faces of people with serious mental illness are many. Some in our congregations choose to keep their mental illness private and do not disclose it to anyone in their church. They are fully functional and participate in the life of the church without their mental illness ever becoming apparent. Others’ mental illnesses are more evident to a congregation.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and this congregation, hears this call to comfort those in exile and seeks to respond through the power of the Holy Spirit, by **welcoming outcasts as Jesus did. The Holy Spirit connects us to people wrongly exiled.**

So we come to acknowledge that **our words must be accompanied by action.** We walk in faith with the Christ who stepped over social and religious boundaries and dared to touch and heal the lepers of his day, and those who were filled with what the New Testament often describes as “demons” that controlled their hearts and minds and behavior.

Our denomination is once again calling for justice, care, and hospitality for all God’s children, including those with mental illness. While the church cannot eliminate a person’s mental illness (recovery is a more applicable reality than a cure), we can welcome people who struggle daily with mental illness and thereby help reduce their suffering by helping to transform a portion of their chaos into wholeness.

The church can recognize that although we might be powerless over some aspects of mental illness, God is not. **Through the extraordinary power to love, we can share the precious gift of belonging with persons who have often heard that they do not belong. We can carry the message that by their baptism they bear the indelible mark of belonging to God’s family forever.**

By God’s grace let us continue to grow into our congregation’s **Mission Statement** that declares our intention to be an inclusive community of faith in which love, acceptance, encouragement, forgiveness, and compassion work together to foster emotional and spiritual growth, support, healing, and wholeness.

**Is our congregation a place where everyone is valued for who they are?**  
A place where each person is welcome to participate - including individuals with a serious mental illness?

**I believe that College Hill can be a powerful force in overcoming fear and stigma by modeling for the rest of our community how those who have suffered in exile must be regarded – with respect, as loved children of God, and with deep appreciation for the unique gifts they bring to the community where they, too, are recognized as members of the Body of Christ, the church.**

There are a million more things to say about all this, including the difficulties and challenges (as well as joys) inherent in this kind of outreach ministry. This is just a beginning.

Yet I want to close with a quote from Bettye Snelson, a member of North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She is a mid-50s grandmotherly type who suffers from mental illness.

If I could talk to people who have never met a mentally ill person and tell them one thing, I'd say: Don't be afraid of us. We're people who have feelings, too. Our lives may seem different. But we can be

very caring people. We care about each other, we care about our families, and we care about our church – just like you.

**May our welcome and our hospitality be extended equally and fully to all persons – especially to those who find themselves in diverse places of exile.**

'Comfort, O comfort my people,' says our God.

Amen.

**Resources:**

*Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness*, The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) report to the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Report and Resolution on *The Church and Serious Mental Illness* approved by the 200th General Assembly (1988).