

Shining the Spotlight: Mental Health Awareness Sunday

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Because one in five people will have a mental illness during any given year, many people and their families are affected in our congregations. And yet, no one talks about it. Sadly, many are left feeling alone in their struggle. However, congregations can be places where people can receive good support. It is important that church leaders speak up about mental illness and recovery so people know it is okay to talk about it and ask for help when they have problems.

How Churches Can Start the Conversation

Some churches have a Mental Health Sunday, often in May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month. Our church, First Christian Church in Tucson, AZ, opted to do ours in October during Mental Health Awareness Week. I have planned our services and have been asked to preach because I'm an ordained Disciple minister and because, having a mental illness myself and having worked in the mental health field, I am passionate about talking about mental health recovery.



I made use of resources on the [UCC's Mental Health Network website](#), which has a resource guide that includes litanies, prayers, suggested hymns, sermon starters, and other resources. We used their Call to Worship, Invocation, and Prayers of the People. The only change we made was that we referred to *mental health challenges* instead of *mental illnesses* because, since there is so much stigma around mental illness, some people will admit to having a mental health challenge but not a mental illness.

During my worship planning, I included a number of voices from the congregation. I knew that three of the other elders had experienced a mental illness and that two other elders and a deacon had relatives with a mental illness. I asked them to be lay leaders in the worship service and to share their experiences with the congregation during lunch after worship. I believe it is important for church leaders to be open about their own struggles if we want to fight stigma and enable members to be willing to share.

During the sermon, I spoke about Elijah being depressed and wanting God to let him die, and Jesus healing the man with demons who lived among the tombs in the Gerasenes. Since I was providing an educational program after worship and lunch, I decided during the sermon to share how God had been present with me through church members when I had been hospitalized several years ago because I was suicidal. I spoke about what mental illness is and how recovery is possible.

This year we used the same worship resources, and after church I also shared a PowerPoint presentation on how and why churches can be supportive of people with a mental health challenge and promote their recovery.

A Beacon of Welcome and Support

After worship, person after person came up to me and said things like, “You’ll never know what I’ve been through”; “A friend of mine died by suicide, and I didn’t know what to do”; or “My child has bipolar disorder.” Evidently many in the congregation have been touched in some way by mental illness.

Perhaps your congregation may find these resources helpful in planning a Mental Health Sunday. I look forward to the continued work of the NBA’s Mental Health and Congregational Care Research and Design Team as we plan to launch a full Affinity Group that can help congregations respond to the call of welcome and support across the life of the Church.

Rev. Mary Alice Do serves on the NBA Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group Research and Design Team. This team will work through December 31, 2015, to define the purpose and goals of a full Affinity Group to launch in early 2016. This is a shared effort with Disciples Home Missions (DHM) and in response to the passing of GA-1523 “Becoming a People of Welcome and Support to People with Mental Illness and/or Mental Health Issues” by the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more information, please email mkilpatrick@nbacares.org.