

Becoming a Welcoming Church:

*Creating Safe Boundaries for Congregations
Serving Those with Severe Mental Health Issues*

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National
Benevolent
Association
CALLED TOGETHER | CALLED TO CARE

Becoming a Welcoming Church



**Danger Stigma ~ Diversity of Thought ~
Balancing Complexities of Welcome**



The background is a teal-tinted photograph of dandelion seed heads and stems. The seed heads are in various stages of maturity, with some showing the characteristic umbrella-like structure of the seeds. The stems are dark and slender, extending upwards from the bottom of the frame. The overall composition is soft and artistic, with a focus on natural textures and light patterns.

VOICES FROM THE PEWS

Church Culture and Norms

Language and assuming diagnosis

Accommodating needs: *sensory triggers, sounds, movement, outburst*

Alternative Rituals

*"It's easier for me to be myself and feel like I fit in at coffee time when I can talk to people freely, but I feel disconnected and uncomfortable in church where we have to be quiet and listen."
~Young Adult Church Member*

Liturgical and Theological Needs

Empower people of all abilities

Highlight figures who lived and thrived with disabilities and mental illness

Avoid correlations to demon possession or “un-Godliness” of any kind

“They can help kids like me with mental illnesses to be able to have support groups and to teach them God is there for them and they were made this way because God has a plan for them to change the world’s minds about babies, kids, grownups with mental illnesses.” Young Adult Member

Services and Spiritual Support

Equip neuro-diverse persons for service, visibility, and leadership

Pastoral Care

Safe space small groups, support groups

"I provide a lot of pastoral care by making myself accessible as someone who has mental health illness. I tell people I have bipolar disorder, and that opens a door for people to come to me to talk about their mental health illness. I have helped a mom deal with a son who would not seek treatment or meds. I have helped a woman with paranoid schizophrenia who needed to talk sometimes with someone who could help her work through a paranoia to realize that it may not be a real threat. While pastors want to be careful not to interfere with professional counseling, pastors can be good active listeners." Rev. Tracy A. Siegman, Senior Pastor First Christian Church Bethany

Relationship Support

Having strong relationship with local agencies and resources

Caregiver and family support system

Peer and social gatherings

The typical compassion and outreach of church folks fizzled out when you no longer fit the mold of a "good Christian." Most folks probably have good intentions and just don't know how to respond or reach out to people who disengage from the church for various reasons and/or exhibit signs of mental illness/mental health challenges. And in our case, of course they wouldn't have known that eventually my mom would take her life. Worst-case scenario, though, they are viewing people as sinners who aren't being good enough and who need to get their life back on track before they are deserving of care. There's a certain onus on the person struggling to ask for help, which they are unlikely to do if it's not a welcoming situation, and because of their inherent mental health challenges.

~Young Adult Church Administrator

"I need friendships that won't go away with one wrong behavior or move. I need people I hang out with in the church to have the same accountability as everyone else, including people like me, but take it gently on us. I need encouragement with what I do in my life; like, say I help older people out, to be praised for it; if I have goals, then have the pastor help me with them; or if he's not there in the sanctuary, someone I'm very comfortable talking to in the church that I trust." ~ Young Adult Church Member

“Understand that mental illness is not something that can be beaten or cured for everyone. It is not a fight or issue to rally behind. Your choices of outcome are not always health or death. For me, it is a life-long cycle of three steps forward and two steps back. Much of the life of families with mental illness is taking great joy in things and celebrating when things are going well, but still always watching for the signs that medication needs to be adjusted or life stressors are too much. And when someone is sick with mental illness, there is no “normal” course – no way to know how long it will be before their loved one is “better”. Realize that life with mental illness isn’t lived day by day or even hour by hour. Most often it is lived minute by minute. *Listen to the stories of those who are willing to share. Learn what their lives are like, without judgement and without assuming that you know what will “fix” their lives. **And then look them in the eyes and tell them that you love them (or that you care about them) and mean it.***”

~Church Music Director



**THOUGHTS FROM OUR
PANELISTS**

**How can we understand
or make sense of severe
mental health symptoms
without stigmatizing?**



**How can we understand the
role of Pastor compared to
the role of Mental Health
Professional in our lives?**



**What are boundaries?
Why are they important?
How we can understand
them through our faith lens?**



**What are some practical
ways to implement
healthy boundaries in a
congregational setting?**



**How do you de-escalate
a crisis situation?
(i.e.: disruptive behavior,
severe symptoms or episodes)**



**What do you do when
someone expresses suicidal,
homicidal ideation?**



**How do you know when
it's time to refer?**



What are good resources for clergy and congregational education?

Mental Health First Aid

www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/

UCC Mental Health Network

www.ucc-mhn.org

NAMI for Pastors

www.nami.org/faithnet

Resources, continued

NAMI Bridges of Hope Slide Deck- SLIDES 8 & 9 (see attached, but also downloadable from link below)

<https://www.nami.org/Extranet/Education-Training-and-Outreach-Programs/Outreach-and-Advocacy/NAMI-FaithNet/Bridges-of-Hope>

Pastors, Counseling, and Mental Health: 6 Guidelines for Pastors to Consider

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/august/pastors-counseling-and-mental-health-6-guidelines-for-pasto.html>

Rick Warren's Training Materials

<https://store.pastors.com/products/hope-for-mental-health-starter-kit>

Pastor Care Boundaries in Ministries

http://desperatepreacher.com/pastorcare/boundaries_in_ministry.htm

Thank You!

Find more information and resources at:

nbacares.org/mental-health



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