WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

≫ Step by Step: Mental Health Ministry ≪

≫ GETTING STARTED

What is a Mental Health Ministry?

A ministry that addresses mental illness is one that provides compassion, love, support, education, counseling and acceptance to people who have symptoms of a mental illness. Individuals experiencing psychological distress often seek out religious leaders for assistance with the struggles associated with mental illness. A mental health ministry provides holistic care through the application of both biblical truth and psychological resources.

Why is there a need?

Mental illness can affect anyone – male and female, young and old, and from every socioeconomic, religious and cultural background. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), an estimated 26.2% of Americans 18 years old or older suffer symptoms of a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. NIMH cites mental illness as the leading cause of disability in the United States and Canada for individuals between the ages of 15-44.[1] People suffering from mental illnesses experience difficulty with the activities of daily living. Thinking, concentrating, remembering and relating to others are only a few of the many challenges. Similar to physical illness, if there is no intervention, mental illness causes difficulty with coping and functioning in life. Some well-known examples of mental illness are depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

 Too often mental illness still carries with it a social stigma. A study by Dr. Matthew Stanford found that approximately one-third of the study's participants diagnosed with a mental disorder reported having a negative experience with a church when they sought help for a mental health issue.[2] However, years of research indicate that mental disorders are the result of biological and environment factors no different than cancer or heart disease. It is not the result of personal weakness or character flaws. Mental disorders, like other diseases, are treatable. The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) states that between 70 and 90 percent of individuals suffering from mental illness see a significant reduction in symptoms through effective psychological or pharmacological treatment.[3]

The failure to address mental illness can have a negative impact on society, leading to an increase in unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, unnecessary disabilities and incarcerations, and suicides. According to NAMI, the cost for untreated mental illness is more than $100 billion annually.[4] As with all illness, early identification and intervention significantly increase the likelihood of a successful recovery.

Stepping out in faith

Here are some "first steps" to consider before your congregation begins a ministry to those with mental illness:

• Participate in assessments designed to discover the scope of the need in your community and the resources your congregation possesses to meet that need.

• Based on the outcomes of the assessments, both internal and external, determine the level of interest in your congregation in this ministry and what, if any gaps exist in community care for this population.

• Learn about the factors contributing to poverty, unemployment, housing, and school drop-out rates in your community.

• Research existing programs and development projects in your community – find out as much as you can about existing programs.

• Look for ways your church can partner with a program or organization to meet a need.

• Once the interest for this ministry has been confirmed and research completed, begin educating the congregation and recruiting volunteers.

• Research local and national statistics as well as programming options from web sites recommended in our Backpack.

What this ministry might look like in your church

There are many levels of ministry engagement that are available to your congregation. Here are just a few ideas:

• From your research and assessment information, develop and implement an educational campaign for your congregation about mental illness and its impact on families, communities and churches.

• Begin a support group for those individuals suffering from a mental illness; if you have a licensed counselor in your congregation, ask him or her to facilitate, or to recommend another professional from the community.

• If you have the resources, offer individual counseling, several support groups, Bible studies, and fellowship meals.

• Begin a benevolence fund to help pay for the costs associated with treating mental illness.

• Post emergency hotline numbers on bulletin boards in your church, church bulletins, and newsletters that people in crisis can call.

Backpacks

The Walking Alongisde Web site provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, Web sites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.

Pathways

Learn from the first-hand accounts of those already engaged in this specific ministry. Plus, develop networking contacts as go-to sources to explore solutions to challenges or celebrations of successes.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.

References

1. National Institute of Mental Health. (2009, August 6). *Statistics*. http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/statistics/index.shtml.

2. Stanford, M. S. (2007). Demon or Disorder: A Survey of Attitudes Toward Mental Illness in the Christian Church. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 10*(5), 445-449.

3. National Alliance on Mental Illness. *What is Mental Illness: Mental Illness Facts*. http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Inform_Yourself/About_Mental_Illness/About_Mental_Illness.htm.

4. National Alliance on Mental Illness. *What is Mental Illness: Mental Illness Facts*. http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Inform_Yourself/About_Mental_Illness/About_Mental_Illness.htm.