



# THE CHURCH AND MENTAL ILLNESS: BREAKING THE SILENCE

by Keith White

I had not realized how deeply mental illness affected people in the community until I began working as a Mental Health Counselor. Following the completion of a degree in social work, I built a clientele in Winnipeg comprised of individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bi-polar, anxiety, depression, and personality disorders that led many into the realm of suicide ideation. Many of these exhibited no physical, outward signs of mental illness, but were inwardly fragile, broken, and hurting. My first client had been diagnosed with Schizophrenia many years prior. His first words to me in counseling reflected a label another source(s) had given him. "I am a schizophrenic," he stated. To which I responded, "Or, are you are **a person** with schizophrenia?" Tears coursed down his face as he shared how that was the first time he realized his illness didn't define who he was - a person, made in the image of God.

What is mental illness? Mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, daily functioning, and ability to relate to others.<sup>1</sup> Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, poor upbringing, or demon possession. Neither are people with mental illnesses more violent than the rest of us. The Surgeon General's Office reports, "The overall contribution of mental disorders to the total level of violence in society is exceptionally small."<sup>2</sup> Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, so mental illnesses are a disorder of brain functioning, leading to mental disorders.

Within our churches and seminaries, as in the wider culture, mental illness has historically been enshrouded in mystery and stigma. For example, previous societies viewed mental illness with contempt. Societies in the 16th century deemed individuals with mental disorders as demon possessed. The 18th century saw the implementation of asylums, while the 1930s saw drugs and shock treatment as the best way to care for the mentally ill.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this, how should the church of the 21st century respond to mental

illness? Does the church understand what mental illness is? Does the church have a missional role in reaching and supporting individuals dealing with mental illnesses? Sadly, often what is not understood is met with silence and avoidance. However, God has not called His church to the place of silence and/or avoidance regarding this matter. Rather, he has called His church to reflect the mission of Christ: "To bind up the broken hearted, to comfort all who mourn, to bestow the oil of joy instead of mourning and (give) a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."<sup>4</sup> This is a mission of action. This action calls us to take steps toward individuals with mental illness without labeling or seeing them only in light of an illness.

Therefore, one of the first steps the church must take is to simply talk about it. Discuss it with a person struggling with a mental health issue. Ask if there's anything you can do to offer support. Second, make friends with someone with a mental illness. People with mental illness are people too. Humans need friendship and support. Third, be there in the low times. A telephone call, an invite out for dinner or coffee can do wonders in a person's recovery from an episode of depression or anxiety. Fourth, remove labeling from our speech, and pulpits. A person with a mental illness is not "coo-coo," "nuts-o," or "whacked" - they are people made in the image of God, with an invisible illness. Fifth, remove the barriers for acceptance into the church and community by becoming aware of personal, misguided judgments, and labeling. It is only within a rich and supportive environment, composed of relationships with others and with God, that life becomes bearable for these persons.

Not many clergy or congregational members are equipped to care for persons struggling with mental illness. Symptoms of mental illness are sometimes diagnosed as demon oppression or sin. Some churches shun the mentally ill while others simply neglect to care. Some churches may advise the person to pray and/or seek God for forgiveness. When this doesn't work the

person's lack of faith is sometimes deemed to be the problem. Clergy and congregational members often visit the bedside of cancer patients or heart attack victims, but how frequent are visits made to the psychiatric unit or a church member living in a home run by a community mental health program? The fact is that all people are important to God and sacred. One is no less sacred when one's brain is in disorder.

"A Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada" indicates that approximately 1 in 5 adults will experience a mental illness and can affect all people regardless of race, culture, economic class, gender, or educational level.<sup>5</sup> The community where I live has approximately 5,000 people: this means there are potentially 1,000 people in my community struggling with a mental health issue, or disorder. Yes, the impact mental illness has on people within the church, and society as a whole, is significant.

Our place of ministry to a hurting world does not always begin with travel to distant lands and often it begins with the next step; perhaps toward a neighbor who is suffering in silence from a mental disorder. "*When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?*" "*The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me.'*"<sup>6</sup> God loves, and desires to embrace, those with mental illness. What about the church? Let's break the silence, and embrace "the least of these."

1. Public Health Agency of Canada: *A Report on Mental Illness in Canada*. Retrieved October 31, 2014, from <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>.

2. Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, (1999).

3. Sawatsky, A., Theories of mental illness/wellness, September 2006.

4. Isaiah 61:3 (NIV).

5. Public Health Agency of Canada: "A Report on Mental Illness in Canada." Retrieved October 31, 2014, from <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>.

6. Matthew 25:39,40 (NIV).



Keith White is the Worship & Music Pastor at Emmanuel Pentecostal Church in Deer Lake. He is also registered with the Canadian Association of Social Workers.