

No One Should Be Alone Conference Brings Mental Health Awareness to Vancouver Area Churches

Depression. Anxiety. Alzheimer's. Dementia.

While at first glance these conditions vary clinically from one-another, a closer look shows they connect on the broader spectrum of mental health and its effect on individuals. On April 30, Grace Vancouver Church hosted Mental Health and the Church: No One Should Be Alone, a conference which aimed to network, educate and provide practical resources on mental illness for the church and community.

The three-hour event featured keynote speaker Fiona Choi from Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries. Choi opened her talk by sharing statistics on mental illness in the Canadian society: 20% of Canadians are treated for mental illness; 24% of Canadian deaths from suicide are between the ages 15 and 24; and 16% of Canadian deaths from suicide are 25 and older.

"Mental illness can be debilitating as much, if not more, than physical illness," Choi said. To illustrate, she shared brain scan imagery showing visible areas where mental illness and depression can be seen.

"The effects of mental illness include a significantly shortened lifespan, and medical conditions such as heart disease and diabetes," Choi said. "Research shows those struggling with mental illness receive a lower quality of social and health care. Perhaps this is because struggling individuals have a hard time being 'self-advocates.'"

Drawing from Dr. C. Keyes' mental health continuum model "From Languishing to Flourishing in Life," Choi discussed how everyone's mental health falls in a unique spot on the continuum. Sanctuary Ministries focuses on three levels in building others throughout the Christian journey: emotional, social and psychological.

Choi's advice to churches looking to aid individuals struggling with mental illness includes fostering their sense of belonging in the community, their contribution to society, as well as building on their esteem, sense of purpose and life direction.

"Putting knowledge to action looks different for each individual," Choi said. "As a community, we're all supporting each other on the mental health model, from flourishing to languishing. We're not in a position to fix, but to come alongside a person to know what they are going through is OK."

Following Choi's presentation was a panel discussion and testimonials moderated by Grace Vancouver Associate Pastor Rev. Mark Swanson. The four-member panel included Matthew Smed, member of Grace Vancouver and six-year tenant of housing community More Than A Roof; Skylar Osbourne, Yukon Shelter case planner; Grace Voo, Clinic Director of SOMA Counselling & Family Resources; and Dr. Brian MacVicar, director of the Djavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health at the University of British Columbia.

We have had a number of positive responses for those who attended the conference and in response have made our video recordings of the day available on our. As a church, we are just taking our first “baby steps” in this area and have a lot to learn. It is our hope that we might be able to connect with and support other churches who already have substantial ministries for Mental Health or who, like us, are just starting out. This is an issue which the general culture is recognizing as a great need to be addressed, and we hope that the necessary steps toward destigmatization are found not only within the church, but, through God’s grace, throughout our communities here in Vancouver. We hope and pray that more churches would seek out education through groups like Sanctuary Ministries or SOMA so that pastors and congregations would be better able to care for, disciple, and grow in grace through the inclusion of those struggling with Mental Illness and Mental Health. We know as well that many of our own congregant members already struggle with or have someone close to them who is struggling with Mental Health and Mental Illness, and our hope at GVC is to be better equipped to listen, to encourage, and to support them.

We are so glad for those who could attend, and we are so thankful for those who came and participated in our discussion. Thank you for all of your feedback also. Please check our church website www.gracevancouver.com for other events we will be facilitating in the future addressing the topic of Mental Health and the Church.

Blessings,

The Pastors and Team at GVC.