

## **Pirates, Cowboys and Bridges**

Héctor Hernández, Connect Coordinator

October 2019

"They acted like Pirates and Cowboys," a sound like a stifled moan or sob escaped him.

Confused, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"When I was at my lowest, needing guidance in moments of crisis, like Pirates, they plundered the ship of my life — striking me down with judgment as they were minimizing my pain and sorrow," my friend responded to me, trying to wipe his tears.

Puzzled, I opted just to listen, as he continued sharing.

"Like Cowboys, they shot at me barrages of bullets when I only needed empathy and support."

I didn't have to ask for clarification, through his silent wailing, he forced himself to continue.

"Yes, rounds and rounds of Bible verses out of empathy and out of context were shot at me with deadly force. I became a source of gossip and mockery as pseudo-Bible verses like 'God never gives us more than we can handle,' and 'You don't have enough Faith' were shot at me. All I needed was a safe space, but I only got, shots of doctrine and condemnation."

To be honest, I don't remember how the conversation concluded. I hugged my friend and said how sorry I was for the way the Church had mistreated him when he was most vulnerable.

It is so painful when we are unable to find adequate support in our brokenness. It's confusing when we receive sympathy, quick-fix solutions, or even worse, destructive judgment from the people who are supposed to help us, walk with us, and assist us while trying our best to survive "the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4)."

Throughout my life in the Church, I too have been hurt by a few "pirates and cowboys." But I'd like to share a different story, a story that gives me hope for the future of the church.

More than a decade ago, during one of the worse times in my life, depression and hopelessness took control of me. I was broken and paralyzed at my lowest. My wife literally forced me to seek help from my Pastor. I was afraid and ashamed of what he and others would think and say about me; but I agreed to see him.

My pastor welcomed me in my vulnerable state. I didn't receive judgment but a sacred space to share my sorrows, and in addition to listening to my story, he did something else, something that I could have never imagined; he invited me to seek the assistance of a Mental Health professional.

Additionally, he guided me through the referral process by calling and helping me set up my first appointment with a therapist that worked in alliance with him and my church.

As my pastor, he was wise enough to understand his limitations and the true meaning of "doing no harm." He became the bridge when he connected me with the adequate help I needed. I would never have sought that type of help and support because at the time, mental health was a cultural taboo.

My church acted as a bridge as well. They offered me support as I went through therapy by praying for me, and, at times, covering the cost of my therapy sessions while I was unemployed.

After some time, my life was transformed. Christ, the Liberator brought liberation to me, and my household eventually allowing my wife and myself to imagine our lives beyond our losses and grief.

God healed us throughout the therapeutic process of clinical counseling, the support of my pastor and our church community. Faith, community, and mental health, working together for the integral wellbeing of the personhood.

As a pastor and trained psychotherapist, I have witnessed how life's traumatic events can shake up people's lives, marriages, and families to their very core. When they happen, they often bring confusion, fear, and hopelessness with them, regardless of our faith and the years we have been in the Church.

Throughout our lifetimes, we will all deal with these challenges that will unbalance our true self. Our mental health will be challenged one way or another, that is a fact.

Unfortunately, mental health is still a taboo in a significant number of our Hispanic churches. There is a lack of knowledge and a profound misconception about Christian Faith and Psychology.

Statistics tell us how a significant number of people from our Hispanic immigrant populations are struggling with mental illnesses. More so, many of our communities are continually facing oppressive systems that are vehemently working against them, impacting the mental wellbeing of our families, our children, and our churches. Additionally, many of our pastors choose to suffer in silence, dealing with depression, anxiety, and other challenges for fear of "Pirates and Cowboys."

Fear betrays us all!

Since January 2019, as part of my work as the Connect Coordinator of the National Benevolent Association (NBA), I have been visiting and sharing NBA's Mental Health and Wellness Initiative with some of our churches and their leaders. I have led workshops and congregation-wide conversations, about the correlation between our faith, our communities, and mental health.

It has been joyful to witness people speaking honestly about mental health in my workshops and conversations. We all are capable of moving beyond assumptions, fears, and stigmas and towards liberation. NBA's [Mental Health and Wellness Initiative](#) is working to make that possible across the life of the church.

Christ the Creator has moved in such a way that some of the congregations I've visited are exploring ways to create local ministries that will provide mental health services. Other churches are identifying ministries that can offer balance and wellbeing to the communities they are serving. Nancy Jimenez is one of many in the denomination working to end the stigmas surrounding mental health in the Hispanic community. Nancy, and partner Evangelina Perez have begun creating a mental health hub with a holistic approach that provides services for the Latino community in Grand Prairie, Texas.

We shall never forget that as people of faith, we are not immune to mental illness, and also, as people of faith, we are in the "business of liberation."

The Church must always be the place where we can find hope, wellbeing, and liberation. We are called to "Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)."

In the face of the crisis and traumatic moments, how do we react? As a church member, a church leader, or a pastor, how do we make sure we are providing adequate help in times of crisis? Is there a plan in place? Have you identified people who can help you in moments of need? Who are the mental health professionals of your community from which you could create alliances? Are you a bridge?

We should never forget that we can help others when we operate beyond our areas of expertise. Life challenges often require the church to work in solidarity and partnership with other institutions and professionals. The best place for pirates and cowboys is in the movies, not the church. We are called, as bridges, to connect broken people with hope, compassion, and care.

### ***Connect with Héctor***

If you want to know more about the NBA's Mental Health and Wellness Initiative, please [click here](#) and complete the form at the bottom of the page. Moreover, if you are a Mental Health professional and want to collaborate with me in the education process of our Hispanic Churches and the reduction of stigma, click on the link and complete the entire form. Please share with me your area of expertise and the type of work you do.

If you have questions, concerns or ideas and would like to connect with me, please don't hesitate to [reach out via phone or email](#).

*As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at [www.nbacares.org](http://www.nbacares.org).*