

Mental Health in the Church: Being a Prophetic Voice

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One of my most meaningful professional experiences was when I worked for more than 20 years with a young adult homeless population. A significant number of these young people faced severe mental health challenges in their lives. In my work with this population, trauma-informed care was practiced daily. Trauma-informed care is an evidence-based treatment plan that emphasizes emotional, psychological, and physical safety, while responding to the different types of trauma that one can face in their lives.

In working for many years with young adults who were experiencing trauma, I came to realize that the mental illnesses that they were suffering with were the direct results of the various traumas in their lives. With effective trauma-informed care, I learned that you focus not so much on one's behavior, but mainly on the reasons behind the behaviors. Though not condoning the behaviors, I came to understand that those dealing with trauma in their lives needed support and understanding, not anger and resentment, from those around them.

Also, for far too long, the subject of mental health still continues to be taboo in many African-American churches. Mental health has been the forbidden topic in several faith communities. It often has been the proverbial “elephant in the room,” that uncomfortable, and often times controversial, issue that, for many in the church, is better left alone. Discussions about mental health and mental illness are often avoided because it makes many in the African-American church community uncomfortable—because most of us simply do not understand it and are not very knowledgeable about it.

A significant amount of my preaching and teaching is focused on the issues of mental health. I see our response to mental illness in the church as an issue of justice for those who are coping with these challenges. Too often the church is a silent voice regarding mental illness, and it causes too many of our sisters and brothers to suffer in shame, while feeling neglected and abandoned. If I am to be a prophetic voice to God's people, then I must, through my preaching, counter the stigma of mental illness so that no one in the church is made to feel “less than” or ostracized because of their mental health struggles.

Mental illness is often disregarded in the church because it confronts the long-held biblical views of many who believe that mental illness takes place when one has yielded to sin. For a long time, many believed, and some still believe, that mental illness is a sign that the devil is winning the battle for control of your mind and soul; so the way you must approach mental illness is with a Bible and a prayer. There are still those who preach and believe that the only way to deal with mental illness is to pray God's healing over the individual.

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Though I strongly emphasize in my preaching and teaching that prayer is definitely an important element in the healing process of those with mental health challenges, and that our God is the divine Healer, there is also a need for supportive and compassionate professional care. My dream and vision is for the church to truly be a welcoming place for those caught in the throes of mental illness, so that they may experience real community with a family of believers who are non-judgmental, compassionate, and caring. This is the only way there can be true healing and recovery for those in the church with mental health challenges.

Questions to Consider:

- What stigmas or assumptions have you heard about mental health care professionals? Have you ever experienced something different from these stigmas, or do you know someone who has?
- What messages have you heard as to the root cause of mental health issues? How do these messages impact how we perceive and respond to people with mental health issues?
- Rev. Perry said, *“Too often the church is a silent voice regarding mental illness, and it causes too many of our sisters and brothers to suffer in shame, while feeling neglected and abandoned. If I am to be a prophetic voice to God’s people, then I must, through my preaching, counter the stigma of mental illness so that no one in the church is made to feel “less than” or ostracized because of their mental health struggles.”* What would it look like to be a prophetic voice to God’s people in your community regarding the issue of mental health?

Rev. Perry Wiggins III has been pastor of Alameda Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for 10 years. He shares, *“I have been married to my wonderful wife, Lillie, for 43 years. We have two sons. Our oldest son is married with two daughters. My passion is centered around issues of justice. I have worked with a young adult homeless population for more than 20 years. I served on two domestic violence boards for several years. I also love running and have run several half marathons.”*

Wiggins is a guest blogger for the NBA Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group, launching in early 2016. This is a shared effort with Disciples Home Missions (DHM) and in response to the passing of GA-1523 *“Becoming a People of Welcome and Support to People with Mental Illness and/or Mental Health Issues”* by the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more information, please email mkilpatrick@nbacares.org.