



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

MARGARET MEAD

INVISIBLE STRUGGLES: CHURCHES LEARNING TO HELP INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

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At one United Methodist Church in central Kentucky, members always turned up with cards, visits and gifts of food whenever a church family faced a crisis. But when someone in Angie O'Malley's family was diagnosed with a mental illness in the 1990s, that didn't happen.

"I realized then that mental illness is a no-casserole disease," Ms. O'Malley says. "Our congregation didn't know how to help, so they did nothing at all."

The scars of neglect can run deep, driving many people to leave the church entirely. The O'Malleys took a better approach: They moved to a more responsive congregation and began a faith-based support group.

Brain disorders afflict one fourth of the U.S. population at some time in their lives, according to a 2005 study by the Harvard Medical School. But too many faith communities fail to reach out.

"Medicine treats the symptoms, but relationships cure the soul — and that's what churches can provide," said the Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder, a United Methodist elder who has created a series of DVDs on the role of spirituality in recovery. "Faith communities rely on us for mental-health education," said Margaret Ann Holt, VICOMIM's coordinator of resources. The group sponsors workshops in the region, training local churches and synagogues on how to help — and not hurt — those in need.

It's not uncommon, Ms. Holt said, for believers to tell friends they wouldn't suffer from depression if their faith were stronger or they "prayed correctly."

"That really puts the fire in the belly for me," she said, "to be sure people understand these are biologically-based illnesses. To lay that extra burden of guilt on someone is just inexcusable."

Instead churches can help erase stigma by hosting support groups or making space available to licensed counselors. “In small towns a lot of people won’t go to clinics,” Ms. Holt said, “out of fear that someone will see their car parked outside. But it’s OK in front of a church.”

FACES (Family Advocacy Creating Education and Services), a nonprofit mental-health center, is located in an annex building at St. Mark’s UMC near Richmond, Va. Church member Pat Myers founded the center after her son, Justin, committed suicide at age 20.

“He was hospitalized five times with bipolar disorder,” Ms. Myers said. “As is typical for that illness, especially with young people, he resisted taking his medications.”

Shortly before Justin’s death, Ms. Myers had visited a NAMI support class, and planned to start group meetings at St. Mark’s. At the funeral, the pastor — who had tried to help Justin — came to her and said, “Whatever you need, we will provide.”

“I could never say enough about how they stepped up,” Ms. Myers said, “and the church tells me they’re so thankful to have **FACES** there, so they can refer anyone who needs help.” Besides support meetings and education events, the **FACES** staff hopes to add housing and employment services for people in recovery.

By Bill Fentum
Staff Writer
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