

You Are Not Alone



BY JEFF PFLUG

AS A PASTOR who advocates for those who live with mental illness, the Rev. Jeff Pflug encourages you to do one thing: Look for that member in your parish who may be off in the shadows.

As Lutherans, we take to heart the many vocations that God gives to us all. Each Christian has received his or her vocation as a baptized child of God, a forgiven sinner-saint who lives in the midst of fellow sinner-saints. I am glad to say that I am also a son, a husband, a father, a brother, a pastor, a former pharmacist, and in recent years, an advocate for those who live with mental illness.

None of my vocations were chosen vocations. For example, I didn't ask to be a son or brother. I simply am. I did desire to be a husband, a father, a pastor and a pharmacist— and—by God's good and unmerited grace, I am. However—and this is a very big *however*—there is no way that I would have ever desired to be an advocate for those who live with mental illness.

My goodness, mental illness was in my family, and in the 1960s, my dear Aunt Charlotte had to be hospitalized. She was psychotic and, yes, we called her crazy. She would go away for awhile and then return home, only to go away again several more times. Oh, how I admired and loved my Uncle Emory who stayed with her and remained faithful to her until they both fell asleep in the Lord Jesus. Fifty years later, I understand my Uncle Emory.

A catastrophic event(s)

It was 1983, just a week or two after Easter. Our 19-month-old daughter became seriously ill. For two weeks, the medical team could not tell us why one of her lungs was collapsed. My wife, who was 25 years old and had just given birth to our oldest son a few months earlier, cared for our daughter night and day. One of her vocations included being a registered nurse, and the hospital staff truly appreciated and admired how she stayed at our daughter's bedside, caring for her and watching over her like the mother hen she is.

Sadly, things did not appear to go well after a procedure to remove fluid from her chest. Her lung re-inflated, but unexplained seizures occurred and our daughter was transferred to ICU. I remember very well calling our pastor at 4:00 a.m. on a Sunday

morning asking him to please come to the hospital. The now sainted Pastor Philip Kaufmann did just that, praying with us and staying with us until his vocation as a called servant of the Word beckoned him to the Divine Service.

And God be praised, our daughter would eventually have a successful surgery and a month later all would be well with her. But it was during that stay in the ICU that something catastrophic happened to my wife. She lost touch with reality and began to live in a world of delusions, paranoia, unfounded fears, confusion, sadness and isolation. These are a few of the so-called positive symptoms of mental illness, and they are anything but positive. They are one side of a double-edged sword, and they are unwelcome additions that cut deeply into your loved one's mind, spirit and body. They cause so much devastation, so much pain.

Now as I struggle to limit my saga and avoid melodrama, I must add that eighteen years later, mental illness would strike our oldest son, only much more severely. Many of his symptoms have not been relieved through medication and therapy. Through organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), I learned that the onset of biological diseases such as schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder often affect young males between the ages of 18–25 and women in their early to mid–20s. Learning that your loved ones' mental illnesses are statistically the norm does not ease, in the words of Luther, a family's *tentatio* and *anfechtung* (words that Luther often used to describe afflictions and a warlike attack on the human soul and body).

The tragedy of these illnesses is their cruelty. Mental illnesses take from us the very things that distinguish us as human beings. The double-edged sword strikes again as it slashes away the ability to focus, concentrate and have insight about what is happening around oneself; the ability to cope with minor problems, express joy and have emotional resiliency. These are some of the so-called negative symptoms that take from a person the gifts and wonders of our humanity. Especially cruel is when the illness strikes early in life, before one has opportunity to have a career or family. Finding and then maintaining a job, enjoying life with an expanded circle of friends, or pursuing the hope and dream of loving someone and raising a family feels impossible for many.

Family members also suffer. I felt overwhelmed, helpless, angry, grieving. Something catastrophic had happened, and I did not know how to deal with it. I protected myself through denial. I thought there was a perfectly logical explanation, and with good diet and proper rest these things would pass. I normalized what was going on, hoping against hope. In days gone by, I was

Overcoming Challenges

Stigma has always been a serious issue for individuals and their families who have mental disorders. Stereotyping, embarrassment, isolation, avoidance and even fear are very common. Religious beliefs about serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, clinical depression, bipolar disorder and anxiety disorders are also extremely diverse and complex. No wonder we steer clear of these topics in casual conversation!

Numerous studies agree that clergy and the church are the most common source of help for people in psychological distress. In times of mental and emotional crisis, the response of clergy and laity to people in distress is crucial. It can be supportive and helpful or hurtful, even disastrous.

Listed below are a few resources that can provide education on the severity of mental illnesses and, most important, offer the mercy and strength of the Gospel to families who often find themselves in desperate need.

- › **LCMS:** Go to lcms.org to download “Our Theology of the Cross” by the Rev. Herb Mueller, and “You Are Not Alone,” a video produced by the former LCMS World Relief and Human Care.
- › **The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** offers information, referral and education to assist people with mental illnesses, their families, friends, mental health professionals and the general public. NAMI

educates all people about severe and persistent mental illnesses to eliminate stigma and promote access to integrated systems of care, education and rehabilitation. Visit nami.org.

- › ***I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression:*** This 100-page book offers a rare glimpse into one LCMS pastor’s personal journey through depression while remaining reliant upon God’s grace. To download, go to lcms.org.
- › **LCMS Michigan District Mental Health Resources:** Download a manual on mental illness and other resources at michigandistrict.org/congregations/christian-care/mentalillness.

embarrassed and became very protective. As a husband, father, seminary student, and pastor, I isolated the illness in our family for more than a decade, concealing things from my colleagues, my congregation, community and even my younger children. I became a master of facade.

The *tentatio* and *anfechtung* of mental illnesses cause one to cry out with that one word question: “Why?” The seeming silence of God’s answer to our “why” easily leads to isolation, embarrassment, guilt, anger and hurt. We are made numb, and we feel very alone.

You are not alone

The apostle John tells of how God in Christ pitched His tent among us (that is, He has dwelt bodily with us as we read in John 1:14) so that you and I might never be alone in our fallen humanity. Christ bivouacs with His creatures, and this is the great message of the Gospel, a message of forgiveness and mercy, of fellowship and restoration for the body, soul and spirit.

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the first Messianic words are spoken by Jesus. He unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and the Lord of all compassion proclaims to His hometown that the Spirit of the Lord “has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to the captives and the recovering of sight to those who are blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). Though the Lord was forced to “pass through” His unbelieving hometown folks, He then embarked on a ministry of mercy and restoration where those with leprosy were cleansed, a man who was paralyzed leaped to his feet, several who were blind received their sight, and many who were troubled in their minds and spirits were restored to wholeness, wellness and soundness of mind. All who were visited by Christ

would hear that their sins were forgiven by Him who shows mercy and restores body, soul and spirit. The Lord gave them a foretaste of what heaven is.

This vocation of Christ He now gives to His Church. His baptized hold fast to Him and His Word, and He sends them to visit His creatures made after His image and likeness. He calls His Church to visit and befriend those who are oppressed, those who feel isolated and alone as they live with mental illness and other disabilities. They may appear fearful and embarrassed, even ashamed. In reality, their needs are not unlike yours; they need hope and compassion, encouragement and a friend.

What better place to provide such basic human need than within Christ’s Church, which is His Body. He provides all that we need for this body and life, giving us parents, siblings, friends, pastors, physicians, psychiatrists and counselors, and even wonderful organizations like NAMI.

And so, not by choice but by God’s grace, as an advocate of those who live with mental illness, I want to encourage my Synod and my fellow saints: Please look for that member in your parish who may be off in the shadows. Perhaps you can visit and become his friend. He or she is really not that hard to find. She may be a neighbor in your community. He may be at work or school, and often you’ll find him on the street. In the Spirit of Christ, I beg you, pray for them. And as opportunities arise visit them as a servant of Christ, and assure them by saying, “You are not alone!”

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:23–24).