



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

A Leader's Guide for Congregational Study ELCA Message on Mental Illness

Note to leaders: This leader's guide will assist you in conducting a study of the ELCA's social message on mental illness. It is recommended that you allow at least an hour for the session. You will need an easel and paper, or a dry erase board, or chalk board. Instructions for the leader are printed in *grey italics*. Directions or questions for the group are in regular print.

Before you lead a session, plan to read the social message. The message is available as a downloadable resource at www.ELCA.org. Print out or order copies of the message for every person in your group to take home.

Mental illness is a topic that requires particularly sensitive leadership. Even though incidences of mental illness are high, many people are unaware that someone they know, work or worship with has suffered from mental illness. Privacy is important: someone may be struggling with whether or not to reveal mental illness, particularly in a small community. It is essential that participants not feel coerced or persuaded to reveal more than they feel comfortable with, as well as invited to contribute appropriately.

Consider having a speaker come from an organization such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org) or Pathways to Promise (pathways2promise.org). The National Alliance on Mental Illness, is a nationwide mental health organization committed to raising awareness and advocating for access to treatment and research. Pathways to Promise is an interfaith cooperative in which the ELCA takes part that offers resources and training. A speaker from one of these organizations can open the meeting and offer some guidance. There also may be a mental health professional from your congregation who would be willing to speak. If there is at least one person present who has talked openly about a diagnosis of mental illness, everyone will be more at ease around the topic.

Remind the group, both at the session's beginning and end, that unless the person speaking gives express permission to share the conversation publicly, what happened inside the group should be considered confidential. Remind participants that they are free to leave at any time. Remind them also that respectful and appropriate behavior is required to participate. Consider establishing a few guidelines for the group such as one person speaking at a time and allowing the leader to guide or limit the discussion.

Pathways to Promise
www.Pathways2Promise.org

"Pathways was founded by fourteen faith groups and mental health organizations to facilitate the faith community's work in reaching out to those with mental illnesses and their families. Pathways is a technical assistance and resource center for those interested in this area of ministry." The ELCA supports Pathways to Promise.

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org

"NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness." The National Alliance on Mental Illness has a website with many resources, including advocacy and training. They also run a religiously oriented network called FaithNet. Learn more at www.faithnet.nami.org.



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I. Entering in

Begin by writing the following definition where everyone can see it.

“A mental illness can be defined as a health condition that changes a person’s thinking, feelings or behavior (or all three) and that causes the person distress and difficulty in functioning.”

Choose a scribe (it can be you), and underneath the definition, ask the group to list some mental illnesses of which they are aware. List these mental illnesses across whatever you are writing on, to create columns. You may want to include items such as drug abuse, addiction and anxiety. Underneath each mental illness, list the answers to this question: What features (symptoms) of this mental illness cause distress and difficulty in functioning?

Everyday life is a challenge.

Name some ways in which you think these features could make everyday life difficult.

(Everyday life includes tasks such as having a job, paying bills and medical expenses, taking care of physical needs, keeping to a treatment and prescription regimen, spending time with family and friends.)

Why should we have this conversation?

Read lines 23-25 from the Message: “In their lifetimes, one-half of Americans will have a serious mental health condition, but fewer than half of them will receive treatment.”

II. Bible study

Read Mark 5:1-20 and ask your group to think about the following questions:

The Gerasene man “lived among the tombs.” Why was he living apart from his village?

Why do you think the people ask Jesus to leave?

Why does the man formerly possessed by demons want to go with Jesus?

What does Jesus tell him to do instead?

How do you think the people the man had lived with reacted when he returned as a healed person?

What might this healing story teach us about how important community is to someone who is experiencing illness?

Leader: Pages 5-8 of the study guide at this URL: (www.mentalhealthministries.net) has a helpful list of common disorders and symptoms.

Mark 5:18-20

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.



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Personal reflection

The Bible story is a transition into discussing how a supportive community (as opposed to the exile that the Gerasene man experienced) can make a difference in the experience of illness.

Read aloud the following paraphrase of the message: One of the most difficult aspects of mental illness for people suffering from mental illness is the sense of isolation mental illness can impose. They may feel isolated from family and friends and cut off from social networks, and it can be difficult to maintain any faith life. (See lines 345-353 in the message.)

Ask participants to reflect — briefly, and if they feel comfortable — on a time in their lives when they were vulnerable or felt lonely (for example, after a family member died, with diagnosis of an illness, or with depression).

How were your relationships with others affected?

How would you describe your faith life at that time?

Was there a community of people who gave you comfort, or who could have given you comfort? What would you have wanted from that community?

The next question is intended to help the group connect their vocation as a Christian community to their experiences of loneliness and comfort of community.

Galatians 6:2 urges us to bear the burdens of one another. What are some ways we could bear the burdens of each other in the Christian community when it comes to mental illness? Are there some boundaries to this? If so, what are they? Pastors are urged by the message to refer people with mental illness to the appropriate professional. How does referral relate to the bearing of burdens?

III. What the church can do

The last part of the study is intended to help the group focus on its own setting relative to the message, and to begin to see possibilities for action.

The message gives four areas where the church can act on mental illness:

A. Being the body of Christ

Read lines 450-455 of the message. In what ways is vulnerability present and in what ways is vulnerability hidden where you worship?

Optional Question: Are there other images you have in mind from the Bible and the church regarding mental illness?

Leader: think of King David's mourning for Absalom in 2 Samuel 19, Jesus in Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14 and Matthew 26, and the anguish of Psalms.

Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

"As Christ was not afraid to be vulnerable, or to show his wounds, the church when living faithfully as the body of Christ is not afraid to be vulnerable and wounded. When people with mental illness are present as full members, as their true selves, the church as the body of Christ is both wounded and authentic. Their willingness to be present as vulnerable is a gift and is itself a form of service, and a reminder to the church that true freedom is found in service." (ELCA Message, lines 450-455)



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How would someone in your congregation feel about talking openly regarding a diagnosis of mental illness? For example, how might the reception of this news be different than if someone were to reveal a diagnosis of cancer?

What might members of your congregation think would be most useful to someone experiencing mental illness? What might be most helpful to their family?

If anyone in your congregation has died by suicide, how was it handled?

B. The church's healthcare

How does your congregation care for the health of its members? In what ways could your congregation give attention to the mental health of its members? (Resources are on the side of this page.)

C. Preparation for clergy and other rostered leaders

What do you know of your pastor's and other leaders' preparation for counseling people suffering from mental illness? How could your congregation support your leaders in this? How could your congregation support your rostered leaders in caring for their own mental health?

D. Public voice

What issue regarding mental illness do you think your congregation would find most pressing? (i.e., lack of access to care, veterans, the criminal justice system) How could you find out? Who could help you address this?

IV. Conclusion

Countering dis-grace and isolation

The message concludes with the following statement: "By answering its call to enter into the companionship of suffering, the church eases the isolation and alienation experienced by those who suffer from the effects of mental illness. Answering this call is at the heart of the church's response to mental illness" (lines 557-560).

How has your group's discussion of bearing the burdens of one another helped you to think about this section of the message?

Pathways to Promise

offers a training for clergy called "Pathways to Understanding" that can be ordered through the website. The site also has a section on pastoral crisis intervention

(www.pathways2promise.org/crisis/index.htm).

National Alliance on Mental Illness

has a page regarding different aspects of public policy on its website

(www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=About_Public_Policy)

Pathways to Promise

has resources such as a page on the impact of mental illness on families

(www.pathways2promise.org/family/impact.htm#stigma), as well as

a National Training Initiative. You can

download

presentations from the Pathways website.



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V. Action:

What are some ways your congregation could improve its sensitivity to the needs of people with mental illness and their families?

Next steps:

Ask if your group is willing to meet again. Consider the following further items for discussion/action:

- 1) Read the **commitments** from the message and distribute them to your congregation.
- 2) Set a time as a congregation to look at those commitments and evaluate them.
- 3) Sponsor an educational session about the state of the mental health care system.
- 4) Look into some of the resources listed on the side of this page.
- 5) Explore ways for your congregation to promote advocacy for mental health issues.

Mental Health Ministries has produced a video called "Creating Caring Congregations" (www.mentalhealthministries.net).

The ELCA has published a social message on suicide prevention that could be useful. It is available by searching www.ELCA.org.