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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

MAY/JUNE 2024

Bible study:

After certainty

Devotional:

**Compassionate
companions**



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All are welcome.

BY ELIZABETH HUNTER

THE ISOLATION AND LONELINESS CREATED by the pandemic came at a time when depression was already growing among children.

When in-person classes resumed for my child in the fall of 2021, mental health care providers continued to be in demand. Waiting lists were long for those appointments. Sadly, that year, a student at my child's school, another parent's beloved child, lost their life to suicide. The school staff, which previously hadn't included a full-time, in-house social worker, scrambled to cope. Trauma counselors met with students. Speakers visited a schoolwide assembly. Parents and staff discussed what it would take to get a social worker in place.

Mental health is an important issue in our world today. Between 2016 and 2020, diagnoses of anxiety rose by 29 percent in children aged 3 to 17, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Over that same period, children were also 27 percent more likely to be diagnosed with depression.

How will the church's ministry reflect our care for 1 in 5 children and adults (according to the National Institute of Mental Health) who are affected by mental illness? Instead of walking by people with mental illness, we can choose to walk with them. Ministry is about healing.

We might think that healing is about fixing a mental health diagnosis. Healing often involves therapy and medicine. Yet healing can also be about accompanying people who live their entire lives with mental illness. Healing can mean therapy, medicine and loving someone who might be hard to understand sometimes.

Jesus walks with people. Jesus eats with people, including people who are not well and people who are

not welcomed by other people. Jesus' unconditional welcome for people was one of the main reasons he got in trouble with the faith leaders of his day.

Elise Seyfried, our May devotional author, encourages congregations to walk with people who are living with mental illness (p. 20). In her a one-session study, she writes about how she once worried that her congregation would learn of her bipolar diagnosis. Would she lose friends, her job, even her church? Not at all. In fact, her congregation responded with love and support. So can we when welcoming people with mental illness and their loved ones in our midst.

This June, Bible study author and ELCA pastor Meghan Johnston Aelabouni begins a three-part "After certainty" summer Bible study. She notes that Jesus named as "blessed" people we probably wouldn't expect—people who "are identified by circumstances of hardship rather than happiness."

"It's one thing to hear [Jesus say] that the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers are blessed," she writes. "But what about the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted and reviled?" In today's culture, Johnston Aelabouni says, "we're probably more likely to associate blessing with *#livingmybestlife* than with *#poorinspirit*."

Maybe that will change as churches reach out with love and support to welcome people living with mental illness and their families. This issue can help congregations and groups create welcoming spaces to do just that.

Because we are all invited to the Lord's table. All are welcome. 🌿



gather

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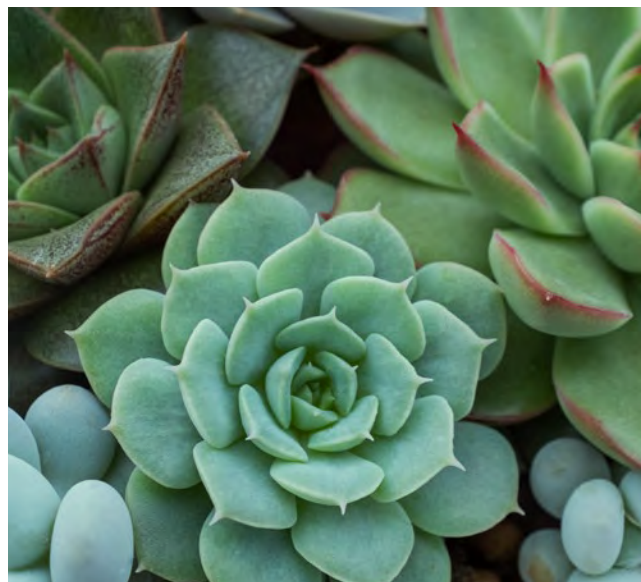
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God's love in Jesus Christ
accompanies us beyond certainty,
through every unknown.

Devotional

- 20 **Compassionate companions**
Congregations can play a role
in mental health ministry.
BY ELISE SEYFRIED

- 26 LEADER GUIDE

Bible study

- 36 **After certainty: A biblical guide**
SESSION ONE: CURIOSITY
Holy curiosity can lead us, like our Biblical
ancestors, to where God's love in Jesus
transforms "what is" to "what could be."
BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

- 42 LEADER GUIDE



departments

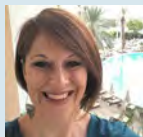
- 1 **Welcome**
All are welcome.
BY ELIZABETH HUNTER
- 5 **Give us this day**
When the light goes out
BY SUSAN SPARKS
- 10 **Family matters**
When we know better,
we do better.
BY LISA A. SMITH
- 47 **Grace notes**
Building walls or
windmills?
BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFISKY
- 48 **Amen**
Nothing can separate us.
BY JULIA SEYMOUR



features

- | | |
|---|--|
| 6 Levántate. Pausa. Fluye. Vive.
I was grieving a miscarriage.
BY KRISTINA DIAZ | 27 Who dies by suicide?
Statistics don't tell
the whole story.
BY ELISE SEYFRIED |
| 9 Take the first step.
Help create a safer world
for our kids.
BY CINDY NOVAK | 28 Patterns of war
Tracing the ways women and
children are most affected
BY LAURA GIFFORD |
| 12 From grief to celebration
Nothing is ever lost
with God.
BY JUDITH ROBERTS | 32 Bearing one another's burdens
Mental health ministries benefit churches, individuals.
BY KARRIS GOLDEN |
| 16 A holy, loving "no"
Boundaries are a way to stay
in relationship.
BY EMMY KEGLER | 44 In a mirror, dimly
My struggles actually brought
me closer to everyone else.
BY MARY BUTTON |

— Contributors —



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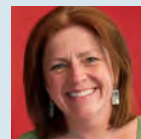
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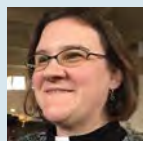
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When the light goes out

BY SUSAN SPARKS

GOING SNOWMOBILING 750 MILES ABOVE the Arctic Circle—where the temperature is 20 degrees below zero—isn't everybody's idea of fun, but it was ours. My husband Toby and I, our guide, and a few other bold adventurers climbed onto snowmobiles in Kjøllefjord, Norway, and drove into the frozen wilderness. Eventually, the guide had us cut our engines and park at the top of a mountain pass.

Although it was only 4:00 PM, the darkness was so absolute and unforgiving that we couldn't even see our own snowmobiles. It was frightening. After a moment, the guide said, "Welcome to the darkness that we live with 24 hours a day for two solid months in the winter."

I thought about how disorienting, lonely and profoundly sad it could feel to live in a place where there is no guarantee of the sun rising. Then I thought about the 280 million people worldwide who live in the darkness of depression, not knowing if dawn will come.

Let's be clear: Depression is not a fault, a weakness or a sin. I once heard a preacher say, "Feeling depressed doesn't mean you lack faith, any more than being happy means you have it." Depression strikes us indiscriminately. Job, Jonah, Moses, King David and the Apostle Paul experienced bouts of depression and hopelessness. The Psalmist wrote about it too, saying: "The Lord drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog" (Psalm 40: 1-2). You don't write words like that unless you've been there.

The good news is that, despite how isolated

we might feel when we're in that darkness, we are not alone. During the trip, our guide pointed out the lights of a tiny town on the fjord below. He said that years ago, people kept a candle burning in the window during dark winter months to show their neighbors that all was well. If someone fell ill, ran short of food or needed help in any way, they would blow out the candle, signaling that the farm was in crisis and needed aid. For this simple but powerful system to work, two things had to happen: People in crisis had to be willing to ask for help, and neighbors had to keep watch for each other's lights.

Asking for help is an act of power, not weakness. Giving help is our holy duty. We are all God's children, so if one of our neighbors reaches out for help, we must reach back. Maybe that means offering a listening ear or enabling a person to get professional help.

How many people whose light has gone out do we pass every day and not even notice? How many of us are trying desperately to keep a light on when we're in crisis?

Sometimes it may seem as if you are living in

an arctic darkness that will never lift, but dawn will come. You are not alone. Help is available. Jeremiah 58:8-10 promises: "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly...you shall cry for help, and the Lord will say, 'Here I am.'" 🌸

LISTEN 🎧

Hear a sermon on this topic at <https://tinyurl.com/watch-for-lights>.



**Rise.
Pause.
Flow.
Live.**

I was grieving
a miscarriage.

BY KRISTINA DIAZ

ONE SECOND, YOU'RE FLOATING down the river of life, soaking it all up like a bean in water. Then grief forces you to sit up, even stand. As you lift your body, made heavier by water and gravity, you realize you are barely moving. The river continues to flow without you. You have no way to find your way back to the place you thought was yours.

Life can become a collection of intersecting moments. We rise, pause, flow and hold fast, keeping our heads up when the rapids hit. My 41st birthday was one of those times. Instead of celebrating, we rushed to the hospital, where I had a miscarriage.

I didn't know I could grieve so deeply for someone I never even got the chance to meet. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to disappear into a corner and never resurface. I couldn't bear for anyone to witness my pain. It felt too great.

Wanting to help, my husband took us on a day trip to the mountains, hoping we could dip our feet into a river. On the way there, we stopped by a small flower shop, where the owners kindly made us a small white bouquet. Unable to access the river, we

stood on a bridge. Looking down at the water, I held the flowers tightly.

Suddenly I remembered a wonderfully warm day years ago. My high school senior year classmates and I drove to the beach, finding it mostly empty. The sand glowed golden under the early morning sun. The 12 of us had what felt like the perfect day for ourselves. We girls lined up our towels to sun ourselves. The guys quickly jumped into the water. I sat on a towel for all of five minutes before I was ready to join them.

The sand tickled my feet. A few steps in, the ground suddenly dipped. The water rose from my ankles to my hips. I paused, adjusting to the sensation of existing between the cold ocean and the warm air. The beach was near an estuary, the intersection where a river meets the sea. It's a place where saltwater and freshwater mix and life flourishes; a place where life can begin anew.

I beckoned, signaling for my friends to join me. Instead, they began yelling "*Hola*" ("Hello" in Spanish). I waved and returned their *holas*, confused. Why were they saying hi when I wanted

them to swim with me? It turns out they were trying to warn me. *Hola* and *Ola* (meaning "wave") are homonyms. Before I could make the connection, the water dropped to my knees. I was sucked into a dip in the sand and swept under the wave.

I was spinning. Holding my breath, I swam desperately, looking for a way out. I couldn't tell which way was up. I fought to gain control of what was happening, but I was too tired and couldn't hold my breath much longer. "I'm going to die," I thought. In my head, I prayed: "Lord, to you, I commend my spirit." As soon as I stopped fighting the wave, entrusting my life to God; the wave spit me out. I would live.

I remembered that first breath as we dropped flowers into the river to say our goodbyes. I realized I didn't need to hide from my grief or fight against the pain of loss. Letting myself be carried by the waves of these emotions would not end me. So, I let myself cry, allowing my family's love and God's love to spit me back out, unapologetically, into the world. 🌸

Levántate. Pausa. Fluye. Vive.

Estaba de duelo por la pérdida de un embarazo.

BY KRISTINA DIAZ

EN UN MOMENTO DADO, estás flotando por el río de la vida, absorbiendo todo como una habichuela en remojo. Cuando de repente la vida es interrumpida, te ves obligada a sentarte, a veces incluso a ponerte de pie. Cuando te levantas el cuerpo se te hace más pesado por el agua y la gravedad. Aunque hayas dejado de moverte, el río continúa sin ti. No hay forma de regresar a tu punto original.

Sin darnos cuenta, la vida se convierte en una colección de momentos de intersección. Nos levantamos, hacemos una pausa, fluimos y hacemos todo lo posible para mantenernos a flote al enfrentarnos a los rápidos. Mi cumpleaños número 41 fue uno de esos momentos. En vez de celebrar corrimos al hospital, donde a mis tres meses de embarazo mi cuerpo me traicionó con un aborto espontáneo.

No sabía que se podría extrañar tanto y llorar tan profundamente por alguien que nunca tuve la oportunidad de conocer. No podía respirar. Quería esconderme en una esquina oscura y desaparecer. No soportaba que nadie fuera testigo de mi dolor; era demasiado grande.

Queriendo ayudarme, mi marido organizó una excursión hacia las montañas en busca de

un río donde pudiéramos mojar los pies. De camino paramos en una pequeña floristería donde los dueños tuvieron la amabilidad de hacernos un pequeño ramo de flores blancas. Lamentablemente no encontramos un río con acceso para meternos, así que nos quedamos mirando el agua desde lo alto de un puente.

Con las flores en mano, de repente recordé un momento cuando estaba en la escuela superior. Era un día hermoso, con un calorcito que daba sueño y arena que parecía brillar dorada bajo el sol de la mañana. Lo mejor de todo, la playa estaba casi vacía, así que yo y mis 12 compañeros de clase tuvimos un día perfecto. Los primeros en meterse al agua fueron los chicos mientras las chicas acomodan sus toallas para tomar el sol. Me senté con ellas apenas cinco minutos cuando ya estaba lista para meterme.

Al dar apenas tres pasos noté que la arena se hundía y el agua que me llegaba a los tobillos subió de repente hasta mis caderas. Me detuve, adaptándome a la sensación de estar entre el frío del mar y la brisa caribeña. Esta playa estaba cerca de un estuario, osea una intersección donde el agua salada del mar y el agua dulce de un río se mezclan y la vida florece; un lugar donde la

vida empieza de nuevo.

Desde el agua le hice señas a mis amigas para que me acompañaran. Sin embargo, empezaron a gritar “¡Hola!” Les devolví el saludo confundida. ¿Por qué decían hola cuando yo quería que nadaran?

Hola, se parece mucho a “Ola.” Intentaban avisarme, pero no lo entendí a tiempo. El agua bajó hasta mis rodillas y me arrastró mar adentro. Daba vueltas bajo el agua. Aguanté la respiración nadando desesperadamente, pero en mi desorientación no encontraba la superficie. Luché por levantarme y controlar lo que estaba ocurriendo, pero me estaba quedando sin aire. Dentro de mi corazón, pensé, “Voy a morir.” Oré, “Señor, a ti encomiendo mi espíritu.” Dejé de luchar, confiando mi vida a Dios. Mi cuerpo se relajó y en ese momento la ola me escupió. Viviría.

Pensé, en ese primer buche de aire, mientras arrojaba flores al río. No podía seguir luchando contra el dolor de mi pérdida. Mi dolor no era algo a lo que debo resistirme o de lo que tengo que esconderme. Dejarme llevar por las olas de estas emociones no acabará conmigo. Tengo permiso para llorar, permitiendo que el amor de mi familia y el amor de Dios me lancen de nuevo, sin reparos, al mundo. 🌿



Take the first step

Help create a safer world for kids.

BY CINDY NOVAK

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE NUMBER of children and teens killed by gunfire in the United States increased 50 percent between 2019 and 2021, and that gun violence became the leading cause of death for U.S. children and teens in 2020?

The statistics are devastating. At times, imagining a world free of gun violence can seem futile. We may feel powerless to make a difference.

But by getting involved in gun-safety activities in our congregations and communities, we may begin to envision a world that is safer for our children. Let's take the first step together. Consider these ideas:

SHARE RESOURCES

Women of the ELCA sets aside the first Sunday in May as Rachel's Day—a day to remember the loss of children to gun violence and to renounce the forces of violence and fear. Share Rachel's Day resources and learn how to work within your community and congregation to combat gun violence (www.gathermagazine.org/Rachel'sDay).

The ELCA offers "A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a

Culture of Gun Violence." This resource includes prayers, tips on how to discuss gun violence prevention, links to resources and more (www.elca.org/60days).

LEARN ABOUT GUN SAFETY.

About one-third of American children live in homes with firearms, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. To decrease the risk of gun injury and death, experts recommend gun owners lock up guns and

store them separately from bullets. Also, parents or guardians should ask if there is an unlocked gun where their child plays. If the answer is yes, ask if it can be secured.

ADVOCATE

Email or visit your members of Congress to advocate for gun safety and sensible gun laws. ELCA Advocacy offers tips and ideas to help get you started (www.elca.org/advocacy). 🌱

When we know better, we do better

BY LISA A. SMITH

A WHILE BACK, ONE OF MY CHILDREN WAS STRUGGLING with some behaviors that I thought might indicate a mental health issue. It created a challenging situation at home; it upset our daily life. I didn't know where to turn.

First, I talked to his elementary school teacher. She said he was doing great in school and had no issues. Then I tried our school principal, to see what resources were available. She reminded me that our school had no guidance counselor due to district staffing and funding issues. Things had to be approaching self-harm to get the district psychologist involved. It wasn't *that* bad at home, but we still had challenges. I tried our pediatrician, who recommended a counselor who wasn't helpful. Finally, after a 12-month wait, we were able to meet with a play therapist who helped us craft parenting and home life strategies to support our son. When you know better, you do better. Now we're all doing better.

The one person I didn't think to contact was our pastor. Why? Partly because I suspected the play therapist would be the right fit (she was), but also because I was embarrassed. I felt my child should be better behaved. I felt it might be my fault. Maybe I wasn't a good enough parent. I hesitated to reach out to our church family about a mental health issue. I know it would have been different if my child had broken an arm. But why?

Children's mental health has received greater attention in national news lately. Some call it a crisis. According to the 2023 Mental Health America

Report, more than 16 percent of youth aged 12 to 17 report suffering from at least one major depressive episode in the past year. Of those youth with depression, about 60 percent do not receive mental health treatment. Although these problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not new. A 2022 report from U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy reveals that, even in the years before the pandemic, as many as 1 in 5 American children aged 3 to 17 experienced a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral health disorder. Those numbers may be even higher among historically marginalized populations and LGBTQ+ youth.

Why would I feel so bad about having such a common concern? Even though stigma remains, talking about mental health challenges is becoming more common. My kids talk openly about friends who have autism or ADHD. An adult family friend has ADHD and anxiety; my children know that she takes medication to manage it all. Normalizing these diagnoses has created more acceptance.

How do we talk about mental health with children? I was feeling anxious just before we took my son to see the counselor for the first time. Based on helpful advice from our pediatrician and parenting websites, I told my son that we see helpers and doctors for all kinds of things. Everyone needs help sometimes, I said. This "feelings doctor" was going to help us talk about some big feelings. I shared with my son that several times in my adult life, going to see a feelings doctor (counselor) has helped me.

As caregivers, we can name the range of feelings that we experience and encourage children to name those feelings too. We can also invite children to bring their feelings to God in prayer. God welcomes all feelings and loves us no matter how we feel.

We can open the Bible to the Psalms—a great resource for those struggling with mental health, alongside medical and therapeutic care as needed. These 150 songs encompass feelings from ecstatic joy and praise to a fiery rage that calls for the destruction of one’s enemies. Psalms voice words of comfort and assurance, as well as deep lament. The range of human emotions is welcome. None of this is too much for God, who has heard it all before and responds with love and welcome.

Churches can support youth mental health by destigmatizing challenges. Preachers can mention mental health in sermons. Congregations can promote local mental health fairs and community resources. Leaders can offer general prayers (keeping people’s names and medical information private) for people who live with mental health challenges. One pastor I know is open about her own struggles with anxiety and depression, sharing this appropriately on social media. All these efforts lift the veil of secrecy and shame. People begin to understand that they are not wrong to feel this way, and that help is available.

You can find great resources for mental health on the US Surgeon General’s priority page on youth mental health (<https://bit.ly/SG-mental-health-youth>), and on the website of the National Alliance for Mental Illness (www.nami.org). These can be made available in the home and in the congregation.

One interesting thing about living through a mental health challenge with my child has been connecting with other parents who’ve been there. At first, I felt as though it was just me. What a sigh of

relief, to be able to say to friends with adult children, college friends or clergy friends, “My kid also struggles with this,” and feel seen.

I’ve thought a lot about ways to better support my family’s mental health. Recently, I listened to a podcast on “mom rage.” The presenter said “mom rage” is often triggered by unmet needs. Caregivers, especially women, who are socialized to serve others, tend to put their needs on the back burner. That’s not good for mental health. When adults attend to their own mental health needs (self-care, good boundaries, time for rest, support when needed), they can better support the mental health of children in their care.

We can encourage children’s mental health through active listening, validating their feelings and working together to develop ways to cope with challenges. We can also establish daily routines, plan shared activities and spend time in nature.

Our children’s emotional and mental wellness matters just as much as their physical health. When we know better, we do better. 🌸



A blurred living room scene. In the foreground, the front of a dark-colored vacuum cleaner is visible on the left. The floor is made of dark wood planks. In the background, a television is on, showing a bright image. A bookshelf is on the left, and a lamp is in the center. The overall lighting is warm and soft.

From grief to celebration

Nothing is ever lost with God.

BY JUDITH ROBERTS

I FIRST LEARNED ABOUT THE FIVE stages of grief in a college psychology class. While I barely remember other parts of that course, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' framework for death and dying remains glued to my brain. Developed by Kübler-Ross to unpack human suffering related to loss, the framework has five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I was a young adult at that time. I knew my story would someday include burying a loved one, losing a job, having my heart broken in a relationship, and saying goodbye to a beloved pet. But no one can truly prepare emotionally for what is inevitable. And no one can judge how we move through or pause between grief's phases.

This is my story of journeying through loss.

COMMUNAL AND INDIVIDUAL GRIEF

I barely recall October 7, 2023. It was my day for running errands, doing laundry, cleaning the house and planning Sunday dinner. It was also the day that Hamas carried out an attack against unsuspecting Israeli young adults at an outdoor music festival. The breaking news flashed across my TV with images of young people in fear and distress. Then my phone rang from a familiar number—that of the care facility treating my father. Staff at the facility served as a communication

lifeline between me in Chicago and my father in Connecticut.

I eagerly answered the call. And everything else faded into the background.

Loss has no boundaries. At times communal, at times individual, grief and loss are always with us. That day, international grief coincided with my own personal grief.

My dad had been diagnosed with a terminal illness after surviving COVID-19 during the height of the pandemic and overcoming pneumonia. He had been receiving comfort care (palliative care) for patients who have stopped medical treatment and are nearing the end of life.

When staff at the facility called me, they would always speak positively of my dad, joking about his good appetite or reporting that he was in good spirits despite his diagnosis. I knew he was in comfort care, yet I was expecting to see him in just a few weeks during my next visit home. It didn't matter if Dad mistook me for my mom's sister (my mother doesn't have a sister) or couldn't recall my name. I would see him and have another opportunity to brush his hair, apply lotion to his hands, fluff his pillows and listen to jumbled stories that were part fact, part fiction. Sometimes his memory would be crystal clear. At other times, his speech would be confused, his

voice a faint whisper.

In the past, my dad had always been physically active. Born in the rural south, at age 5 he picked cotton on his grandparents' farm in Alabama. Drafted into the U.S. Army, he served during the Vietnam War. After his military career ended, he became a carpenter and a firefighter in Hartford, Connecticut. Good with his hands, Dad was a jack of all trades: a fix-it guy who could tinker with almost anything.

When my father became disabled, this posed a significant setback for my family. He went from being the sole financial provider to relying on certified nursing assistants for help with his meals, baths and daily dressing. Yet I never heard my father complain about his paralysis. He accepted his condition and the life that followed.

For years, my parents' home was a revolving door for CNAs. These helpers, many of whom came from Jamaica and Ghana, became a part of our extended family. They shared delicious dishes from their cultures with my father, who grew fond of all things involving curry. Together, we exchanged holiday gifts and celebrated Dad's birthday. My dad kept his sense of humor and propensity for telling the stories of his childhood. He was proud to be Black and southern, yet the sin of racism had too often robbed

him of his humanity.

DIFFERENT REALITIES

Growing up, my father and I experienced two different realities. I was raised in a predominantly-white, middle-class suburb in Connecticut. My father grew up in the Jim Crow-segregated South. He did not leave until after high school graduation, when he became part of the Great Migration (the movement of Black Americans from southern states to northern cities). Through the Great Migration, many Black people sought better opportunities in education, employment and housing. They were released from the written and unwritten laws and policies of Jim Crow (de jure or “in law”) segregation, only to be faced with northern (de facto or “in practice”) segregation.

For many Black people today, navigating predominantly white spaces continues to be dangerous. Author Kelly Brown Douglas, in her book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, unpacks stereotypes that stem from American slavery. During American slavery, slave catchers tracked down Black people who had escaped from plantations. After emancipation, in a continuation of this role, Black bodies were policed, surveilled and kept under control. Even today, Black bodies are not

entirely free in U.S. society.

When Dad and I sat around the dinner table, we often talked about the reality and the impact of racism. As he shared vulnerable moments, I learned to listen with empathy.

Regardless of my father’s suburban zip code, his role as a husband and father, or his status as a military veteran, firefighter and business owner, he was never immune to the stares, glares and perception of him as a Black male threat. No matter how far north or south one travels, negative stereotypes and perceptions of Black men are still part of our country’s collective narrative.

WOUNDS OF BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), racism—both both structural and interpersonal—is a fundamental cause of health inequities, disparities and disease. Average life expectancy for people who are Black is four years less than for those who are white. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many U.S. racial health disparities—including COVID’s disproportionate impact on people of color.

Grief was all around in those scary days. When my father contracted COVID-19, doctors prepared our family for the worst. Dad was hospitalized and treated. While he survived, his roommate,

another Black man, did not.

The CDC states that trauma, such as unprocessed racial trauma, remains stored in the body in the form of stress (See: www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/racism-disparities/impact-of-racism.html). The wounds of racism are real, impacting body, mind and spirit.

I’ve often thought about how racism impacted my father’s medical health. Years of accumulated stress took a toll on my dad in the form of high blood pressure, a series of strokes and early-onset Alzheimer’s. The body keeps a count.

Many people have experienced racial trauma. For example, before 1968, many white communities across the U.S. resisted racial integration, not wanting Black or other ethnic minority groups to live within close proximity. In northern states, housing discrimination was systemic, preventing racial, ethnic and religious minorities from buying homes in predominantly white neighborhoods. This was accomplished through various common practices: housing covenants (agreements not to sell homes to particular groups), the process of steering (real estate agents would only show homes in particular neighborhoods), banks refusing to offer mortgage loans to Black buyers, and devaluing properties in predominantly

Black communities through the process of redlining. Some “sundown towns” restricted Black people from becoming residents. Although Black people were allowed to work in such towns during the day as domestics and laborers, remaining after sunset would result in a fine, jail time or being violently attacked and run out of town.

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 legally ended housing discrimination, opening the doors of homeownership to Black families. When my parents purchased their first home, my family became the first nonwhite family to move in, integrating that suburban neighborhood. Christ the King Lutheran Church’s pastor, a white man, lived nearby and established a relationship with my parents. He invited my parents, who had grown up in Black Baptist and A.M.E. church traditions, to worship at the Lutheran congregation. The community of Christ the King Lutheran Church would become an integral part of both my father’s and our family’s support system.

Through the church, my dad experienced relationships of belonging and family that transcended race. One such relationship was between my dad and Tom, a white man and fellow Southerner who understood the blatant, overt racism of the Deep South. Their genuine friendship

probably wouldn’t have happened in their earlier years or in the Jim Crow South. Through their proximity to each other, they became real friends. Unafraid to discuss race, they held courageous conversations over boiled peanuts and my mom’s potato salad. Church was a place where my father experienced peace and a place where he glimpsed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of Beloved Community.

When Dad became sick, the congregation’s care continued. Christ the King’s pastor prayed for and visited him in the hospital. The congregation’s Women of the ELCA unit knitted prayer shawls for him and sent him Christmas cookies. Deacon John gave my dad communion in the care facility, until his passing.

GRIEF GAVE WAY TO GRATITUDE

In the days following my father’s death, my mother entrusted me with the funeral arrangements. I realized that my father, a first responder, had prepared me for the inevitable by communicating his wishes, including his wish to be cremated. Moving beyond the logistics of date, time and location, I began to reflect on my father’s life of service to others. Dad, a firefighter, was trained to run into burning buildings, even though the human instinct is to keep out of harm’s way. I thought about the courage it takes for

firefighters, police officers and medical professionals to risk their lives daily to serve others. Thanks be to God that my dad could live a life of service and sacrifice for others.

I also recognized that many people had served my dad. CNAs had trudged through snow and ice storms to get Dad ready for bed. Staff at the long-term care facility had worked holidays and overtime to care for my dad and other residents. Dad was also cared for by his siblings in faith from Christ the King. I am grateful that last November our family’s faith community surrounded us as we grieved and celebrated Dad’s life. That experience will forever remain in my heart.

I am also thankful for the truth-telling conversations that my dad and I shared around the dinner table. It was a place where Dad could be vulnerable about his life as a young person in the segregated South and the reality of racism he experienced in the North. And yet, nothing is ever lost with God.

Thanks be to God that my father became accepted and embraced as family by those who—unlike him—were born outside of the U.S., white or northerners. These faithful friends from Christ the King, CNAs and nursing staff were with my father until the end. For that, I have reason to celebrate! 🌿



A holy, loving “no”

Boundaries are a way to
stay in relationship.

BY EMMY KEGLER



ONE GIFT TO GOD'S CHURCH that I've experienced in therapeutic practice and self-reflection is a revitalized understanding of boundaries. Boundaries in relationships—familial, romantic, work and, especially, community relationships—are guidelines that define acceptable behavior. Naming these boundaries protects our own and our community's emotional, physical and mental well-being. It also preserves autonomy and respect within relationships.

Boundaries can be simple and universal. For example, "We don't swear here." Boundaries can also be complex and intrapersonal, especially within communities where multiple relationships influence each other. Here's what I wrote about boundaries in my 2021 book, *All Who Are Weary: Easing the Burden on the Walk with Mental Illness*:

Boundaries are a way of distinguishing two things from each other — in this case, people. At some point, you end, and I begin. Boundaries are limits, not because I do not love the other person, but because my love for them does not transcend my own needs and values. Healthy boundaries keep me emotionally, mentally, and physically stable, establishing an identity that isn't based on what I can or will do for others. They allow me to refill my



own energies and passions and to preserve my sense of self and my values. Boundaries, in short, are a way of speaking a holy and loving "No."

Most of us may not realize where our boundaries are until they have been crossed, intentionally or unintentionally. We feel uncomfortable, unsettled. Our stomach might turn upside down, or skin flush with anxious sweat. We want to escape the situation, but often can't, at least not right away. We may be confused: "Why am I feeling like this? What's wrong with me?" Only later are we able to put words to what happened: a boundary was crossed.

Boundaries are, at heart, a distinction between one person's needs and another person's wants, and those of us who are on the opposite side of a newly laid boundary have a great deal of trouble separating the two. It is much easier to try to find our way around these new and unfair "rules," to figure out how

to still get what we want, than to reflect compassionately on why the other person needs to draw this line for their own health and well-being. People who finally voice a boundary, after multiple previous violations, might be accused of bringing up the past, of failing to forgive and forget, when what is actually happening is not rehashing history but revealing a pattern. Boundaries are sometimes received as rejection and a fracture of the relationship, but what they actually are (for the most part) is a way to protect the relationship ... Boundaries, for us and for many, are a way of staying in relationship, rather than having to break it completely.

Boundaries play an essential role: the restraint they provide offers a space for the relationship to exist and for trust to rebuild while the parties remain protected. Boundaries enable forgiveness. They allow us to maintain our internal sense of self. They reflect an understanding of each human being as imago Dei, made in the image of God, worthy of respect and preservation. They reiterate the boundaries which God has cast for right relationship, in which mistakes and forgiveness are expected but are, as best we can, repented, amended, and avoided. Boundaries are certainly essential for navigating the complicated emotional and behavioral symptoms of mental illness, but when understood as a gift and a balancing act, they

serve the whole body of Christ, allowing us to remain in precious and compassionate relationship with each other even as we beautifully differ in our needs and our gifts.



BOUNDARIES

One person telling another, “If you hurt me or others, I will act to limit your power to do so,” can feel entirely alien in a Christian context. Are we not supposed to forgive and forget? But especially in community, and especially to encourage mental health, boundaries become essential. Allowing unkindness, cruelty or even abuse to run rampant within our holy walls is not a gift, but a curse, sowing seeds of pain, trauma and mental illness.

When I am afraid to name my own boundaries, telling myself, “Just handle it and shake it off,” or “Don’t hurt their feelings,” I allow the other person—whether

they know they are being hurtful or not—to continue to hurt me or someone else. This is unkind to them and to me and can be dangerous to a whole community.

Yet even when we know a community needs to have stated guidelines for behavior, it can be hard to be the bearer of a boundary. How do we know when it's time to set a boundary with someone else—either for our own care or for a community's protection? Here are four signs:

1. The behavior is a pattern.

Boundaries can certainly be set the first time an unwanted behavior happens — like a parent stopping a kid climbing something too high for safety. But most of us, as adults, have a socially taught sense of acceptable behavior. We often recognize when we've overstepped. In adult or mixed-age communities, boundary-breaking behavior can often be a one-time mistake, like a joke that falls flat. But when someone continues to cross lines, even when others become visibly uncomfortable, we move into a space of needing to state a boundary.

2. We feel anxious, angry or sick to our stomach. If participating in church makes you or those around you feel dread, frustration or nausea, something has gone very wrong! And yet, too often, that can be our first sign that someone else crossed a boundary. We don't want to go back into the space where it happened. Many

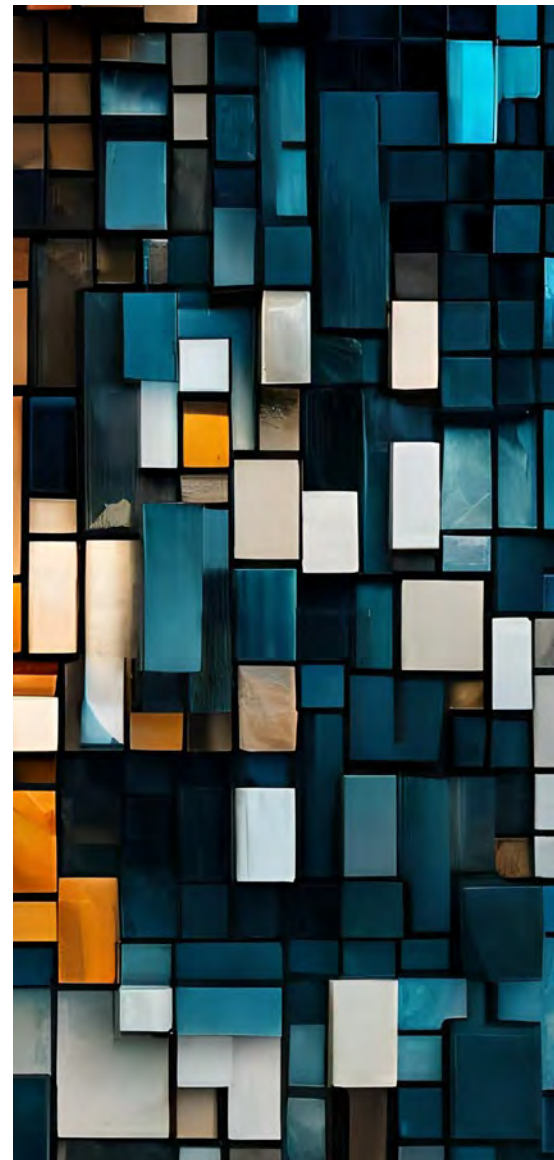
of us have learned to push down feelings of discomfort because “everyone's trying their best” or “it's not polite” to correct someone else's behavior. But our bodies might still tell us that something doesn't feel right.

3. We start anticipating and avoiding. When we spend multiple hours ruminating on a past event or an upcoming meeting, trying to guess and deflect what might happen when a certain person is involved, we might be unknowingly trying to protect our boundaries. (Those of us who, like me, live with anxiety, also need to check if we're stuck in our own spiraling thoughts. This is when a therapist, a journaling practice, or a good friend can be of great help.)

4. Others don't feel good either. If we're frustrated with another person, it's easy to want to complain about it to close friends. We might tell the story with a little bit of exaggeration, overstating their bad behavior so that we come out feeling like the righteous person. Our best practice, however, is to speak from a place of reflection and honesty, rather than frustration and shame, taking our behavior into account as well, and not immediately casting the other person in a bad light. Only then can we listen to the reactions of others. If those around us reflect back our frustration, but don't join in with their own examples, it might not

be a boundary issue, but an intra-personal one. (Even in God's family, there will be people who don't get along!) But if others slowly begin to reveal that they too feel uncomfortable or afraid, it may be time for leaders to discuss if a stated boundary is needed to protect and preserve the whole community. 🌿

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OPENING HYMN

“Healer of Our Every Ill” (ELW 612)

OPENING PRAYER

O God, our Compassionate Companion, you walk beside us through life’s joys and sorrows. When we suffer, you are with us. We ask that you heal all who are living with a mental illness. Help us, your hands and feet in this world, to turn our prayers into action. We recognize that our biblical ancestors also faced mental health struggles. Today, as our society continues to discover more about mental illness, may we and our faith communities become beacons of light and hope to our brothers and sisters who struggle. Help us to be loving companions on one another’s journeys. Amen

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

Compassionate companions

Congregations can play a role in mental health ministry.

BY ELISE SEYFRIED

When I was a child, my encounters with people living with mental illness were, as far as I knew then, very few. From books, movies and TV, I absorbed a picture of these folks as either frightening and out of control, or incoherent and incapable of functioning. My church never spoke about mental illness, except to say that suicide was a terrible sin.

Then, when my mom was diagnosed with major depression in the 1960s, I began to put a face to that picture—the face of someone I loved. Years later, when I received my bipolar disorder diagnosis, I came to understand something else: Anyone—even those who seem to be functioning successfully in life—can have mental health issues.

Since beginning treatment, I have become very active as a writer and speaker on mental health. I am passionate about helping to erase the stigma that still exists around living with mental illness. I have been heartened to learn about the steps many faith communities are taking to make a positive difference, in both the perception of mental illness and the practices that provide practical help and support.

May this devotional add to your understanding and inspire you and your congregation to reach out to the more than 20 percent of people who live with diagnosed mental illness. Jesus’ earthly life of compassion, service and healing is our model.





NAOMI AND DEPRESSION

📖 **Read:** Ruth 1

With the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi has been dealt some severe blows in life. In response, she experiences a profound depression, calling herself Mara, which means “bitter.” Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth—who, of course, has also lost her husband—become a beloved community for each other, walking together and guiding one another to a place of comfort and healing. Their circumstances affect them differently, and depression does not lift overnight. But in their love and support for each other, we see how caring people can bring hope to the hopeless.

Kirsten Peachey is a pastor and director of faith and health partnership for ELCA-affiliated Advocate Health Care in Illinois. She encourages congregations to build and strengthen their connections, revealing the loving communities already there. This work is not without challenges.

Pastor Peachey says it can be difficult to break the cycle of pretending in many churches. Often people with mental health struggles pretend to be fine out of shame for their situation and the fear of being shunned, she says. At the same time, clergy can sometimes be overwhelmed by church members’ mental health needs, and church members can feel ill-equipped to help each other. However, Pastor Peachey maintains that we are all well qualified to serve as companions for one another.

We don’t have to fix things, she explains. The most important thing is our loving presence. Just as Ruth stayed with Naomi—and Naomi with Ruth—we can be there for those who are suffering. “All of us have a healing presence,” Pastor Peachey says. “The key is to truly see, hear and hold someone in your heart.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Naomi and Ruth’s special bond comforted both women and offered healing for each. Have you or a loved one ever experienced depression? What did it feel like? Did something or someone make a difference for you in this struggle? Have you ever found yourself able to support someone else, even amid your own struggles?

Depression is a mental health condition that can occur even when there’s “no reason to be sad.” It can also be affected by life circumstances, including loss, like Naomi and Ruth experienced, or loneliness and isolation—something that became more common during the pandemic. For many, this depression hasn’t lifted.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Where and how do you find support when you feel hopeless *despite* your life of faith? Are there certain people you rely on, as Naomi and Ruth relied on each other?
3. When you don’t know how to pray or don’t have strength to do so, does it help to let others pray for you—and to know that even the Holy Spirit does so (see Romans 8:26)?

SAUL AND BIPOLAR DISORDER

📖 **Read:** 1 Samuel 16:14–23; 19:1–24

While there wasn’t an understanding of brain chemistry at the time of King Saul, people now believe he may have lived with bipolar disorder.

Symptoms include extreme mood swings—from the euphoria and hyperactivity of manic episodes to the total despair of depressive episodes. There would have been no medication or psychiatric care for Saul, and it appears he suffered greatly. Saul had tremendous wealth and power, but that didn't prevent his suffering. People who seemingly “have it all” or “have it all together” are not exempt from mental health issues. Some scholars mention 1 Samuel 19:23 as a possible manic episode. Saul's relationship with David reflected his illness, as he swung between loving David and being soothed by his music, to trying to kill him in a jealous rage. Sadly, Saul's life ended with his suicide.

Dr. Deb Karch, a Lutheran who shared her story in the May 2014 issue of *The Lutheran* magazine (the predecessor of *Living Lutheran*), had a long and distinguished career that included Army officer, healthcare executive, and senior epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Yet through much of this time, Dr. Karch lived with undiagnosed bipolar disorder. It made her life painful and difficult enough that she attempted suicide at one point. After she began psychiatric treatment, she joined a church, participated in a group Bible study and connected with a caring pastor, whose daughter was also living with bipolar. All of this made a huge difference in Dr. Karch's life.

Some comments should not be made to someone with mental illness or their family member. For instance, Dr. Karch shares that it is very harmful when church members have the perception that a person who is mentally ill “just needs to pray.” While prayer is good, a person with mental illness also needs to be properly diagnosed and treated, she says. Only when she was diagnosed and received medication could she even begin to understand how to explore a relationship with God.

Share aloud or reflect:


4. Dr. Karch cautions people not to make harmful comments about people with mental illness “just needing to pray.” The implication is that prayer and medical care are in opposition to each other. How might such a comment discourage someone from getting much-needed help from a doctor or therapist? Do you believe that God expects us not only to pray but to put our faith into action, including seeking good medical care?
5. Have you or someone you love ever hidden a mental or emotional struggle out of fear? Did you or they ever share it? What was the outcome? How can the church help to reduce stigma so it becomes safe for church and community members to share these conditions?

ELIJAH AND ANXIETY

📖 **Read:** 1 Kings 19

The prophet Elijah had been doing all the right things for the Lord. Yet he found himself hunted by a cruel ruler, Jezebel. Becoming incredibly worried and anxious, Elijah hid in a cave. There, God came to Elijah in a moment of silence. God's whisper (a sign that God was very near) gave Elijah hope, a plan of action and relief from his anxiety.

For 20 years, I served as director of spiritual formation at an ELCA congregation outside Philadelphia. Beginning in 2005, I spent about a year struggling with very troubling symptoms, including intense manic episodes. I remember feeling that God had abandoned me, even after I had tried so hard to do good things in my congregation and community. My anxiety about the future



became unbearable; I wondered if I had a future at all. Finally, after seeking psychiatric help, I heard a whisper of hope in a therapist's quiet office. I had a plan of action. I would continue with talk therapy and begin a daily regimen of antidepressants and antipsychotic medications.

Still anxious, I debated telling my congregation what was going on with me. Taking a deep breath, I wrote the church a letter in which I was completely honest. Then I waited for their reaction. Would I be fired? Would these good people give up on me?

To my relief and joy, they embraced me wholeheartedly. I was able to continue in that job for many more years. I was also able to be a sounding board and a resource for church members who also had mental health issues in their lives. My work for God had not ended at all. God used me to reach others in a very special way.

I think of how Elijah had God's love and protection, which gave this prophet confidence even at his lowest point. At my lowest point, I felt that same love—and my anxiety about the future also began to be replaced by hope and confidence.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. What makes you anxious? When you feel anxiety, what are some things that help you cope? Do you think some people are naturally more anxious than others?
7. Where do you feel closest to God (in private prayer, at church, outside in nature, another setting)? Do you regularly seek out those places and that special feeling of closeness? When do you feel farthest away from God? What do you do when you have that feeling?
8. The world is an anxious place these days, with so many worries and troubles.

It's easy to think that things have never been worse, but Scripture reminds us that humans have always had significant troubles. Do you ever feel that God should intervene more directly in what's happening in the world? Why or why not?

JESUS HEALS THE GERASENE MAN

📖 **Read:** Mark 5:1–20

In this passage, we see Jesus' great compassion, healing presence and power. We also encounter the ancient understanding of mental illness as demonic possession. "Legion" has been feared and shunned, as his condition has ravaged his brain and body. Jesus meets him exactly where he is, driving out his demons into a herd of pigs, who charge down a steep bank into the sea. After the man's miraculous cure, he tells others what Jesus has done for him.

As Christians, we can imitate Christ's compassionate care through our advocacy for people in our midst who are struggling. Meredith Lovell Keseley is senior pastor at Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Burke, Virginia, a congregation with a vibrant mental health ministry that includes a partnership with therapist Sarah Tran. Pastor Keseley says the impetus came about when a former intern led a 2016 adult forum and 20 people signed up on the spot to form a mental health ministry team (<https://abidingpresence.net/mentalhealthteam>). Congregation members now participate in NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) walks, host educational events, and debunk myths surrounding mental illness.

In the U.S. healthcare system, psychiatric care is both hard to find and prohibitively expensive for many people. At Abiding Presence, those who need and cannot afford mental health services can receive funding from the church to pay a large percentage of their first sessions with a medical

professional. This is a practical and concrete way for the congregation to serve others. The congregation's website also offers links to help people find providers such as therapists, as well as medication discounts. Without insurance (and sometimes even with insurance), antidepressant and antipsychotic medications can amount to thousands of dollars per month.

Pastor Keseley believes the church should engage beyond church walls and become "one of the loudest voices in the room" when mental health care is discussed. "Possibilities, not limits," is the mindset at Abiding Presence Church, she says.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. In Mark 5, do you think the townspeople lose their fear of the man after Jesus cures him, or might the suspicion that he's still sick linger?
10. Abiding Presence Lutheran Church is notably active in its mental health ministry, though it is not a huge congregation. Mental health has become one of the congregation's most important outreach ministries. Do you think your congregation would be interested in starting a mental health ministry? What might be the obstacles? What are the opportunities?
11. Many of today's societal mental health issues can be traced to the widespread closure of mental hospitals and facilities in the 1970s and 1980s. After patients were released, they faced the prospect of continuing care that was inadequate at best and nonexistent at worst. Even today, there is a lack of mental health care for people who need it. What role do you think the government should play in making mental health care more

accessible? How about insurance companies? What role should the church play?

I can truly say that along with my family and close friends, my church helped save my life. I'm here today because of ordinary people who held me in their hearts. As Pastor Keseley says, "We can make a difference, one person at a time."

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord of Life, what we sometimes see as a definite challenge can indeed be a joyful opportunity. Through your love, we are never alone. You are with us always. You call us to care lovingly for one another in sickness as well as in health. Send us out to make a difference, to serve others with compassion and to love ourselves amid our own struggles, as we choose life together with you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"It Is Well with My Soul" (*ELW* 785) 🌿

MORE MENTAL HEALTH TEXTS

Psalms 13 Many psalms, including this one, reflect human struggles with sadness and despair.

Psalms 25 This is a psalm of hope and faith in God's deliverance.

Proverbs 12:25 Mental health has a physical effect.

John 9:1-12 Jesus says that contrary to popular belief, mental and physical illnesses and disabilities are not caused by sin. We aren't being punished for things we, or our parents, did or did not do.

WANT TO START A CHURCH MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH?

- Start with yourself, according to Advocate Health Care's Kirsten Peachey. Consider creating opportunities for reflection and conversation where you and others can share your own stories of mental health in a safe, respectful setting.
- Pray together in church on mental health and suicide prevention awareness days.
- Invite a speaker who is a mental health care educator to an adult forum and/or youth forum. This speaker can give an introduction to mental health issues and vocabulary, answer questions, dispel myths about people with mental illness and suggest best ways for churches to accompany people with mental health concerns.
- Survey church participants, allowing them to respond anonymously and list or rank mental health services they would like to see the church offer to members and the community.
- Start or host a support group or two. People often feel more comfortable sharing in a smaller group with others who understand. In my congregation, we discovered an unmet need for a support group for parents of teens and young adults living with mental illness.
- Tackle the subject of mental health right there in the sanctuary or meeting room. Don't be afraid as leaders. People really do listen and can sense when church leadership is supportive and open.
- Create and support a mental health ministry team that gives its members a chance to share their individual gifts, as well as connections to mental health resources. Ideally, a team would include volunteers from several generations, including teens and seniors. Teens are often well aware of mental illness within their age group. Likewise, elders are also aware of mental illness and challenges among seniors.
- Publicize your mental health outreach after your congregation has learned about mental illness ministry and has committed to safety, respect, support and confidentiality for people with mental illness and their families. You might add a page to your website or create a welcome brochure, letting people know that your church is a safe place to talk about mental illness.



MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH. The first week of October is Mental Health Awareness Week. This issue of *Gather* focuses on mental health, including mental illness and suicide. This devotional helps churches and groups explore mental health in May, October or anytime during the year.

Leaders can share the stories of several people from the Old Testament who likely experienced mental illness (Naomi and Ruth, Saul and Elijah). We'll also explore the story of one person from the New Testament: the Gerasene man possessed by demons (an ancient understanding of mental illness), whom Jesus healed.

Mental illness may be an uncomfortable topic for participants for the following reasons:

- Some may not have had interactions (at least, to their knowledge) with people living with mental illness.
- Misinformation abounds in our society about causes and symptoms of mental illness.
- Stigma remains around mental health struggles.
- Some people tend to avoid any discussion of mental health struggles.

In recent decades, our society has become open in talking about mental health care. One example is that increasing numbers of young adults are comfortable sharing that they visit a therapist. However, we're still not in a place where everyone feels safe and comfortable with this subject.

Faith communities are uniquely positioned to help our society make more progress in this area. Churches are excellent places to have these important conversations. This devotional can help you begin to advance understanding constructively and compassionately.

Your challenge, as a leader, is to meet group members where they are and steer conversation in positive, respectful, healthy and nurturing directions.

Paramount to the use of this devotional is the expectation of absolute confidentiality. Leaders

must ensure that everyone in the group understands and agrees to keep the entire discussion within the confines of the room and the group. Clear boundaries must be set and kept by all so everyone can feel safe having this discussion.

Here are discussion guidelines I encourage you to share with participants:

1. Listen to one another. Let others finish speaking before taking your turn.
2. Share your personal thoughts (use "I" language).
3. Respect those with different perspectives and experiences. Try to understand their feelings and points of view.
4. If a participant chooses to remain silent, honor their decision.
5. Remember to keep ALL conversation strictly confidential. What is shared here, STAYS here. All participants must agree that this will be a SAFE place to share.

BEFORE YOU MEET

1. As a leader, watch the May devotional video posted at www.gathermagazine.org, then think about your own understanding of mental illness.
2. Read the Scripture passages ahead of time so you can be ready for possible reactions within the group.
3. Remember: Unless you are a licensed mental health professional yourself, you are NOT called to act as one. Be clear that your role is to serve as a caring discussion leader. If someone in the group reaches out to you with a personal mental health struggle, please encourage them to seek professional help. (You might say: "Sounds like you would benefit from talking to someone with professional expertise in this area.")
4. Make sure all group members agree to the discussion guidelines. If time allows, watch the May 2024 devotional video together:
www.gathermagazine.org/may-2024-devotional-on-mental-health-and-wellness-video-supplement/ 🌿



Who dies by suicide?

Statistics don't tell the whole story.

BY ELISE SEYFRIED

STATISTICS INDICATE THAT A PERSON who dies by suicide is most likely to be a white or Native American male, aged 55 to 75. Men are three times more likely than women to die by suicide. But statistics don't tell a complete story. Deaths of despair occur with every age, gender and ethnicity.

Todd was 22, a recent college graduate working as a civil engineer, and a bright young man with a promising future. Yet he suffered from deep depression. On a Friday evening, Todd called his mother, Sherry, and said he was thinking of ending his life. Sherry got him to a hospital emergency room. Unfortunately, the medical personnel concluded that he was not a risk to himself, and he was sent home. Todd died by suicide on Sunday.

Heather was a loving mom of two. She sang in her congregation's praise band and was very involved with church activities. But Heather had a history of self-harm as a teenager, and her mental health issues surfaced again. She attempted suicide four times in one year before losing her life to suicide. Heather told her family, "I just want this pain to stop." She died at age 53.

Deb was a wife, a mother of three and a professor of public

health. She taught Sunday school for many years and was much loved in the community. Unlike Heather, Deb gave no indication that she was contemplating suicide—she seemed excited about upcoming events. But Deb, too, suddenly passed away, at age 49.

Todd, Heather and Deb have left us, but their stories are not over. Their families have turned grief into positive action, participating in suicide prevention efforts on local and national levels.

Here's some advice from their families:

- Let young people know to tell a caring adult if a friend confides that they are experiencing suicidal thoughts. There are resources and people to help.
- Educate yourself and others about suicide risk and prevention.
- Don't be afraid to ask a person if they're thinking of suicide—it won't increase the chances of completion.

"As someone who lost a family member to suicide and now works in the mental health field, it's evident to me that mental health is a part of human nature," says Deb's daughter, Tess. "Some people might just be better at hiding the bad, in fear of being judged."

Deb's husband, Mike, adds:

"Don't try to find answers; find peace. For those who want to support people who are grieving, you are not a reminder of loss, but a reminder of the love that person shared. There are no right words, so don't try to find them. Just be there."

For centuries, suicide was considered a grave sin. Those who died by suicide were condemned by the church. Nowadays churches stress that God loves the deceased person tremendously and welcomes them into heaven. Suicide is a desperate act, born of great mental anguish. We need to pay attention to each other and reach out if we see someone struggling. And hopefully, someday, suicides will stop, forever. 🌸

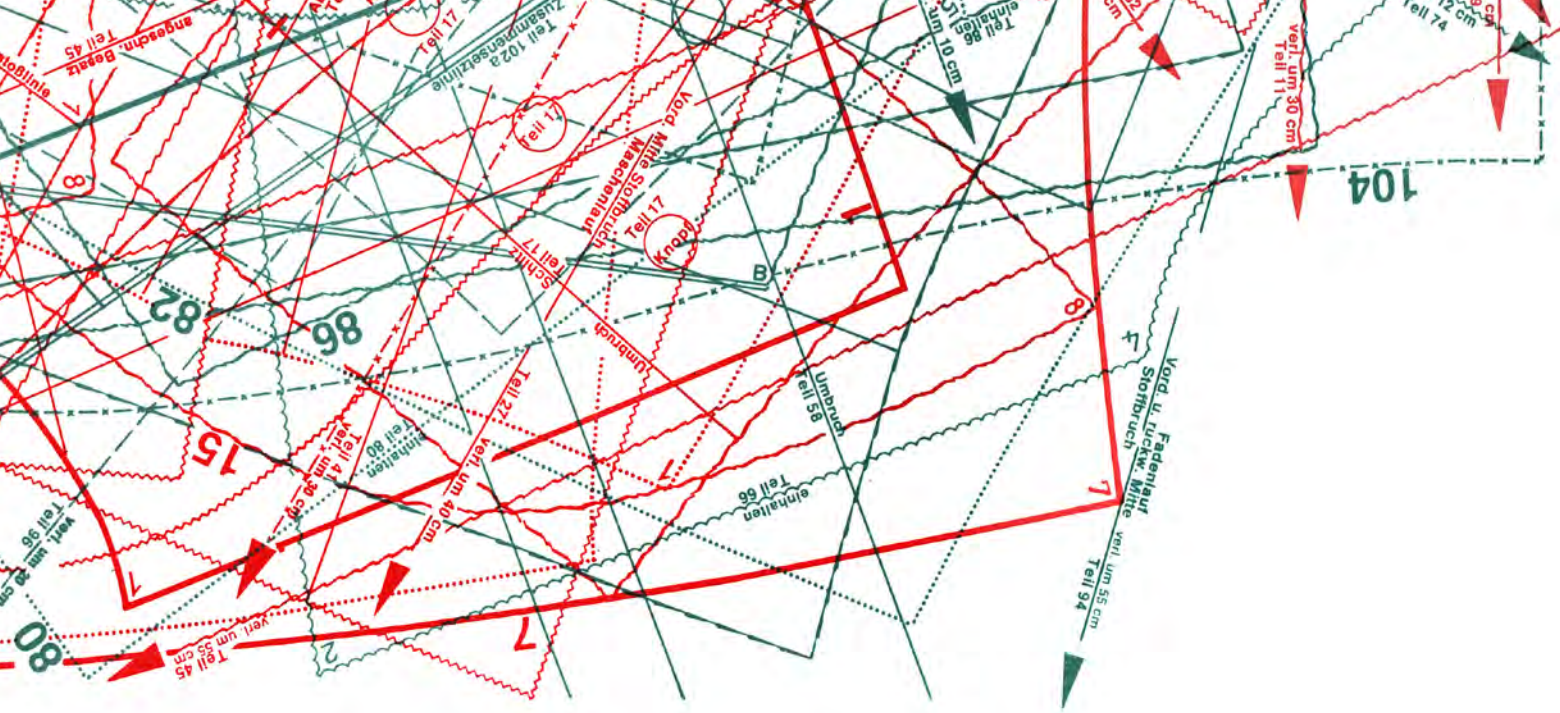
Suicide Crisis Hotline

Dial 988, text "STRENGTH" to the Crisis Text Line at 741741, or visit www.988lifeline.org

Lutheran Suicide Prevention Ministry was begun by ELCA members Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch after the suicide of their daughter. www.suicidepreventionministry.org

The QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) Institute trains ordinary people to help save lives. www.qprinstitute.org

ELCA Social Statement on Suicide: located on the ELCA website (elca.org)



THE RAW-EDGED FABRIC OF WAR

When we think of war and conflict, we usually think of battles and soldiers. In all times and places, however, women and children experience some of the harshest and least visible impacts of war. While there have always been exceptions (Jael in the Bible, Joan of Arc, beloved daughters in our own congregations), women and children suffer distinctively as non-combatants. Other women have often played vital military roles in support of their people, without receiving the credit they deserve. Like Chin, Maria and Duaa, their stories reflect troubling patterns of war.

Stephanie Mitchell, a history professor at Carthage College, an ELCA-affiliated school in Kenosha, Wisconsin, is an expert on women and conflict in Mexico and Central America, where women have played vital roles. Any war requires both *soldadas* (soldiers) and *soldadera* (commissaries who supply food, laundry and other services). *Soldaderas* might be related to the soldiers or serve as contract laborers. No army could survive without them, and yet these women's efforts would disappear from public memory as soon as the war ended. As a result, women who sought military pensions were almost never granted compensation for their service.

History books tell of war in terms that make it seem very important which army is which. Oral histories of women

who lived through the Mexican Revolution and subsequent uprisings, however, demonstrate that for most rural women, the specific identity of a given army made no difference. All armies helped themselves to these women's food supplies, causing famines. All armies perpetrated violence, and especially sexual violence. Years ago, Mitchell spoke with a woman who had lived through the Revolution and two subsequent uprisings and couldn't tell the three conflicts apart. All ran together in her memory because all produced the same, dire consequences.

CHILDRENS' LIVES UNRAVEL.

In 2023, one in six children around the world lived in areas marked by armed conflict.⁴ While hunger and resource scarcity impact humans of all ages, children suffer distinctive damage. Like Chin's children, contemporary children also experience starvation. In Yemen alone, 85,000 children died from hunger between April 2015 and October 2018. In the first months of 2024, the current war in Gaza has left 90 percent of children under age two and 95 percent of pregnant women facing extreme food poverty. Even children who survive malnutrition experience lifelong consequences. Three-quarters of the 150 million children worldwide who suffer from stunted growth live in war zones. Children who fail to receive adequate nutrition in their first two

to three years will suffer irreversible impacts to their physical and cognitive health.⁵

Displacement has myriad impacts, uprooting children's lives, damaging mental wellbeing, disrupting education and more. As of February 2024, children made up half of the 1.7 million people displaced by war in the Gaza Strip.⁶

Meanwhile, since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, children in frontline areas have spent the equivalent of four to seven months sheltering underground during air raids, with harrowing impacts on mental health. Forty percent of children in Ukraine cannot access regular schooling.⁷

Sexual violence is a persistent theme in wartime. In Sudan, combatants target women based on their ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, militia members eager to consolidate support may try to win over children and needy families with gifts of toys and food. "People are afraid to not take it," Duaa says.⁸ Children, too, experience sexual violence. In addition to forcing 730,000 Rohingya—more than half of whom were children—out of Myanmar starting in 2017, government troops targeted children for sexual violence.⁹

WAR'S RIPPLE EFFECT

War impacts women directly and indirectly. The Guatemalan civil war was precipitated by a U.S.-backed coup in 1954, burst

into full conflict in 1960, and did not end until 1996, Mitchell says. When government forces charged with eradicating communism failed to find communists, they often turned their attention toward other, invented enemies. New targets included women whose behavior was considered outside “typical” gender roles—students, activists, even women wearing blue jeans. Women and children kidnapped by the military were tortured in front of each other. Men and women alike were subjected to gender-specific humiliation.

War’s indirect results can be just as damaging. Mitchell relates the story of a friend whose large family lived on a farm in rural, northern Guatemala. With civil society in tatters, when a neighboring farmer wanted the family’s land, there was no one to stop him. He killed her friend’s father and expelled her mother, who had just birthed twins. The grieving family fled to the city, where they were forced to beg for food.

“Was that related to conflict?” Mitchell asks. “Yes and no. It was related to the collapse of effective institutions.”

Warlike conflict doesn’t always come with a formal declaration. In Central America, for example, the structures that would normally maintain order have been corrupted by international criminal organizations. After decades of Cold War conflict, government and civil society in the region were

so fundamentally weakened that they were easily overrun. A country such as Guatemala or Honduras may not be “at war,” but its citizens are experiencing violence on par with “official” wars. The gangs that control these nations operate internationally, with diversified interests—including human smuggling.

Meanwhile, asylum systems in countries such as the United States are predicated on World War II-era models of conflict in which governments were the oppressors. If a young woman in Honduras needs to break up with her abusive boyfriend, but the man’s cousin is in a gang, that woman’s choices are stark. By freeing herself from a dangerous relationship, she may put her entire family at risk of deadly retaliation. Escaping that relationship will require her family to flee. However, because the gang isn’t a “government,” the family probably won’t be granted asylum in the U.S.

PATTERNS OF HOPE

Amid the calamities of war that women and children experience, another more hopeful pattern emerges. The very women who have suffered so greatly are often at the forefront of peace and reconciliation efforts. Leymah Gbowee, for example, was just 17 when her home country of Liberia erupted into civil war. The war turned the young Lutheran “from a child into an adult in a matter of hours.” With the help

of a scholarship from the ELCA International Leaders program, Gbowee trained as a social worker and trauma counselor to work with ex-child soldiers. She became a founding member and Liberia Coordinator of the Women in Peacebuilding Network of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding. Gbowee also collaborated with a Muslim colleague to form Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Gbowee’s efforts earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.¹⁰

Gbowee and many other women are beacons of hope amid the destructive patterns of war. We too can become bearers of hope—even those of us who are insulated from the terrors of active conflict. How?

First, we start to recognize the patterns. Women and children experience: displacement; sexual violence; hunger and malnutrition; gendered treatment in military support roles; the indirect impacts of failed civil institutions; and barriers caused by outdated or ineffective policies. Recognizing patterns is the key to establishing new habits.

Second, we listen. Many of the stories that have exposed these patterns of war took place behind or under the official narrative of a conflict. Knowing the shared impacts of war on women and children around the globe, we can learn to hear beyond the noise of official narratives.

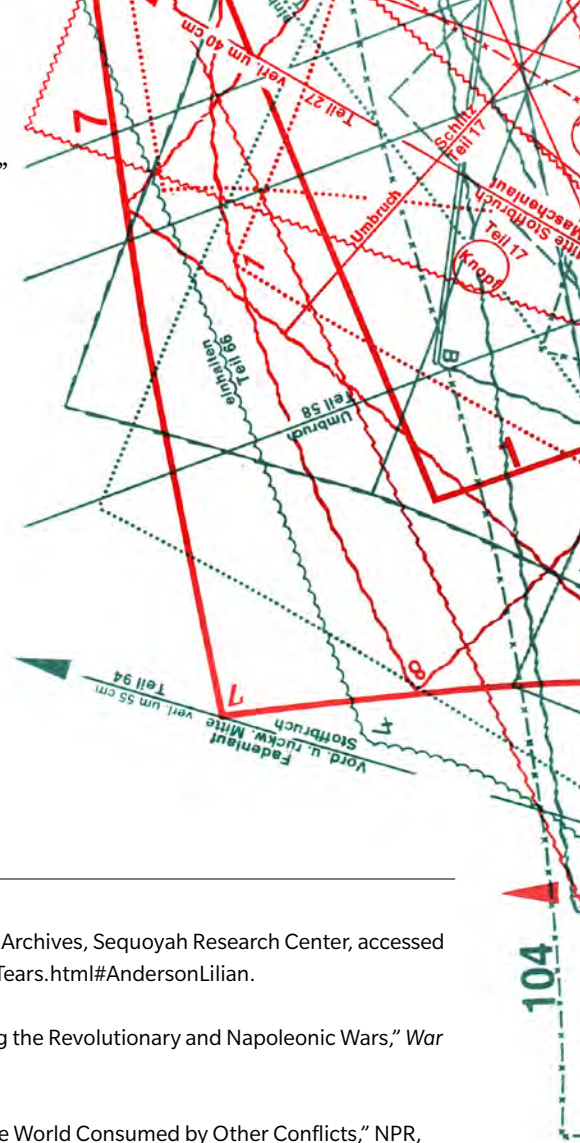
Mitchell, the Carthage College historian, is also an ELCA

member. “There is a way to solve this,” she reminds us. Too often, “at the end of the day, we think Jesus is impractical,” she says. She adds that the love to which Jesus calls us is the gift that truly will make a difference. Through love, we hear women’s stories. Through love, we see the needs of children. Through love, we gain strength to look hard things in the face, proclaim that there is a better way and advocate for change.

When humans think about war, we tend to think in terms of winners and losers. Yet as the apostle Paul reminds us, we are called to a different way of being.

“Do not be conformed to this age,” he writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2 NRSVue).

Winning may feel good in a game, but winning is not transformation. As Christians, we can live into God’s promise that the will of God is for the transformative justice that brings peace to *all* nations—especially the most vulnerable people. 🌿



¹ Account of Lilian Anderson, “Family Stories from the Trail of Tears,” American Native Press Archives, Sequoyah Research Center, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://ualrexhibits.org/tribalwriters/artifacts/Family-Stories-Trail-of-Tears.html#AndersonLilian>.

² Philip G. Dwyer, “‘It Still Makes Me Shudder’: Memories of Massacres and Atrocities during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars,” *War in History* 16:4 (2009): 400, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070650>.

³ Kate Bartlett and Emmanuel Akinwotu, “Sudan’s War Passed Six Months, With Much of the World Consumed by Other Conflicts,” NPR, October 21, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/21/1206104009/sudan-war>.

⁴ “468 Million Children Live in Conflict Zones, New Figures from Save the Children Reveals,” Save the Children, accessed 25 February 2024, <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/new-figures-millions-of-children-live-in-conflict-zones>.

⁵ Graham, George, et. al., *Stop the War on Children: Protecting Children in 21st Century Conflict*, (Save the Children: 2019), 22-23. Accessed 25 February 2024, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/report_stop_the_war_on_children.pdf. “Children’s Lives Threatened...” UNICEF, February 19, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/childrens-lives-threatened-rising-malnutrition-gaza-strip>.

⁶ “Childhood Displaced in Gaza,” UNICEF, February 9, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/stories/childhood-displaced-gaza>.

⁷ “Ukraine two years...” UNICEF, February 22, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/ukraine-two-years-children-frontline-areas-forced-spend-5000-hours-equivalent-nearly>.

⁸ Bartlett and Akinwotu.

⁹ *Stop the War on Children*, 32.

¹⁰ “Leymah Gbowee, Biographical,” The Nobel Prize, accessed 25 February 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/gbowee/biographical/>; “Peace Activist to Speak of Transformation,” Women of the ELCA, September 14, 2016, <https://www.womenoftheelca.org/blog/news/peace-activist-to-speak-of-transformation>.

Bearing one another's burdens

Mental health ministries
benefit churches, individuals.

BY KARRIS GOLDEN



A GROWING CRISIS

Churches and surrounding communities are grappling head-on with the nation's growing mental health crisis. The ELCA Social Message titled "The Body of Christ and Mental Illness," points to Galatians 6:2, which emphasizes the church's role in encouraging companionship and healing: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

According to the message, many people who seek treatment face challenges due to "existing social inequalities and lapses in the U.S. health care system." The document calls out our human responsibility to serve as companions to one another, even in the toughest times. The message states: "To people who are experiencing mental illness, physical, prayerful companionship can be a sign of God's presence in a time when God's presence cannot be felt any other way. For caregivers and families, offers of help and presence are a tangible sign that they are still a part of the body of Christ."

Carol Schickel, a rostered ELCA deacon, has devoted more than 30 years to counseling and coaching adults and adolescents. She is a psychotherapist, a licensed clinical professional counselor, and the spiritual director at Holy Trinity Life Center in Chicago.

"Some of us are fortunate to have friends who really do listen to us, but some of us wander

DID YOU KNOW?

More than 20 percent of teens and adults in the United States live with a mental illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Among adults and adolescents, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org) ranks anxiety disorders, major depression and bipolar disorder as the most common.

More than half of adults and youth living with mental illness do not receive treatment, according to NAMI.

Forty-nine percent of Americans live in a designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Area, according to the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation (<https://bit.ly/mhp-shortage>)

through life without anyone," Schickel explains. "You deserve someone who's giving you full attention [and] a safe listening space. It can transform your mental and spiritual sense of who you are."

Schickel is one of many lay and rostered leaders who offer their communities mental health services in church-affiliated settings. "I feel like my seminary training helped ground me in who I am and how I work

with clients and see the world,” Schickel explains. “That informs the work I do with clients of a variety of backgrounds. I’ve had Christian, Jewish and Buddhist clients, and other clients who do not have any faith practices. I try to make a safe space for exploring the connections between psychology and faith.”

However, Schickel doesn’t refer to herself as a “religious” or “Christian counselor,” noting that few counselors from Lutheran backgrounds do so. It comes not from a wish to conceal her beliefs from clients, but rather from the need to ensure clients won’t feel they’re held to ideas and beliefs they don’t share.

“When many people hear ‘Christian counselor,’ it can give the impression that the emphasis will be on judgment or blame—or that ‘we’re just going to pray with you.’ That isn’t the case at all,” she says.

Schickel believes her experience and education focus her work with clients. Her goal is that clients feel comfortable, safe and heard.

CHURCHES CAN BE CONNECTORS. Many congregations share similar goals by supporting mental health ministries in surrounding communities. They work with organizations like NAMI and partner with local agencies and faith communities to provide services. Some also provide education and professional development for lay and clergy counselors.

Members of Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas, wanted to be ready for those who would turn to the congregation for mental health assistance. With help from an ELCA grant, the congregation launched its Mental Health Ministry in partnership with NAMI Central Texas. Their ministry emphasizes “healthy living in spirit, mind and body,” and provides free education and resources.

In the Twin Cities, faith communities collaborate through Mental Health Connect, a non-profit organization that works to destigmatize mental illness and removes barriers so community members can find services and resources. Sponsored by Bethlehem Lutheran Twin Cities, the organization also offers on-site mental health and addiction help, directed by a team of volunteers and staff. Their website (www.mhconnect.org) lets people know that there is no membership or faith requirement to get help.

Trinity Lutheran in Stillwater, Minnesota, partners with NAMI of Minnesota to host events and provide mental health resources. Those events include sessions led by mental health professionals on topics like technology and student wellbeing.

“Depression is a heavy topic — suicide can be a heavy topic,” therapist Rebekah Windschitl explained in a suicide prevention presentation. “A person with depression sees the world

completely differently than a person who is not depressed. ... So, when people say, ‘Oh, people with depression are very pessimistic; they just need to think positive,’ it doesn’t work that way. The negative things are so much bigger and heavier to them.”

These ministries stand alongside church-affiliated efforts to address the national substance abuse crisis. In 2022 alone, nearly 17 percent of Americans aged 12 or older were treated for a substance use disorder, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

To address mental health and addiction recovery, Augsburg University, an ELCA-affiliated school in Minneapolis, created the StepUP residential recovery program. It is one of the nation’s oldest and largest collegiate residential recovery and sober living programs. StepUP participants have a “current mean cumulative GPA of 3.26 and a cumulative abstinence rate of 93 percent” (source: www.augsburg.edu). StepUP provides them with structure and support for their success.

WHAT KIND OF CARE?

People can benefit from many kinds of resources, according to Schickel, whether that involves working with a mental health ministry, seeking counseling, finding a support group or something else entirely.

“You know how you work and how you process things,” she says.

"You know the things in your life you want to explore and possibly change. ...To have someone who really listens and lets you tell your story [so you can] get the help you need is something everyone will benefit from." Finding this help is "about being fully you," Schickel says.

Yet identifying what you want from mental health assistance—and determining if it will work for you—can seem daunting. "This can be a scary proposition for people who haven't done it," Schickel says. "Take the risk, because you're worth it."

Some needs are able to be met through spiritual counseling from a pastor. Other needs may be best met through a professional therapist. Schickel suggests seeking a referral from someone you trust, such as a pastor, family member or friend who has been in therapy.

"Comfort, safety and feeling like you'll be heard are essential," Schickel says. "Ask yourself: 'Where am I on this journey? What's going to help me dive into the issues I want to explore through counseling?' That's how you get the most out of an investment like this."

It's important to view therapy as an investment, especially when the alternative is living with untreated mental health issues, she says, adding: "Our souls need nourishment; our souls need care. It's tragic how many people live with pain and anxiety they don't need to have."

Schickel recommends interviewing several potential counselors to determine which has experience that aligns with your needs and beliefs. A therapist's values and beliefs may also be important, especially in situations with the potential for disagreements or misunderstandings. For example, because Schickel's office was a space that visibly welcomed people who identify as LGBTQ+, she was nonplussed when one parent brought in her adult child. The parent said her child identified as a lesbian, and requested a therapist who would "fix" her daughter. Schickel declined.

"All therapists care," she explains. "Most therapists aren't going to judge you or try to urge you toward being someone you're not. A therapist shines a light on the imbalances ... the fears and pains of your life ... and helps hold you to a path of healing. It's a relationship that can provide you [with] safe space for addressing the emotional difficulties and stresses in your life, so you can become more aware of yourself."

Before selecting a potential therapist, Schickel says to consider questions such as: Would you prefer someone who understands your background and heritage? Does it matter to you whether your therapist is female, male or nonbinary? Are you comfortable with talking about religious beliefs and spiritual issues during sessions?

When clients remain mum on the topic of faith, Schickel, who is

both a mental health professional and a deacon, will ask about their faith practice and religious history. She views this as key to mental health care. "Spiritual health is mental health," she says.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Statistics related to national mental health and substance abuse treatment can be disheartening. Yet Schickel is encouraged by changing attitudes. In particular, she appreciates that seeking mental health services is becoming destigmatized. "Things have changed so much," she says. "We're having a real watershed moment for therapy, *finally*." 🌸

Need to talk?

If you or someone you know needs someone to talk to, call or text 988 or log onto 988lifeline.org/chat.

OPENING HYMN

"Bless Now, O God, the Journey"
(ELW 326)

OPENING PRAYER

God of wisdom, open our hearts
and minds to seek your presence
in all times and places. Fill us with
curiosity, that we may follow the way
of Jesus in love and justice. In Jesus'
name, Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

"Ask, and it will be given you; search,
and you will find; knock, and the door
will be opened for you. For everyone
who asks receives, and everyone who
searches finds, and for everyone who
knocks, the door will be opened."
(Matthew 7:7–8)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

After certainty

Session one

Curiosity

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

INTRODUCTION

This three-part Bible study series focuses on what it means to live in faith after certainty. In these years of a worldwide pandemic, escalating climate change, political turmoil and a changing religious landscape, it may feel like the days of predictability and stability are behind us. What will the future bring now?

For Christians who have been taught that having faith in Jesus means being certain, times of uncertainty can feel like a spiritual problem to solve, rather than a spiritual opportunity to embrace. However, the Bible shows us that God's people have often lived in deep uncertainty. Adam and Eve left the garden for an unknown future beyond. Sarah laughed to hear she would have a child in her old age. Moses questioned his call before leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt—only to face forty years of uncertain wandering in the desert. When Israel's kingdom and temple crumbled, prophets like Isaiah consoled the exiles in Babylon who did not know whether they would ever return to their homeland. Jesus and his disciples lived under an empire's rule, knowing that the status quo could change at any time. Early Christians shared the Gospel and built churches without any certainty about what would become of this new faith. The apostle Paul stood firm in the promises of the Gospel, but his descriptions of faith did not always sound like certainty: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Even Martin Luther, whose certainty about the grace at the heart of the Gospel gave him the confidence to challenge the pope and laid the theological foundations of the Reformation, reportedly came to humbler conclusions at the end of his life. His final words, some say, were not “Here I stand,” or “Salvation by grace through faith,” but rather a simple confession: “We are beggars; that is certain.” In this, Luther displayed the source of his certainty: not his human ability to puzzle out the right theology, but his utter dependence on God for help and hope.

If our ancestors in faith lived and trusted God while remaining in uncertainty, so can we. In that spirit, this series will explore uncertainty not as a failure of faith, but as “the road where faith is found.” (“The road where faith is found” comes from the lyrics of our opening hymn, ELW 326.) Jesus invites us to ask, knock and search for what lies beyond certainty: holy curiosity (June), community (July), and compassion (August) that ground us in the certain love of God in Jesus Christ and accompany us through every unknown.

This June, we begin our series with a look at *curiosity*. Jesus’ ministry often challenged the certainties of the status quo when it came to faith, power and relationships. Curiosity drew people to Jesus and his message. Holy curiosity can still lead us today to the places where God’s love in Jesus transforms “what is” to “what could be.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Think of a time in your life when something that seemed certain suddenly wasn’t. How did you navigate uncertainty, and how did God meet you “on the road”?

“WHAT IS THIS?” JESUS’ MINISTRY OF CURIOSITY

📖 **Read:** Mark 1:21–28; Mark 4:35–41; John 1:43–50

One day, early in his ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum to teach. This was not an unusual thing for Jesus to do. According to the gospels, Jesus often spoke in synagogues. Yet this occasion was apparently remarkable, because afterwards “at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” (Mark 1:28). Why? First, Jesus “taught them as one having authority” (Mark 1:22). Then, when interrupted by the voice of a man with an unclean spirit, Jesus commanded the spirit to be silent and to leave—and it did. The crowd was “amazed” and “astounded” and “kept on asking one another, ‘What is this?’” (Mark 1:27).

This was not the only time that Jesus’ ministry was met with curiosity. Those who encountered Jesus rarely knew for certain what to make of him. They more often responded with questions than with immediate understanding. Even the disciples, who traveled with Jesus and participated in his ministry, remained uncertain about him. After Jesus stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples responded as though it were the first time they had witnessed Jesus in action: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41).

The questions that came from people around Jesus were not only about awe or fear, but about curiosity. Awe alone would likely not have been enough for the disciples to leave behind their familiar lives. Fear alone would have driven them in the opposite direction! Curiosity, on the other hand, compelled the disciples and many others to follow Jesus, seeking to know more. Curiosity connected people to Jesus and to each other. Even when they didn’t understand the meaning of what Jesus was saying and doing, the disciples stayed near to Jesus—until the cross. And even then, when the disciples scattered, it was not because of uncertainty, but because they were certain that it was the end. When the risen Jesus appeared, the disciples finally realized what Jesus had been saying all along: Beyond the certainty of death lies resurrection. After

certainty, God makes the impossible possible.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Imagine yourself living at the time of Jesus. What about his message or ministry might have made you curious to follow him?

CERTAINLY WRONG: (UN)LEARNING FAITH FROM THE DISCIPLES

📖 **Read:** Matthew 16:21–23; Mark 9:2–8; John 3:1–9

Until now, Peter has been having a particularly good day—maybe his best ever. Earlier, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter gave the right answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus praised Peter and declared that he was the rock on which Jesus would build the church. Peter’s position is as sure and certain as bedrock. What could possibly go wrong?

In a transition so humbling that it is almost comical, Peter’s very next move is to stumble. As Jesus explains the death and resurrection that awaits him in Jerusalem, Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). So certain is Peter of his rightness that he corrects the Messiah, the Son of the living God! Jesus answers Peter with his own stern rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23). Suddenly, Peter’s certainty has made him—the rock of the church—into a stumbling block.

When Peter, James and John later follow Jesus up the mountain to witness his transfiguration, Peter again gets it wrong. He eagerly suggests building dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, so that they can stay where they are. “It is good for us to be here,” Peter declares with certainty. It’s not hard to

relate to Peter’s desire to stay, perhaps to prove to Jesus that this time he understands what is happening and knows what to do. But staying on the mountaintop is not the plan. The way of Jesus leads not to withdrawing from the world, but to coming to the people—and to the cross. On some level, Peter must know this: He speaks with certainty, not because he is certain, but because “he did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (Mark 9:6).

We can conclude that certainty is not a requirement for discipleship. (Otherwise, Peter would be disqualified.) On the contrary, too much of our own certainty can keep us from understanding what God is doing. Yet even when this happens, all is not lost. The risen Jesus sends the women at the tomb to go and tell the disciples “and Peter” the good news of the resurrection (Mark 16:7). In Galilee, where it all began, Jesus commissions Peter once more: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). Jesus still chooses Peter to be the foundation stone of the church—a foundation that is not certainty, but humanity.

Certainty can be a strong temptation. It can simplify a complex world and replace fear and worry with a burning warmth that feels like rightness—or righteousness. But certainty doesn’t mean we’re right; and self-righteousness can lead us astray. Curiosity, on the other hand, can lead us to ask, knock and search for Jesus. Curiosity can open doors we never even knew existed.

Consider the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the religious leader who comes to see Jesus by night. As befits his authority, Nicodemus begins the conversation with certainty: “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3:2). There is no question here to indicate what Nicodemus seeks to learn. Still, Jesus seems to know. His response, that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3), may seem to come out of the blue; but this statement astonishes Nicodemus

into voicing the question that he has really come to ask: “How can these things be?” (John 3:9).

Jesus leads Nicodemus beyond his certainty to a place of wonder and curiosity. We can imagine some gentle teasing in Jesus’ tone as he asks Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Curiosity emboldens Nicodemus to ask Jesus the deepest question of his heart. In response, Jesus offers him (and us) some of the most beloved words in all of scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (John 3:16). This conversation had a powerful effect on Nicodemus, who later used his leadership position to defend Jesus (John 7:50-51), and then came with a generous supply of burial spices to help prepare Jesus’ body after his crucifixion (John 19:39-40). Even today, John 3:16 continues to be held by many Christians as the core verse of the Gospel.

The lesson here is important: Jesus can often do more with our honest curiosity than with our stubborn certainty. Those who asked, knocked and sought after Jesus may not have found what they expected, but they found something real and true. May we do the same.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. When did your certainty about something become a stumbling block?
4. When was being certain, and wrong, the best thing that could have happened?

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT: A CURIOUS SERMON ON THE MOUNT

 **Read:** Matthew 5:1-12

The Mount of Beatitudes church sits on the top of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, in a lovingly maintained retreat for worship and reflection,

surrounded by flowers and leafy plants. Like many churches in the area, it also has a curious sign affixed to the church door: “NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE.” Accordingly, most pilgrims enter in a hushed and respectful (if puzzled) silence. Some also happily point out the sign to their nearest preacher. No sermons today!

As a matter of fact, the sign is there to remind tour guides not to lecture inside the sanctuary. However, this has a positive side effect: Pilgrimage groups fan out across the hillside, sitting on rocks or benches to read the Sermon on the Mount in the open air—exactly as the crowds around Jesus first heard it. As the familiar verses flow over them in the sunshine, they may find themselves less focused on Jesus’ words than on the same question the crowds and disciples had during the original sermon: *When is lunch?*

If we pay close attention, however, we find many things to ponder in Jesus’ teaching that challenge what we think we know. In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of people who are blessed. The Greek word used is μακάριοι, meaning “blessed” or “happy.” Curiously, many of the people Jesus names are identified by circumstances of hardship rather than happiness. It’s one thing to hear that the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers are blessed. This makes sense; the Nobel Peace Prize, for example, is offered each year for a similar reason. But what about the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted and reviled? In a culture still fascinated with social media influencers and curated portrayals of daily life, we’re probably more likely to associate blessing with *#livingmy-bestlife* than with *#poorinspirit*.

In truth, this isn’t much different from the time of Jesus. First century Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire, which had a reputation for maintaining peace and prosperity (Pax Romana) that was also a carefully curated image. Beneath the

surface, the empire operated through a power structure that rewarded loyalty and punished dissent—often through a quick and violent response to any attempted acts of resistance. (Remember that Jesus was not the only person crucified by the Romans.)

For Jesus to name as blessed the people who were most on the edges of that power structure was more than curious. It was a challenge to a system that called control “peace” (pax) and claimed divine right to rule over other peoples in their own lands. It was a defense of justice (or “righteousness”) in the face of injustice. Compare Jesus’ blessed ones to their opposites: The rich in spirit (or ego). Those who celebrate while others are mourning. The powerful. Those who have no appetite for justice. The spiteful. The impure in heart. The warmakers. Those who benefit from unjust conditions. Those who are falsely praised and protected and fawned over. Likely, we could all put names and faces to these descriptions from our own contexts. If we’re honest enough, perhaps our own names and faces will be among them. By pronouncing blessing on the least likely candidates, Jesus reveals the difference between blessing and privilege.

In Jesus’ time, as now, unearned privilege due to wealth, social status, race and ethnicity, language, religion, physical and mental ability, gender and other factors favored some with power at the expense of others. The curious crowds on the hill found in Jesus what we may also find if we ask, knock and search through Jesus’ message: the declaration of a different reality. God does not have the same accounting system as we do. God’s place is not with the privileged, but with the vulnerable. And God promises a world made right: a world where those who are suffering are comforted, those who are persecuted are vindicated, and power is restored to those who humbly work for peace and seek justice. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” Jesus says (Matthew 5:8). Perhaps that promise can be extended to the curious in heart as well.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Where might the Beatitudes illustrate the difference between blessing and privilege in your own context?

CONCLUSION: JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW.

According to an oft-told story, during a 1962 lecture in Chicago, Protestant theologian Karl Barth was asked if he could sum up his theology in one sentence. He responded with the well-known words of the children’s hymn: *Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.*

The truth is that even when we find value in uncertainty, as human beings, we still ask, knock and search for what is certain. Our curiosity has a goal: We seek a truth we can stand in and proclaim, “This I know!” Yet when life is swirling around us and the ground underfoot is crumbling, what does it mean to say, “Jesus loves me, this I know”? This proclamation of certainty might sound inadequate, naïve or even arrogant. With so much suffering and injustice in the world, it might seem callous to shrug and say, “Jesus loves me,” especially if the undertone is one of competition. (“I know Jesus loves *me*. You, on the other hand...”)

Yet at the birth of Jesus, the angels proclaimed that God’s incarnation in Jesus is “good news of great joy for all people.” And so, “Jesus loves me, this I know” is a claim everyone should be able to make, because it is true for everyone. It’s also a statement that is noteworthy for what it doesn’t try to say. When people in pain ask, “Why is this happening? What will happen now? What should I do?” proclaiming the love of Jesus does not mean pretending there are easy answers or guessing at a future no one can know. The platitudes of human certainty can ring hollow. Sometimes questions themselves are holy. God’s grace can come through saying less.

It is a powerful witness to speak love into uncertainty. I have seen this witness in the Palestinian

Lutheran church that I accompany as an ELCA missionary, especially during the past year. The trauma of these months has deeply affected both Israelis and Palestinians. But the scale of the suffering, and the balance of power, are not the same. Tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank have been wounded and killed, the great majority of whom are children and women. Millions have been displaced and made homeless in Gaza as homes, hospitals and places of worship have been bombed. Checkpoints in the West Bank have been tightly closed, keeping people from their work, land, families and medical care. Palestinian residents in Israeli areas share that they are afraid to speak Arabic in the streets, which nowadays are filled with Israeli civilians carrying military-grade weapons slung over their shoulders as an unspoken threat. Poverty, hunger and despair are on the rise.

Local churches like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land are working hard to address the large-scale trauma and suffering of their neighbors. The attacks of Oct. 7 were terrible and unjust, but the vast majority of the Palestinian people had nothing to do with them. And it is also terrible and unjust that mothers in Gaza now write their children's names on their bodies with permanent marker, so that their children can be identified when they are found in the rubble of the next bombing. Our companions are asking us, as fellow Christians: "If the image of God is in all people, how can it be justice that the death of innocent Israelis justifies war, but the death of innocent Palestinians is our own fault?"

How powerful it is, then, when Palestinian Christians still say: *Jesus loves me, this I know*. These words become a declaration of *sumud*, an Arabic word meaning "steadfast faith" (and the name of our new ELCA initiative, *Sumud: for justice in Palestine and Israel*). What is happening in the Holy Land is pure uncertainty. We do not know when or how the current crisis will end, what

will remain, or what the future might be. Yet our Palestinian siblings in Christ are certain of this: It is not happening because Jesus has stopped loving the people. God does not hate them; God has not abandoned them. At Christmas, the Lutheran church in Bethlehem created a manger scene that placed the baby Jesus amid concrete rubble. That image, shared around the world, offered a clear message: Because God is with us in Jesus, God is also in the rubble of Gaza. Because Jesus went to the cross, Jesus is with all who suffer. *Jesus loves us, this we know*. Blessed are they who mourn. Blessed are we all, for the love of Jesus sustains us in uncertainty.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. How might curiosity, rather than certainty, guide us as we ponder what is happening in places of conflict, like the Holy Land?
7. What does it mean for one certainty—Jesus' love—to stand at the heart of our faith?

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, bless all your people with the gift of holy curiosity; that as we ask, knock and search for you, we find you revealed in the love of Jesus. Strengthen us in the certainty of your love, that we may continue to follow you in humility and faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"Jesus Loves Me!" (ELW 595) 🌿

After certainty

Session one

Curiosity

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the first session of Gather's summer Bible study series, "After certainty." Drawing from biblical texts and Lutheran tradition, we'll ponder what it means to live faithfully in times of uncertainty. As we discuss how our ancestors in faith also lived in deep uncertainty, we will see how God leads us beyond certainty to curiosity (June), community (July) and compassion (August)—practices that help us to navigate uncertainty as people rooted in the certain love of God in Jesus Christ for us and for the world.

We begin by asking: Are we truly living in a time "after certainty"? In 2008, American religion writer Phyllis Tickle published a book, *The Great Emergence*, that claims just that. Every 500 years, Tickle argues, Christianity undergoes a period of significant upheaval and change—a sort of church "rummage sale" through which outdated things are discarded, and new ways of being the church emerge. Beginning with the time of Jesus in the first century, Tickle points to the transition from the Roman Empire to the medieval period around 500, the Great Schism of 1054, and the Protestant Reformation in 1517, as key events that upended old certainties and created deep change in the church. By Tickle's calculations, 21st century Christianity is due for the next great transition; and it is arriving right on time.

Consider, Tickle writes, how the 20th and 21st centuries have also brought unprecedented change to the world. Scientific and technological advances,

changing social and family structures, and a diversifying global Christianity are all contributing to a changing church. Today—nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st century—we could likely add a few things to Phyllis Tickle's list: the age of "terrorism" and "anti-terrorism"; increased political polarization; artificial intelligence and a loss of trust in institutions; the rise of the "nones" and "dones" who claim no religious affiliation. Within five years, the COVID-19 pandemic changed communities, workplaces and human relationships in ways that we cannot yet fully comprehend.

It seems clear that these times will shape what the church and the world will become—but how? We do not know for certain. Of course, neither did the apostle Paul, who wrote that "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Perhaps certainty is only possible in retrospect. In any case, we're in good company.

There is more good news. If Tickle was right, this period of deep and widespread change—as challenging and painful as it may be—is not an end, but rather a beginning. In a time when so many lament that the church is dying, it is encouraging to imagine that the church is instead emerging into something new. That theory cannot yet be proven, but it rests on a sure and certain promise: The love of God in Jesus Christ gives us our foundation and our roots. Where might we go, and grow, from here? These are questions of curiosity, this month's theme.

Secure in God's grace, we can let go of the need to be certain. God can guide us through our questions and searching into new realizations and new realities. This study won't offer all the answers, but it will encourage you and your group as you ask holy questions. We'll seek biblical guidance for facing life after certainty—and before what comes next.

PREPARE

As you prepare to lead this series with your group,

consider using one of these ideas as a promotional activity prior to the study day or as an icebreaker on the day of your study.

- Set up a large blank sheet of paper or a dry-erase board. (Use the “chat” feature if you are meeting via online video conferencing.) Invite group members to write down examples of things in their lives and the world that are uncertain. When everyone has contributed, read their responses aloud. What common themes emerge? What else do you notice?
- Alternatively, invite every participant to bring a mystery object hidden in a bag. Each person can take a turn to offer brief hints about their mystery object while the others guess. The person who correctly guesses an object with the fewest hints, and the person whose object needs the most hints to be identified, both win. (Small prizes are optional but could motivate the group!)

WRAP-UP

- Ask each member to share aloud (or journal about at home) a certainty that keeps them grounded. What do they know for sure?
- Connect each month’s study theme to a follow up action. For “Curiosity,” partner with a local school or educational program to help support teachers and students through a school supply drive, school lunch fund or other effort.

SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in a 90- or 120-minute session (or a series of weekly half-hour studies). Larger groups can break up into pairs or groups of three for discussion, to keep the whole group engaged. Here are suggestions for shortening the study:

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask group members to read the entire study before they come.
2. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
3. Ask each participant to name one thing they appreciated in the study and the one question they would like to discuss.
4. Spend the remaining time discussing the questions raised by your group.
5. End with “Closing prayer”

A LITTLE LONGER (45 TO 60 MINUTES)

1. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Do “Introduction.”
3. Add one section from the core of the study (“What is this,” “Certainly wrong,” or “Blessed are the poor in spirit”).
4. Read the “Conclusion.” Do one of the questions if time allows.
5. End with “Closing prayer.” Add “Closing hymn” if time allows.

A LITTLE LONGER (45 TO 60 MINUTES)

This “book report” format works well with medium-to-larger-sized groups.

1. Sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Break into smaller groups. Assign each group one of the five sections of the study (“Introduction,” “What is this,” “Certainly wrong,” “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and “Conclusion”) to read and discuss for 20 minutes. (Note: If you only have four small groups, ask if one group could do both the Introduction and Conclusion.)
3. Conclude with 3- to 5-minute presentations from each group on what they see as the takeaways from their study section.
4. End with “Closing prayer” and “Closing hymn.” 🌿

**Pilate condemns Jesus to death
(Station 1)**

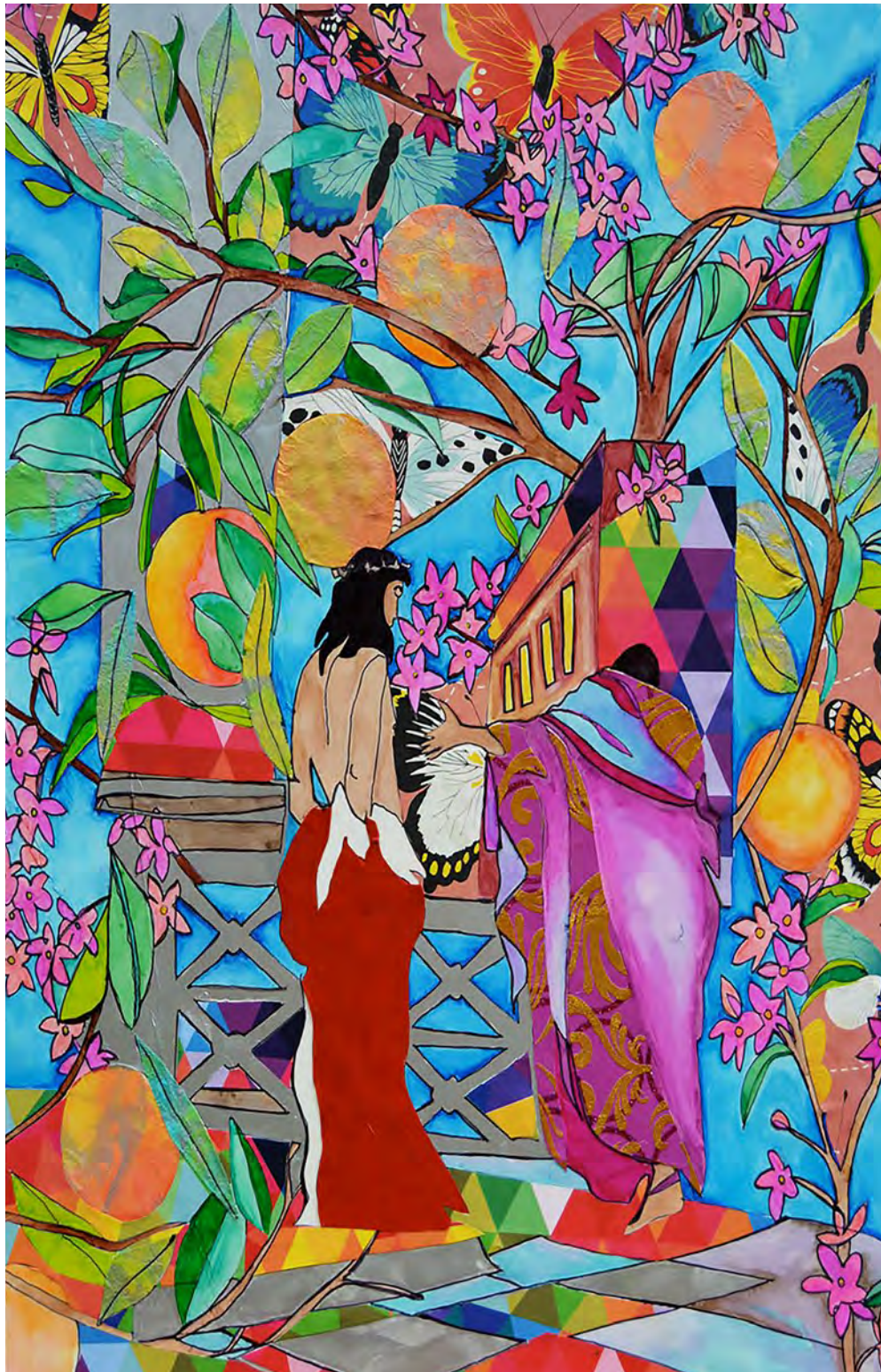
*The beginnings of mania,
the beginnings of depression*

The hallucinogenic mania that poet Robert Lowell describes as “a magical orange grove in a nightmare” is where we find Jesus at the beginning of this story. Mania, in its beginning, can feel like a special invitation into a brighter, blazing alternate reality. Always, though, there is a darkness lurking. A toll must eventually be paid for the sleepless nights and grandiose mornings.

In a mirror dimly

My struggles actually
brought me closer to
everyone else.

TEXT AND ART BY
MARY BUTTON



FOR A LONG TIME, I felt like I was stumbling through life with both hands tied behind my back. The harder I worked to project an image of myself to the world as a confident professional artist, the less that felt like the real me. At the end of the day, after work, after a conference, after a workshop, the only “me” that felt authentic was the exhausted, barely-holding-it-together me. I spent years feeling this way. In fact, I felt that way throughout my 20s and most of my 30s. It was a devastatingly lonely feeling, feeding into a seemingly endless feedback loop of depression and impostor syndrome. I turn 40 this year. If I could go back in time and tell my younger self one thing, it would be this: *Everyone feels this way. Absolutely everyone.*

I know this for a fact because I have spent a decade talking to church folks about mental health. It began in 2014, when I created a series of paintings called *Stations of the Cross: Mental Illness*. These paintings explore the nature of mental illness through the lens of the Passion narrative.

Moments along Jesus’s journey with the cross are paired with illustrations of various artists’ descriptions of their experiences of mental illness. I’ve created a total of 11 Stations of the Cross series, addressing social issues like mass incarceration, climate change, COVID and the rights of indigenous people, but no series has resonated with viewers like

Stations of the Cross: Mental Illness. I’ve traveled across the U.S. with the artwork, from Macon, Georgia, to Edina, Minnesota, sharing with people how my own experience of living with bipolar disorder informed the creation of the series. I’ve also facilitated conversations with congregations about how they can be more welcoming to people living with mental illness.

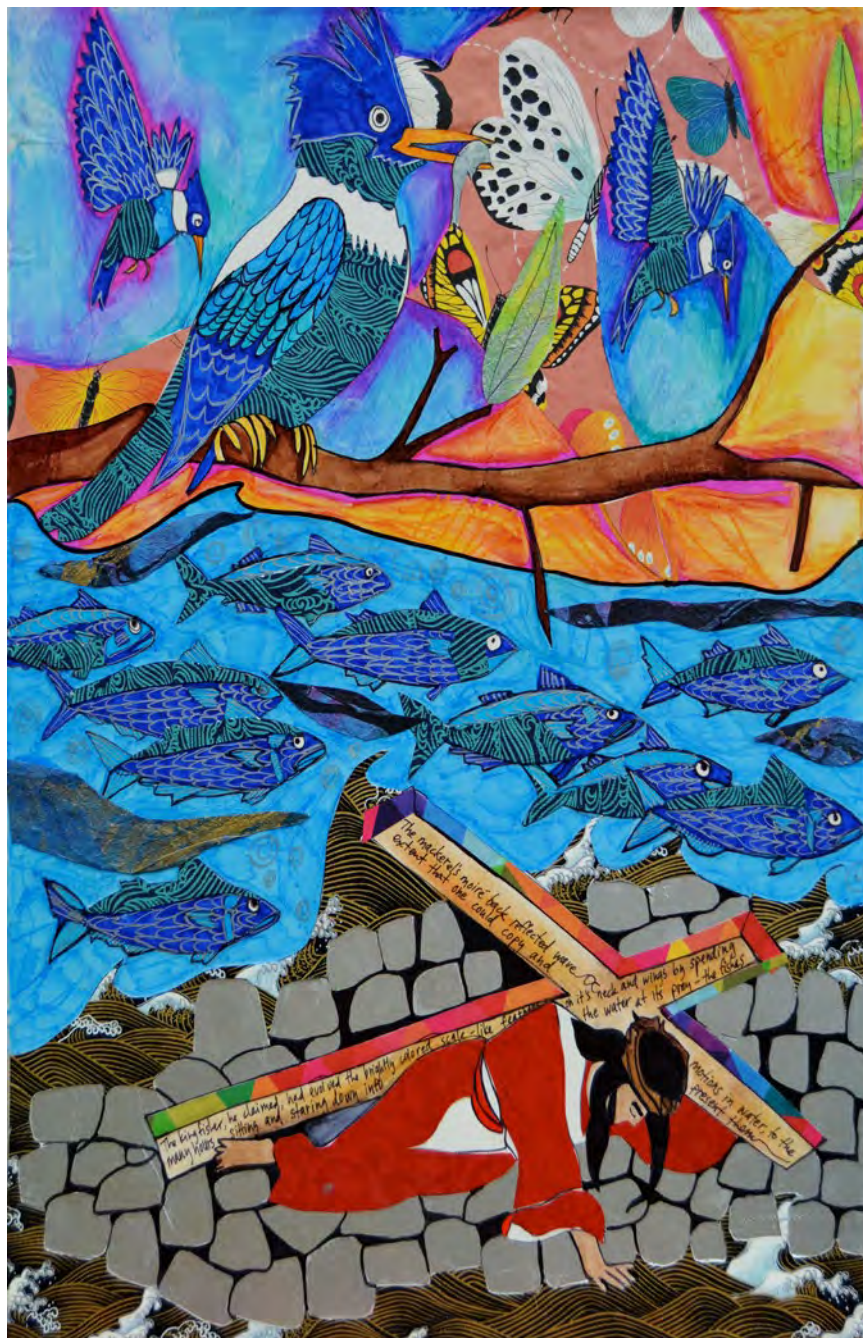
Everywhere I go offering this series, whether it’s a presentation or workshop or lecture, healing conversations happen among the folks who linger—the folks who fill up half a styrofoam cup of coffee and hang back to talk when the Sunday school class is over. They share stories while everyone else starts to make their way somewhere else. Stories about loved ones lost to suicide. Stories about childhoods spent walking on eggshells because of parents struggling with addiction disorders. Stories about relationships strained by the sorrow of grief and trauma. Stories about how hard it is to get out of bed sometimes. Stories about how devastating it is to pretend it’s all OK.

FULLY KNOWN

I released *Stations of the Cross: Mental Illness* the year I turned 30. It took almost a full decade of hearing these stories for them to have the cumulative effect necessary for me to realize something: The struggles I’d always thought isolated me from everyone are actually the experiences that

bind me to everyone around me. This epiphany brought me into a deeper understanding of St. Paul's immortal words on the nature of love: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). I used to think that this passage was about seeing others—that when the kingdom of Jesus Christ is realized, we will fully know and love one another as Jesus would have us love one another.

Now I realize that St. Paul is talking about fully knowing and being fully known to one another *and* ourselves. I may still feel like I'm two people: a pastor/artist who teaches and preaches (and paints!), and the barely-holding-it-together daughter, sister and aunty. However, God knows me fully and completely. All of me is reconciled and embraced in the love of God, just as all of each and every one of you is reconciled and embraced in the love of God. 🌸



Jesus falls for the first time (Station 3)

The creativity of mania

"The kingfisher, he claimed, had evolved the brightly colored, scale-like feathers on its neck and wings by spending many hours sitting and staring down into the water at its prey – the fishes. The mackerel's moire back reflected wave motions in the water, to the extent that one could copy and present them as waves on a canvas." —Olof Lagencrantz, speaking about the mind of Swedish writer August Strindberg (1849-1912)

Building walls or windmills?

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFSKY

WHEN I WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, we observed May Day with a big outdoor celebration. We had a May Pole festooned with ribbons, and the sixth-grade girls had the honor of weaving the ribbons in and out in a dance. Big cans that formerly held food service peaches or beans were covered in aluminum foil, filled with lilacs from many home gardens, and placed all around the stage. Parents sat on folding chairs in our school's parking lot and watched with pride (or amusement, hard to tell which). From today's perspective, it all seems so quaint and innocent.

It was the spring of 1971 when I danced around the May Pole. Truth be told, a lot was happening at that time that was far from quaint and innocent. The Vietnam War raged on. Prisoners took hostages in a riot at New York's Attica Prison. The Ohio National Guard shooting of unarmed college students at Kent State had happened just the year before. The Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution would go before both houses of Congress the following year. Many commercial airplanes were hijacked. The Jonestown Massacre and the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island would close the decade.

In the decades since then, has much changed? Women still earn far less than men for equal work, especially women of color. The war in Vietnam is over, but new wars rage on. Acts rooted in systemic racism fill each day's news feed. We live with the coronavirus and all its implications, including the disproportionate impact it has had on people of color.

Need I go on? Human nature being what it is, little has changed other than the names of the people and the places involved.

We can, however, celebrate some changes within the Church. Through the redeeming and reconciling love of God in Jesus, and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, the

church has transformed and reformed. We've celebrated 50 years of women's ordination. Women now serve as pastors, bishops, seminary professors, and college and seminary presidents. Many women, lay and ordained, hold important positions in national expressions of the church, including social ministry organizations and relief agencies. Those in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships are ordained and called to public ministry in our church.

Despite those changes, much more needs to be done if we are to honestly follow Jesus' call to just love. Transformation and reformation are never easy. According to a Chinese proverb, when the winds of change blow, some people build walls, and some people build windmills.

"An openness to change and the ability to allow for diversity in functioning shall be among the desired results of the structure of this organization," reads one of the principles of Women of the ELCA (Article III, Section 4, Women of the ELCA Churchwide Constitution).

Are you building walls or windmills? Do you support everyone in your congregation, especially those who propose new and different ways of organizing and accomplishing our shared mission? If we are open to change in our personal lives, perhaps we can bring that same spirit to our shared work as Women of the ELCA. We owe it to ourselves and our contemporaries, to those on whose shoulders we stand, and to those who will follow us. 🌿



Nothing can separate us.

BY JULIA SEYMOUR

HOLY AND ABIDING PRESENCE, out of the depths, I cry to you! Like so many before me, I wonder: “How long?” “Why me?” “Why them?” “Why now?” “Where are you?” and “Why have you forsaken us?” If I were to rend my garments each time these thoughts come, I would no longer have any whole clothes. While I am not in despair every moment, every day, I am aware of the grief and pain around me, swelling and ebbing like a tide, like breathing. I remember Romans 8:38, and listen for the whisper, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

At each baptismal service, we renounce the forces that oppose your Divine Will. We say no to them with our whole hearts, our full selves. We reject them. Yet they remain at work in ways beyond our understanding, sometimes beyond human recognition. Those forces create division, stir up dissension, stamp out curiosity and perpetuate injustice by sustaining the feeling of indignity. Whether they are spiritual forces, powers and principalities or internal struggles with sin, again I renounce them. I cling to this solid rock: Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

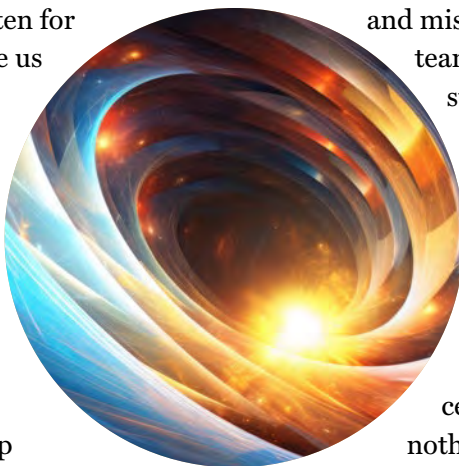
I remember a very bleak time when I was nearly persuaded by my own brain that things would be easier for those around me if I weren't there. In that fog, I was unable to see the fact that if we remove ourselves, the fabric of time and space and experience does not mend itself around the place where we once were. Instead, a hole—shaped like the one who has gone—remains and must be navigated

around and lived with forever. God of love, be merciful to those who are having those same thoughts right now. Pour out for them the peace that passes all understanding. Bring people to listen, accompany and hope alongside that chasm. Let the Spirit echo: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

Lord of Life, grant us wisdom and courage as individuals and communities, as congregations and mission starts, as ministries and care teams. Give us patience to listen to the stories of others, as many times as they need us to. Preserve in us the ability to stand with the vulnerable, especially those needing mental health help. Tend within us gardens of gentle compassion, blooming with faithfulness to Christ alone, rather than our own certainty. May we truly trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

In the wake of mental health struggles, war, death and trauma, those of us who are caregivers, loved ones, aid workers and witnesses carry unanswered questions, anger, grief and a sense of inadequacy. Christ, have mercy! In our deep nights of the soul, may someone's little light shine like a star, helping us to find that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Strengthen our hearts to carry one another in faith.

O Spirit of solace, amid the turmoil of what we cannot explain, at times we're sure the center cannot hold, let this blessed assurance console: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen. 🌿





This Little Baby Went to Market ...



... Wrapped up in a
Newborn Kit Towel!

The promise of a GHM Newborn Kit helped motivate this little guy's mom to come from her village in Liberia to the Lutheran Hospital, where health professionals could assist her when it was time for her baby to be born. The gift of a GHM Newborn Kit connects trained healthworkers with a mom-to-be in countries deeply challenged by poverty, where many women still give birth in their village. It's a connection that can save her life. For

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