

**Four Faith Communities  
Share Their Stories**

at

**“*Mental Illness  
As a Spiritual Journey:  
Creating Caring Communities*”**

Sponsored By

***Faith Connections on Mental Illness***

at

St. Thomas More  
Chapel Hill, NC

**Friday, April 1, 2011**

8:30 am - 4:00 pm

**Four Faith Communities Tell Their Story**

**Chapel of the Cross**

*I recognized the woman as soon as I walked into the day room of the Acute Admissions Unit in John Umstead Hospital one day about three years ago. About sixty years old, confused-looking and disheveled, hers was a familiar face from my time at the Inter-Faith Council's Community Kitchen. I'd eaten several lunches with K., and once tried to get her a bed at the Women's Shelter, only to be told that she was not welcome there due to previous violent behavior towards residents and staff. She was eager to chat once she learned that I was not a social worker, but a chaplain, and an Episcopalian. Life had been hard for many years, and K had bounced from the*

*streets to the mental hospital, and back to the streets again more times than she could remember. She couldn't remember when was the last time she'd been to church, but she had fond memories of the church she and her family attended when she was a child growing up in Chapel Hill: Chapel of the Cross.*

It's tempting to think of people with mental illness as “other” than we are. It's tempting to think that their plight will never be ours. But people with mental illness aren't of another species. People with mental illness are our mothers and fathers and our sisters and brothers. People with mental illness may be our children. People with mental illness may even be us. Very few of us go through life without being touched personally by disorders of the mind. Even in today's world, ignorance and shame may keep mental illness and those who suffer from it in the shadows and separate them from family, community, and yes, even communities of faith. *Rev. Maggie Silton*

**Community Church UU**

Mental illness often makes people uncomfortable. Church members do not usually bring casseroles when someone is diagnosed with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

When a person has symptoms of cancer or heart disease seeking medical help becomes a priority – even if the symptoms prove to be unrelated to disease. One of the “symptoms” of mental illness is denial – an inability to recognize the reality of mental illness. When a family member or friend cannot see what seems obvious to others we don't know what to do. We are afraid to ask for help or information – even from our faith community.

Many congregations are working to change that. The Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist had a service entitled “*Out of Exile: Bringing our Awareness of Mental Illness in from the Margins.*” The sermon was presented jointly by Pat Devine, retired District Court Judge, pioneer of the Orange and Chatham County Mental Health Court and mother of a son with paranoid schizophrenia and by our minister, Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson.

Pat Devine spoke honestly and eloquently as a judge and as a mother. She named the emotions so many family members feel: pain,

helplessness, guilt, and shame. She talked about how hard it is to understand the psychic pain caused by mental illness. She described the experience of knowing parents of successful children, themselves parents of successful children – and wondering if they all pity her. She also talked about her admiration for her son, for the courage it takes for him to face the day, for continuing to be compassionate, wise and loving, for owning his illness, for coping with it as best he can.

Her description of the mentally ill as the most dismissed, distrusted, disdained and feared members of society was followed by a plea for the congregation to pray for people with mental illness – and their families and to work to increase – not slash – programs that can help them have a productive and meaningful life.

Maj-Britt followed by asking those in the congregation who know someone – a friend or family member – or have themselves been diagnosed with mental illness to stand. Nearly everyone stood.

She then talked about her own experiences and described a faith community as a place where people can learn to live with the human condition – which is “brokenness.” She urged the congregation to be willing to help share the burden of mental illness that is currently being carried mostly by those who suffer. She closed by saying, “May our lives be a healing, walking prayer for the human family.” *Susan Spalt*

### Amity UMC

*A loving and beloved husband and father, he had recently been laid off and was seeking spiritual guidance from a compassionate clergy with thirty years in the ministry. Two days later, he was dead.*

*“He told me straight out he was depressed,” recalled the stunned pastor, “I didn’t think I needed to ask if he was considering suicide. I thought if he was able to recognize and admit depression, he was on his way to recovery and would be okay.”*

At the same time they rallied around the man’s family with comfort and care, the church where I worked at the time also spoke about the cause of death only in hushed tones – if they mentioned it at all. And I, who had a depressed husband of my own at home, began a very slow and still evolving quest to empathize with and support people around me who I know to be living in emotional pain.

Mental illness manifests in multiple forms, which was especially evident during my nearly 10 years as a church secretary: the elderly war veteran who, no matter where he moved, was kept awake at night by a neighbor “beating” on his house or “gunning” her sewing machine or “stalking” him through the ceiling; the young woman who drifted from town-to-town believing that floods, fires, and other tragedies befell those who did not treat her kindly; the man who claimed government agents followed him across the country, watching him via satellite; a grade-schooler who attacked a family member, and, after hospitalization, spent time in group homes; the man who finally figured out he lost his job every year around the anniversary of his mother’s murder; the mother who had three sets of children taken from her because she couldn’t or wouldn’t get treatment; the parents who flinch each time the phone rings fearing yet another behavior mishap or suspension from the school; the husband, wife, parent, child, co-worker, or friend who cannot muster the energy or will to get out of bed and face the world or who self-medicate their isolation, anxiety, insecurity, or despair through drugs, alcohol, or other means; the church member(s) who were “in the hospital” but, unlike with surgery, strokes, heart attacks, or cancer, the reason was never specified; the highly regarded youth pastor in a cross-town church who took his own life; the respected, successful businessman with an incredibly sweet wife who took his own life; the (fill in the blank from your own memory) who took their own life.

I could go on and on. So could you. Because, as they say in NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), “Everyone knows someone.” Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, “Everyone knows too many someones” – if we truly open our hearts and eyes to see.

But don’t we really secretly think they are weak? It’s a character flaw? That since it is “all in their head” they could get better if they just try hard enough? That if they were really a good Christian, believed, and prayed, they would be okay? Don’t we just want to scream, “Deal with it and move on!”?

Until the Rev. Vernon Tyson preached a sermon on depression about three years ago (Spring 2008) at Amity United Methodist Church I had NEVER heard mental illness openly discussed in

a formal church setting. So, what does Amity do? Last year during Amity's Lent 2010 focus on social justice issues, we invited a guest speaker to share her personal experience with mental illness. Amity publicizes local mental health opportunities, including the 12-week Family-to-Family course for caregivers, which I have attended. Amity also participated in NAMI Walks 2010 and is fielding a team again this year.

Several Amity members, including our pastor, Rev. Tuck Taylor, will be attending Faith Connections on Mental Illness's 3rd Annual Conference, "Mental Illness as a Spiritual Journey: Creating Caring Communities." Featuring a renowned speaker from California, break-out sessions, and professional credit from AHEC, the conference will provide information on how faith communities can offer the same unconditional love, grace, and acceptance for mental illnesses that they do for physical ailments. With over 300 signed up to attend, the nearly-full conference still has a few open slots.

Amity's ministry to the mentally ill within our walls is still evolving. Our sponsorship of and attendance at Faith Connections' conference is a step in the right direction. My journey is evolving too. My own brief bouts of depression and despair have given me glimpses into the world of those who suffer more deeply or chronically. I always recommend professional help when someone is going through a very dark time – and I am not afraid to ask if they have or are considering taking their own life.

Some will be cured of their mental illness. Some will merely cope. But coping is better than the alternative. Our streets, prisons, and cemeteries are filled with the alternative. *Kim Batson*

### **Binkley Baptist Church**

I was on my way to church on a busy first Sunday last October. That day was not only World Communion Sunday, but also NAMI's Mental Illness Awareness Week. I anticipated the worship service would be long and the bulletin would be thick. I knew there would be an insert in the bulletin acknowledging brain disorders as a major health issue and calling attention to local mental health resources; that has become more or less a tradition at Binkley. I was thinking that perhaps the educational insert would be the only emphasis on mental illness that day. How wrong I was!

That Sunday the gathered congregation heard and responded to a powerful communion meditation, entitled "The World Does Not Need This Stigma". The Gospel scripture lesson was from the Gospel of Mark about Jesus' encounter with the man with an "unclean spirit". Referring to that scripture, Rev. Dale Osborne commented, "Jesus connected with a person who was quite

probably dealing with a mental illness of some variety. Mark says that he had an unclean spirit in him that made him cry out in Jesus presence. In today's world of modern science people who cry out or who seem to be unable to control their voice or actions are said to be living with a mental illness rather than an unclean spirit."

From my seat in the choir I could see and feel rapt attention of those in the pews. I was listening intently. My pastor was talking directly about experiences I was familiar with as a family member of persons living with mental illness. My pastor was acknowledging the pain of stigma and the basic unfairness of and injustice of stigma.

Continuing his meditation, Rev Osborne summed up by saying,

*"I encourage you therefore, to educate yourselves about mental illness and the people who live with brain disorders. Educate yourself so that you might liberate yourself from the unholy practice of shunning and avoidance. Jesus' example is clear not only in Mark's gospel reading but in countless other passages where he places compassion and healing far above the glories of power and place. Educate yourself by connecting to individuals and families who have felt the pain of the stigma our world does not need."*

Then Rev. Osborne asked, "Who are those people and families who deal with brain disorders?" At that point I expected him to answer his own rhetorical question, but he surprised me. Acknowledging he was taking a "leap of faith," he took an action I doubt he would or could have done in years past. He asked those in the congregation who lived with mental illness or had family members who were living with mental illness, to please raise their hands. From my vantage point in the choir, I could see that, along with my raised hand, more than half the folks in the pews were raising their hands. What an affirming moment that was. "Look around you, friends and members of Binkley", Pastor Osborne said. "God is showing you one of the miracles of community living. Let us remember this blessing of compassionate awareness as we receive God's blessing at the table of Grace and abundant love".

As a long-time member of the Binkley faith family, I believe we've made progress individually and as a congregation, and we still have a ways to go. Key to overcoming stigma is disclosure and education. Acknowledgment overcomes fear, naming the name of the illness, saying it out loud, raising your hand; Rev. Osborne took a chance and gave us that opportunity! Our congregational experience over the past two decades regarding the personal and social issues around mental illness continues to unfold. During that time a number of individuals have taken the step of acknowledging they or family members live with a

brain disorder, tending to bring others out of the closet. Each disclosure seems to help others to confide with increasing feelings of comfort and safety. Individuals also have taken the lead in collaboration with clergy, to create educational and supportive opportunities. Increased knowledge of the broad social and economic and health care issues around mental health leads many to social action and participation in advocacy efforts around specific mental health issues. Binkley has had a team in NAMI WALKS and participation in that event continues to grow each year. We've been fortunate at Binkley in having supportive leadership and collaboration with clergy through the years. That support has been fostered through the advocacy of those individuals and families affected by mental illness, who continue to "push the envelope."

The following excerpt (used with permission) is one person's email response to Rev. Osborne's communion meditation. Stigmabusting messages are so important from wherever they come. When a strong voice against stigma comes from the pulpit, it can be very powerful indeed.

*"I just wanted to thank you again for your sermon this morning. It was awe inspiring and one of the most moving church services I have ever been to.*

*My older brother is mentally ill. Probably one of the most difficult things about coping with his illness has been the stigma surrounding it. In many ways I had lost my best friend when he became ill. Since church today I have thought a lot about how brave he is....*

*Today was the first time I have been with a group of people, more or less randomly selected, almost all of whom shared that mental illness had touched their lives in some way. I cannot even begin to tell you how powerful that was.*

*I want you to know that as a minister what you shared today was more important than you probably realize. One of the places where I have felt hatred (rooted, I think in misunderstanding) directed at my brother the most has been in his church at home. Much of the way my brother's illness has manifested itself has been through religious delusions, which of course has complicated our family's religious life in a number of ways.*

*Please know that your sermon today was pretty much life changing for me. Thank you." Barbara Nettles-Carlson*

## ***Faith Connections on Mental Illness***

*An inter-faith coalition of faith communities dedicated to increasing understanding of mental illness through education, advocacy, and support.*

**Faith Connections meets on the 3rd Friday of each month at 3:30 p.m.,  
St. Thomas More ♦ 940 Carmichael St. ♦ Chapel Hill, NC 27514**

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