

The Church—A Healing Presence in Jesus' Name

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Introduction:

Mental illness is part of the world's burden of disease. According to the National Institute of Mental Health—"26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year." Mental disorder is the number one cause of disability in North America.

Our identity is found in our mind, our emotions, and attitudes. A broken leg is not seen the same way as a broken spirit.

In order for us to comprehend the importance of emotional health and wellness in the life and mission of the Church it is necessary for us to inquire if emotional health and wellness is important to God. It is necessary that we press not only for a general answer—but for specific ways in which God demonstrates His attention to emotional health.

Let us consider some Bible passages that provide insight on this matter:

Genesis 1: Before God brings human beings into the picture He creates a whole environment in which they could thrive. He places human beings in this setting and endows them with identity, purpose, meaning, relationship and work.

When sin enters and the whole scheme of identity, purpose, meaning, relationship and work is corrupted by human action, God comes quickly to the rescue. He addresses their fear, their guilt, their isolation, their alienation and anger—the issues that so often serve as the soil for depression and mental illness.

Exodus: The story of the exodus is the metanarrative within which the Old Testament people of God find their identity and purpose. It is an example of God engaged in mission.

In the exodus God responded to all the dimensions of Israel's need. Our commitment to mission must demonstrate the same broad totality of concern for human need that God demonstrated.

The tendency of religions has been to care more for religion than for humanity; Christ cared more for humanity than for religion--rather, His care for humanity was the chief expression of His religion.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22: When the Bible talks about poverty it refers to people who are destitute, not to those who may have lost a few percentage points in their stock market investment values. The poor are those who are most at risk, those who have no cushion of support in life. It is the same for the stranger and the fatherless.

Poverty is not just an economic dimension of life. Poverty affects emotional health and wellness. So when we read in the Bible about God's care for the poor, those who are destitute, we must also picture those whose emotional health and wellness is at risk because the fundamentals for living are beyond their reach.

Isaiah 58:6, 7: In this passage God connects religious acts (i.e. fasting) with His desired behavior towards the poor.

Jeremiah 22:15, 16: The prophet Jeremiah contrasts the ungodly and wicked king Jehohaz with his illustrious father, Josiah. Knowledge of God must be seen as something more than a set of propositions concerning God's existence, character and disposition. Knowledge of God needs to be translated into practice. The Christian life is one of behavior not only belief.

2 Corinthians 1:3, 4: The followers of Jesus Christ are invited to "comfort those who are in any trouble" even as we ourselves are comforted by God.

The Example of Jesus:

Jesus identifies with human need. He described the Son of man coming in all His glory and saying to the nations gathered before Him, "I was

hungry...I was thirsty...I was a stranger...I was naked...I was sick...I was in prison..." (Matthew 25:31-46)

Matthew 11:28-30: Here Jesus invites those with heavy burdens to find relief and rest by coming to Him.

Mark 10:46-52: The healing of blind Bartimaeus is one of the most instructive healing miracles of Jesus for it deals with several dimensions at once:

The multitude and the minority. We live in an age where bigness counts. Large quantity is valued. Mass is important. Jesus arrests our preoccupation with quantity and mass by demonstrating a consuming interest in the plight of one person. The message of Jesus is that an individual matters greatly.

Secondly, this story raises the issue of tension between the spiritual and the secular, between theology and sociology. The crowds who followed Jesus heard the same cry as He did. But they dismissed it as something that was not of interest or concern to Him because it wasn't of interest or concern to them. They had built a wall of distinction between the religion and relief. The burning issues of the day were theological: who is the Christ? have you been keeping the law? how much tithe did you pay? And the crying need of humanity was relegated to the periphery of life.

Jesus shows that theology and service belong together. Any attempt to segregate the two diminishes both. The cry of Bartimaeus is that poverty, suffering, unemployment, sickness, hunger are religious problems. Yet we often say: Keep the church out of economic questions. Jesus demonstrated that all human need is His business. It still is.

Thirdly, we see in this story that Jesus has resolved the tension between the momentary and the momentous. He is on His way to Jerusalem where the final scenes of His earthly life will be played out in awful and public array. His ministry is coming to a climax. All the strands of His teaching, the great focus of prophecy is about to be revealed. Big things are at stake. Yet the Master stops! This single moment, which really

would be unnoticed amidst the heightening drama just on the horizon, represents a moment of destiny for a solitary soul.

A consuming interest in the proclamation of end-time events can distort our vision of service in the here and now.

Mental Health and Church Mission:

This brief survey indicates something of God's concern for emotional health and wellbeing. It is this picture of God's interest and care that ought to inform our understanding of how the Church should relate to emotional matters.

What We Can Do:

1. Celebrate the freedom and security of salvation.

Those who teach, preach and write the gospel message must be sure that they are communicating the gospel correctly. They must make sure that grace is bigger than guilt. It is all too easy for people in a faith community to think of salvation in terms of performance-based eligibility rather than a performance-based response to grace.

Ellen White described her own struggles as a young teenager. As a child she viewed God as a "stern tyrant compelling men to blind obedience." When preachers would describe the fires of an eternally burning hell, she personalized the horror of that experience. She wrote: "While listening to these terrible descriptions, my imagination would be so wrought upon that the perspiration would start, and it was difficult to suppress a cry of anguish, for I seemed already to feel the pains of perdition."

She recalled one occasion: "Despair overwhelmed me, and...no ray of light pierced the gloom that encompassed me." Her "feelings were very sensitive" and at one point she feared she would "lose" her "reason." Ellen White recollected that "sometimes for a whole night" she would not dare to close her eyes, but "kneel upon the floor, praying silently with a dumb agony that cannot be described."

Finally, at about age 15, she talked with someone who helped her to better understand the loving character of God. She pointed to her interview with Levi Stockman, a Millerite Methodist minister, as providing her with the most help. Stockman was sympathetic to Ellen's emotional pain and even shared her tears. She wrote that she "obtained" from Stockman "more knowledge on the subject of God's love and pitying tenderness than from all the sermons and exhortations to which I have ever listened."¹

2. Break the silence/remove the stigma.

Many people are fearful of mental illness and do not know how to relate to someone who experiences mental illness. In contrast to physical illness, which is seen as temporary, mental illness is often considered permanent and untreatable.

We might think that the mentally ill are on the margins of society. They are really in the mainstream when you consider the prevalence of mental illness in society. And with medical knowledge today mental illnesses can be treated and managed effectively for most people.

Unfortunately the media often either reinforces terror of mentally ill or makes comedy of them. Amusement parks use mental illness to entertain and terrify, with rides like "Psycho Mouse," "Psycho House," "Psycho Drome," "Dr. D. Mented's Asylum for the Criminally Insane," "The Edge of Madness: Still Crazy," and "Psycho Path."

When we gather as a church family we must be careful that we are not trying to sustain a sense of spiritual community by exaggerated piety and polite behavior. We are all broken people—in various stages of being mended by the Great Physician.

So, let us not be afraid to talk about it. Let us acknowledge the presence of mental health issues in our circle of acquaintances and in the Church. Let us talk about it publicly—but not with jokes.

¹ See Merlin D Burt, "Ellen G White and Mental Health," *Dialogue* (20-3 2008) p. 12. See also Ellen G White, *Life Sketches*, p. 28-39.

Let us find out what can be done to help: from simple friendship to professional resources in our communities. Let us radiate acceptance of people, even those with visible mental struggles. How else will we be the people who represent Christ?

And when it is our turn to suffer emotional illness let us not be afraid or hesitate to seek help. Mental illness is not a cause for shame.

3. Carefully articulate the theology and meaning of suffering.

Our theology must not be too small to wrestle with big questions. We must be careful lest our view of God be distorted by the presence of suffering. How can God allow people to endure the kind of suffering that mental illness carries? Is mental illness a sign of God's punishment or a lack of faith?

It is often claimed by preachers these days that if one believes firmly in God everything in life will turn out rosy. The gospel of prosperity attracts many followers. The idea that God will fulfill your desires is a treacherous deception. Yes, God does satisfy our deepest hungers but often we do not realize what those hungers are. Instead we live on transient wants and desires and think of these as the things that God ought to fulfill if we are faithful.

How many of God's servants can you think of who had easy and prosperous pathways in life? Hebrews chapter 11 presents a listing of some giants of faith—none of whom had it easy in life. After listing several people by name and summarizing their faith life, the author goes on to describe others who “were tortured... had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth.*”²²

²² Hebrews 11:35-38, NKJV

4. Emphasize the experience of forgiveness

Emotional illness may at times stem from a deep sense of guilt arising from one's actions toward others or from a strong resentment arising from what others are perceived to have done to us. In many a life, the experience of realizing God's forgiveness and the willingness to extend forgiveness to others brings a renewal of mental health.

The Bible records stories of Jesus healing people simply by stating that their sins were forgiven. (See Matthew 9:2 for example.) If a doctor were to say that to a patient today the doctor would be charged with malpractice. But Jesus knew the close connection between mind and body.

We achieve inner health only through forgiveness—the forgiveness not only of others but also of ourselves.³

5. Develop the local church as a supportive community.

We are not only called to unity, we are called to community. Let us make sure that our gatherings for worship are also times for celebrating human connections. Let us be careful lest our time in church be nothing more than a spectator experience. It is possible to be lonely in a crowd.

To what extent do we really know each other? Do we know the names of the children and young people of the congregation? Do we greet people by name? Do we understand the burdens people are carrying? Are we alert to seeing pain and discerning loneliness?

6. Practice prayer plus.

So often a promise to pray for someone is the way of escape from getting involved in a complicated situation. We think it is some kind of solace to a distressed person to say "I'll be praying for you." or "Why don't you just pray about this." This can be a demeaning dismissal.

³ Joshua Loth Liebman (1907–1948)

Sometimes what people need is prayer and potatoes.

We must take the time and interest to learn how to help or how to guide someone to help. This does not mean that every church member should see himself/herself as a counselor. No! There are definite ways in which we should not presume to help another deal with emotional illness. But there are also ways in which we can affirm the value of every person and accord to each the dignity of being God's child. Kindness and practical helpfulness is a ministry that every church member can give to another.

We must be careful lest we buy into the idea that the markers of religious life are Bible study, prayer and witnessing. This is an incomplete list. What is missing is service.

7. Live in harmony with what we know about healthful living

Seventh-day Adventists have been blessed with so much information about healthy living. "Wholeness" should be one of our trademarks. Principles of healthful living are not something we invented or discovered. They came to us as a gift and for quite some time in our history their acceptance was a matter of simple faith. Today we take pride in the research that repeatedly confirms the advantages that we were told long ago would attend this kind of a lifestyle.

Is it not a bit strange that today, in the presence of all this evidence, we as a faith community seem somewhat ambivalent about the health message? Should we not celebrate this gift in ways that enable us to be known for what we affirm rather than what we deny? Can we not be known as a people of joy, peace, health, longevity, and love?

The prophetic vision for evangelism:

Seventh-day Adventists base their sense of mission what is called the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28. Actually the Bible has more than one commission. Matthew 25 has an implicit commission based on loving service. There is also an Old Testament commission about evangelism.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" —Zechariah 8:23

That's evangelism. Good news is embodied. It is a way of life, a thing plain for all to see.

As we embark on a global initiative to work in the vast urban centers of the world—how will we be known? By our institutions? By our professionally designed and media savvy programs? By our prophetic interpretations? Or by the quality of our lives and interactions with others?

Conclusion:

Robert Lewis Stevenson, best known for his adventure story Treasure Island, was in poor health during much of his childhood and youth. One night his nurse found him with his nose pressed against the frosty pane of his bedroom window. "Child, come away from there. You'll catch your death of cold," she fussed.

But young Robert wouldn't budge. He sat, mesmerized, as he watched an old lamplighter slowly working his way through the black night, lighting each street lamp along his route. Pointing with excitement, Robert exclaimed, "See; look there; there's a man poking holes in the darkness."

"Poking holes in the darkness." What a marvelous picture of our task in mission so that no one is left behind.