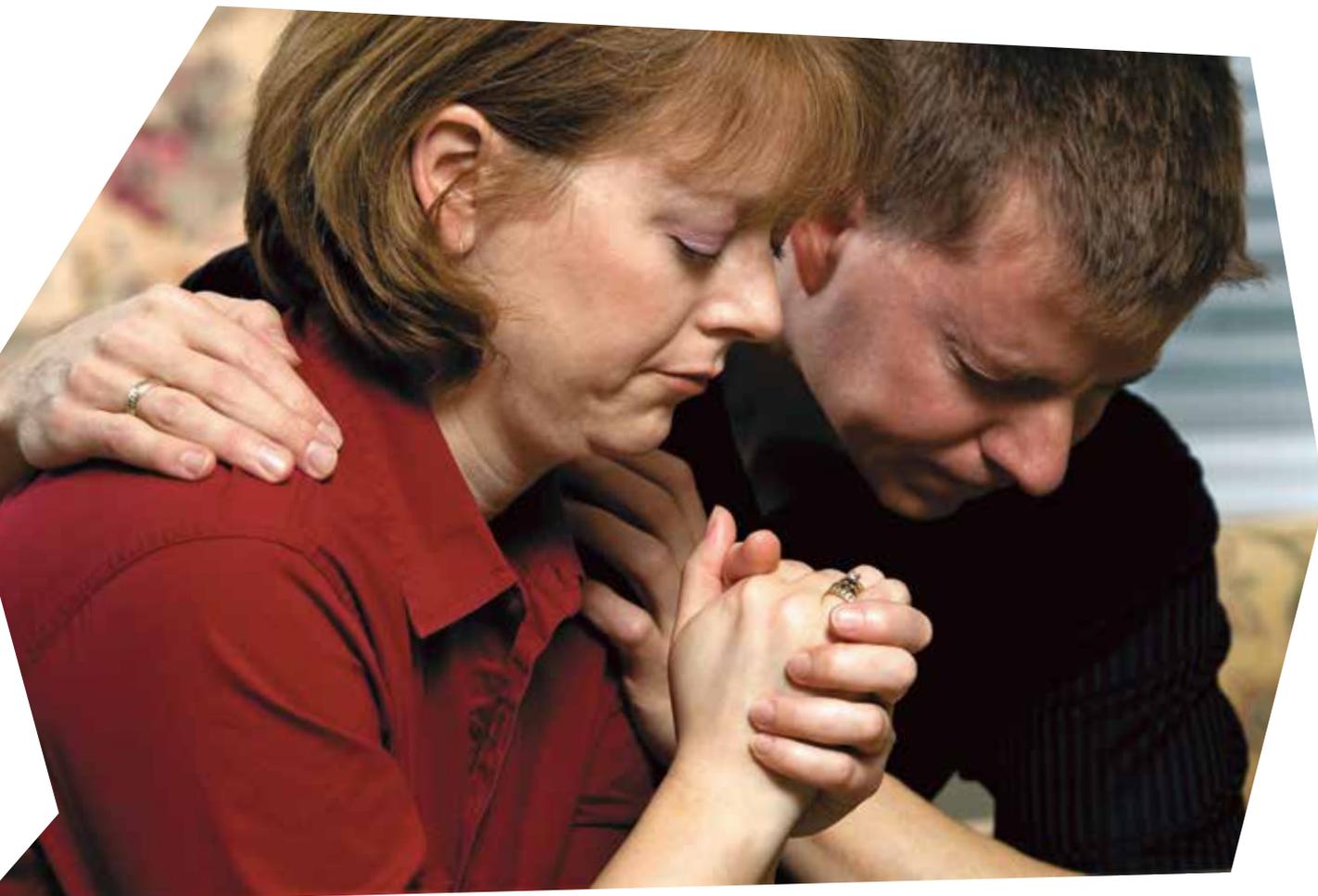


# The spiritual challenge of **mental illness**

Life may never be 'normal' for those touched by serious mental illness. But by offering God's grace, the church points the way to a new version of normal.

By Erin Dunigan



**THERE IS HOPE:** Mental illness wreaks havoc in virtually every area of one's life, but with perseverance and support, it is possible to make it through the illness to the other side.

**N**o one chooses to be mentally ill. Dealing with a mental health condition, either one's own or that of a family member, is incredibly difficult. From the toll of mental health issues on a person's mind, body and spirit to the social stigma faced by those affected, mental illness wreaks havoc in virtually every area of one's life. Mental illness is no respecter of class, social position, education, wealth or other cultural symbols of success. Anyone can develop a mental illness.

Despite these realities, there is hope. For those with serious mental illness and their families, life may never be the same as it was—life may never be “normal” again. But with treatment, perseverance and support, there is the possibility of making it through the illness to the other side, to a new version of normal.

Here are the stories of a few of those who have traversed, or are in the midst of traversing, that challenging path.

## **What does my faith say about this?**

Two decades ago, John Lewis's oldest son died of hypothermia after running away from the hospital where he was being treated for schizophrenia.

“Here's the thing that mental illness does to you: it makes you ask, ‘What does my faith say about this?’” says Lewis, a Presbyterian minister in the Nashville area. “I thought that the church should at least try to help reduce the stigma of mental illness.”

At the time, few resources addressed mental health issues from a faith perspective. So Lewis wrote an overture regarding issues of mental illness that his presbytery sent to the 199th General Assembly (1987). That overture led to the adoption of a resolution on the church and serious mental illness the

Lewis admits that advocacy for those who struggle with mental health issues is not easy work. “I wondered at times how I had the stamina and fortitude to go on,” he says. But he gratefully acknowledges that “through it all, the church has been a sustaining presence in my life.”

were of the devil. “We couldn’t do anything for him,” Christiansen says. They could not force their son to get treatment, and “unless he was harming himself or somebody else, the police wouldn’t enter the situation.”

Christiansen’s experience with his son—an ongoing struggle—has



Elder Larry Beaty found out that the ‘difficult person’ he had been asked to meet with had been asked to leave 19 churches. ‘I thought to myself: “Holy smokes! Have we in the church missed the boat?”’

following year and to the formation of the Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network, connecting people like Lewis with other Presbyterians across the country to share resources and support. This set the stage for General Assembly approval, in 2008, of *Comfort My People*, a major policy statement on serious mental illness (see “Learn more,” page 24).

“We worked to find churches that were examples, leading the way in ministering to those with mental illness,” Lewis says. The Florence Iversen Kraft Award (named for a founding member of the network) was created as a way of honoring such congregations.

### No cure, but we do have healing

Gunnar Christiansen, now a retired ophthalmologist and member of Trinity United Presbyterian Church in Santa Ana, Calif., was thrust into the arena of mental illness years ago by the sudden disappearance of his son from college.

“Our son was in his third year at Pepperdine University when all of a sudden he didn’t show up for class—he was just gone,” Christiansen says.

When Christiansen and his wife finally found their son, he was living on the street, suffering from hallucinations and convinced that he was the angel Gabriel and his parents

become the driving force behind his commitment to help others dealing with mental health issues.

“At some point it finally hit us,” remembers Christiansen, “that we couldn’t do anything for our son, but we could at least try to do something for someone else with mental illness.”

In the early 1990s, after a few years of donating to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) affiliate in Orange County, Calif., Christiansen was asked to serve on its board. At his first meeting, he asked the board, “Isn’t anyone doing anything with the faith community?”

His question laid the groundwork for a meeting that brought together

more than 100 people from the religious and mental health communities. “At that point, no one in the Southern California area had hosted any sort of meeting about faith and mental illness,” Christiansen says.

members are called to educate themselves so they can become a healing presence in the lives of those with mental illness. “We don’t have any cure,” he says, “but we do have healing.”

and the group’s numbers had begun to dwindle.

So Beaty arranged to meet with the man in a restaurant over breakfast. He learned that the man’s mother had abused alcohol while

When Leah Stout’s husband was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, ‘it was like the bottom fell out,’ she says. She couldn’t believe such a thing could happen to a pastor.



The meeting sparked a weekly support group, which then led to the first major gathering on faith and mental illness, with more than 350 people coming to listen, learn and share their stories. Christiansen’s leadership in California led to the formation of NAMI FaithNet, an organization linking mental health advocates with religious organizations across the country.

Christiansen believes that church

### **That difficult person**

Twenty years ago, when Larry Beaty was clerk of session at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, Calif., he was asked to intervene with a “difficult person.” This person, Beaty was told, had tried to get involved in the church’s singles group. But because the man had terrible hygiene, dirty clothing and no grasp of social conventions, he was scaring the women in the group,

pregnant, which caused him to be born with fetal alcohol syndrome, among other problems.

“I also found out that he had been asked to leave 19 churches prior to our conversation,” Beaty says. “I thought to myself: ‘Holy smokes! Have we in the church missed the boat?’”

Beaty asked the man if he could meet with him again the following week. After about a month of these

## Watch your words

Attitudes toward people with mental health issues or other disabilities are conveyed in the language we use to describe them. Well-chosen words communicate respect and compassion rather than perpetuating negative stereotypes. People-first language puts the emphasis on the person rather than the disability. For example:

- Instead of saying “the handicapped” or “the disabled,” say “people with disabilities.”
- Instead of referring to an “emotionally disturbed” or “mentally ill” person, say “a person who has a mental health condition” or “a person with mental illness.”

To learn more about inclusive and expansive language, download *Well Chosen Words* at [allwomen.pcusa.org/language.htm](http://allwomen.pcusa.org/language.htm). To learn more about people-first language, go to [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com).

weekly breakfast meetings, Beaty got a telephone call from a stranger. “I understand you have a covenant group for people with mental illness,” the voice on the phone said. “I’m bipolar, but on medication and doing well. I’d like to be a part of your group.”

The breakfast meetings began to grow. Two decades later, Beaty hosts a thriving support group where those with mental health conditions find acceptance and understanding; he also has found ways to integrate them into the life of the church.

Providing opportunities for service is essential, he says. “You’ve got to feel you belong and that you can be of service to others.”

For example, Beaty tells about the time when one of the covenant group members, Stephen, volunteered to chaperone a group of kids going to a weeklong camp for abused children sponsored by the congregation. After some discussion and hesitancy on the part of those running the camp, Stephen was allowed to go.

When the group arrived back from camp, “the person in charge came up to me and thanked me,” Beaty recalls. “She said Stephen was so great with the kids—it was like he put on a clinic for the rest of us on how to deal with kids who are disturbed and abused.”

### God’s amazing grace

When Leah Stout’s husband, a busy pastor, would “crash” after going through particularly stressful periods in his ministry, Stout assumed she was witnessing the normal ups and downs of a demanding church situation. Then one day she got a call from her husband’s therapist, who told her he had checked Jim into a mental hospital.

When her husband was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, “it was like the bottom fell out,” Stout remembers. She couldn’t believe such a thing could happen to a pastor. It was, as she puts it, the beginning of a “rocky”

time that lasted many years.

After six months and multiple suicide watches, Jim was able to leave the hospital. The dark situation lightened a bit, Stout says, when her husband finally was able to admit that he had an illness. He began researching bipolar disorder to find out everything he could about it, educating both himself and his family. He began an exercise program and learned to manage his stress. He also learned to recognize and to cope with the things that triggered his illness.

The couple soon realized, however, that life was never going to be the same again. Leah had channeled her love of the church into her activities as a pastor’s wife, but now she needed to work outside the home.

“I would have never dreamed of going to seminary,” she says, but when she did, she fell in love with pastoral care and hospice work. It was, as she tells it, “a gift.” She now serves as associate pastor of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, Calif.

“It might sound trite to say this, but with the Lord’s help I’ve made it through,” says Stout. It’s not the life she expected. It’s not the marriage she planned on. But it is the calling that has unfolded before her.

“There were many years when it was really hazy and confusing and foggy, but God has brought us through it,” she says. “All of that was God’s amazing grace.”

### We’re all broken sometimes

Though it’s less than a year old, the WordHouse, a mission of Faith Presbyterian Church in Sacramento, Calif., is already becoming known as a safe place for people with a variety of mental health conditions. Jeff Richards, pastor of this small house church, has a degree in psychology and experience working with troubled youth. When he came across the PC(USA) policy statement *Comfort My People* several years ago, he says, “It

helped me put two and two together.”

Richards believes that Presbyterian theology strongly supports ministry with people suffering from mental illness. “We’re all broken sometimes,” he says. “God calls us to care for the weak and the humble.”

Those involved in WordHouse talk openly and respectfully about mental health issues, encouraging those suffering to seek treatment. “Since many people have mental health issues,” Richards says, “this has to be something God cares about and for which Christ offers his love and reconciliation.”

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