

# Ministry and mental illness

Churches increasingly help ‘stomp out the stigma.’



Linda Valentine is executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

The powerful Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway musical “Next to Normal”—performed recently in Louisville—tells of the struggles of one woman with bipolar disorder and the impact her illness has on her family.

It’s a story that Janet Martin—a member of First Presbyterian Church, Danville, Ill.—knows all too well.

Six months after the birth of her second child, Janet found herself besieged by a host of personal and medical problems. Incorrectly diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she underwent a harrowing series of medical tests, treatments and drug therapies, which led to severe mental health issues and culminated in her hospitalization and later her institutionalization.

Janet says that her mission ever since has been “to enlighten the public and stomp out the stigma” of serious mental illness.

## A painful experience

Today, as a deacon and a Stephen minister at her church, Janet still painfully recalls the first time she went to see her former pastor upon her “return to the flock” after a long absence due to her illness.

“I needed some support and felt like he had very little time for me,” she says. “So I got on my computer and sent the denomination a message: ‘Does anybody in the Presbyterian Church care?’ That’s when I reached Susan Stack in the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA).”

Susan, the associate for PHEWA and Networking for the Presbyterian Mission Agency, listened to Janet’s concerns, assured her the church does indeed care, connected her with others who had faced similar challenges and ultimately published her article “Depression Does Not Mean Death” in the 1999 *Presbyterians with Disabilities* newsletter.

“In every congregation there are people and families in every pew that are affected by each of the 10 areas organized under PHEWA, including the Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network,” Susan says. “Until that person either hears the pastor preach a sermon or an adult Sunday school class cover the issue, they sit in silence because these issues can stigmatize. By hearing the message preached and taught, they come to learn that their congregation is a safe place, a source of

empowerment and a place to talk about the struggles in their life. Because PHEWA does care about what many hurting people are going through, we do our best to inspire, equip and connect congregations and other church bodies by working with them to develop the tools and skills to enable them to show that *they* care.”

## ‘Breaking the silence’

Having once made that critical connection with PHEWA, Janet has remained in contact with its staff and networks through the years. In 2011 she called Trina Zelle, PHEWA national organizer/executive director, to ask how to set up a serious mental illness network in her church.

“Janet has been a driving force behind the congregational activities in Danville,” Trina says. “Most recently she wrote a play for mental health awareness month, *Snap Out of It*, that was performed by the youth group in her church. We are now exploring the possibility of making it available to other congregations who are interested in working toward breaking the silence.”

At one time during the course of her illness, Janet couldn’t speak for a year. “God restored my voice,” she says, “so watch out.”

In her advocacy efforts Janet is guided primarily by two verses from Scripture: “Do not fear, for I am with you” (Isaiah 41:10) and “Love one another” (John 13:34). “Being critical and judgmental is so marginalizing to those of us who love someone with mental illness or who are people with mental illness,” Janet says. “We marginalize enough. Stop. Think how to help, to listen, to share. Love is so important.”



**SPEAKING OUT:** Janet Martin, a member of First Presbyterian Church, Danville, Ill., says that her mission has been “to enlighten the public and stomp out the stigma” of serious mental illness.

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