

Ministry and mental health

By Rev. Dr. Prince Rivers

We are much better at accepting broken bones than we are at accepting mental illness. We rarely think twice about someone's fractured leg or the cast on their arm. We often don't know how to engage with someone who is struggling with depression or bipolar disorder. Despite the present shifts toward inclusivity, there is still a stigma attached to mental health issues.

Congregations and pastoral leaders can play a big role in removing this stigma. For starters, how do we talk about mental health in our sermons? Do we speak with compassion about the fact that there are people who struggle to get through the day, or do we use language like "crazy" that we know will elicit an easy laugh?

We may wish that everyone who belonged to our congregations was psychologically balanced and highly emotionally intelligent, but let's not forget that Jesus said he did not come for those who are well but for those who need a physician. Our congregations comprise people from all walks of life. Some of those people have wounds we cannot see on the surface.

Ministry at its best addresses the needs of the whole person — body, mind and soul. It's time for the church to be more invested in holistic health and to think about how it can meaningfully engage and better inform the congregation on issues related to psychological well-being. Every church has someone (or is connected to someone) who is dealing with mental health issues on some level. When congregations are willing to address the topic of mental health, they will discover new opportunities to offer healing and hope where it is needed.

Before you go...

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately one in five adults in the U.S. experience some form of mental illness. About one-quarter of these individuals will turn to a clergy person for support or resources. Thus, despite the general decline in trust in institutions in the U.S., ministers still play an important role in advocating for people who have mental health needs. In some traditions, pastors will need to help congregants discern the intersection between charismatic spirituality and mental well-being.

It is imperative for leaders to understand the responsibility they have for helping people who are suffering, often needlessly. Jesus came to minister to those who suffer, and now we must do the same.