

Hope Conference Gives Hope!

It was a blessing to participate in the second Interfaith Conference on Mental Illness on May 20, "Depression over the Life Cycle and the Role of Faith Communities." It was sponsored by the HOPE Coalition, NAMI Boulder County, The Mental Health Center Serving Boulder and Broomfield Counties, Boulder Aging Services, and the Task Force of the First Congregational Church, UCC, Boulder.

For those of you who attended, you will recall your own experiences and for those of you who did not, I hope this intrigues you enough to read the Comments from the Small Groups. There were 115 registrants, and 65 organizations/faith communities were represented.

The keynote by Amy Robertson, program coordinator of suicide prevention at C.U., talked about her times of depression and those times when she has been counseling someone who is considering suicide. If a person is concerned about another person, it is not hurtful but is helpful to ask, "Are you suicidal?" The responding panel included Jan Hittelman, Rhonda Racicot, Alan Johnson, along with Amy. The threads in their responses were to talk about depression, to address it, and to realize that mental illness is not a moral lapse, a character flaw, or a lack of faith. Each person said that isolation and/or rejection can be results from being depressed.

The 12 small groups shared comments, such as "Faith communities can be ignorant about mental illness. Society is afraid of it. I am surprised that 1 out of 5 people are affected by mental illness." One conference goal was to reduce the stigma around mental illness. One person said, "Stigma still destroys mentally ill people." Another goal was to offer education. We came wanting "to learn more; education; understanding."

Many faith communities are involved in offering help. "Churches can get training to learn how to lead support groups and can look at people with a mental illness as a mission," said one participant. "Use the words 'depression', and 'bipolar' in prayers and pay for counseling," said another. "Someday we will discover mental illness is biologically based through new research," said others.

"Great to see so many different aspects of the faith community working together," said another on their evaluation. "The interfaith aspect especially good." "NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK," wrote another. There is a clarion call to form an Interfaith Network on Mental Illness. Our passion is the interface of faith/spirituality and mental illness through faith communities drawing on the resources of mental health organizations. We hope to help congregations create supportive community for persons with mental illness and their family and friends.

If you have any reflections after reading this material, and/or would like to talk more, and/or would like to join the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness, please get in touch with me.

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