

Ministry Beyond Barriers

By Jonathon D. Counts

The Body of Christ (the Church), pastors, Christian educators, youth ministry leaders, and believers can no longer ignore or give scant attention to the ever-increasing mental health problems of today's young people. Youth of today are dealing with depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, low self-esteem, trauma related to all of forms of abuse, substance dependency, obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, bipolar disorder, sleep disorders, and so many more mental health problems.

There was a teen who was very active within her youth ministry, and she was one of the leaders of the dance ministry within that youth group. She also served as a prominent leader inside her school, founding the Christian club for young believers to come together to fellowship, have Bible study, and worship. This particular Christian club was an opportunity for young people to grow in faith and feel unashamed of their belief system. The young lady was also a part of the immediate family of her youth pastor but had mental health issues related to anorexia. She masked her eating disorder because there was no avenue she knew of where she could unashamedly talk about her problem and get help.

The question must be asked, *So what is the Church going to do?* Will we allow the youth mental illness dilemma to increase, or are we going to take a stand and assist our young people so they can experience healing as well as deliverance?

Youth ministry must go beyond the norm of just having a meeting every quarter or having a youth Bible study every other week without offering "real" solutions for the difficult problems youth face. The days of just having youth fellowships with pizza and snacks when it is convenient should be eliminated. This generation is crying out for cutting-edge, beyond-the-barriers types of ministry that deal with their issues, especially the challenges that are negatively impacting their mental/emotional well-being. In many instances young people will not openly admit their challenges immediately. Accordingly, churches must create an atmosphere where there is a comfort zone for them to open up about what they are dealing with. Youth leaders must make a commitment to embrace young people who are wrestling with mental health issues. Poor mental/emotional health obstructs peace from the minds, hearts, and souls of people. So peace, rest, and comfort should be found within our ministries and in our witness. Peace, rest, and comfort are what Jesus offers: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). We can offer no less.

If ministries designed for youth do not tackle mental health issues, the lives of so many youth will continue to be significantly damaged. This will include an increase in suicides and anything else that harms the Temple, including substance abuse and misuse of alcohol. Paul Valéry says, "A man who is 'of sound mind' is one who keeps the inner madman under lock and key."¹ The current generation is starving for a sound mind, and the Body of Christ is challenged to help keep the inner madman within our young people under lock and key. Will we accept the challenge?

One of the main reasons the Church should minister to youth who are battling mental health challenges is because Jesus did it. In the Synoptic Gospels we see “real-life” examples of Jesus ministering to those battling demonic spirits. For example, in Mark 5:1-20 Jesus heals a demon-possessed man. Mark’s Gospel explains how Jesus and the disciples went across the lake to the region of Gerasenes (some manuscripts will say Gadarenes) and when Jesus came out of the boat he came in contact with a man possessed by an evil spirit. This man lived in the tombs, and others were not able to handle him by a bind or chain. Mark recorded that “...no one was strong enough to subdue him.” Night and day this man would cry and cut himself with stones. When Jesus was seen in the distance the man fell on his knees trying to discover what Jesus wanted from him, and Jesus responded by commanding the evil spirit to leave. So the demon-possessed man who was known in the town for being “crazy” became dressed and in his right mind after his encounter with Jesus. The man wanted to follow Jesus after his experience, but Jesus instructed him: “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.” The man followed the command and told those in the Decapolis or the Ten Cities how much Jesus had done for him, which caused others to be amazed.

As Christians, pastors, Christian educators, and youth leaders, given the example of Jesus and all of the resources now available, how can we tarry in throwing out life-lines to youth battling mental health problems? Who are the young people in our church who dwell in tombs and cry themselves to sleep while cutting themselves? What young people in our youth groups are so vexed that no one can control them? Who in our youth departments need to be loosed from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, low self-esteem, schizophrenia, and other mental illnesses? We cannot shun those who are dealing with mental health issues, but we are to embrace them and use our divine authority to ensure that mental illness does not bind our young people to lives of dread.

Consistently, research has stated that African Americans are reticent to discuss mental illness. We are ashamed to deal with our emotional and mental difficulties through mental health assistance, and some of us attempt to hide our problems with religiosity. Youth have seen the reticence and the shame of their elders, so they have adopted the same mindset. Youth leaders must break the silence and support youth who are bound by mental health struggles. Moreover, pastors and youth leaders must help churches become keenly aware of the mental health challenges of our children and no longer allow the challenges to be worn as badges of shame or treated as problems that are swept under the rug or as burdens to be borne alone.

Also, concerning the issue of ministering to youth with mental health challenges, pastors and youth leaders must **prepare** themselves for such circumstances. This is the other reason our children are not being helped. Pastors and youth workers must receive training from clinical practitioners who can shed light on the different mental disorders affecting young people. Training will give pastors and youth workers the ability to recognize the signs that indicate that a youth is in trouble, and it will help them know when to make referrals and/or bring in a team to offer help to a youth.

Consistent and competent training by professionals is the best method to equip and prepare youth workers to work with this current generation. Dr. Christopher Amenson, a psychologist with the Pacific Clinics Institute in Pasadena, California,² explains how youth workers are to lead youth

to Christ by befriending, guiding, and advocating for them. The same formula applies to ministering to youth with mental health concerns. Youth leaders can make a difference by first being a listening ear for a young person. Youth need to have a trusting relationship with their youth ministry leaders and be able to take comfort in knowing that there is confidentiality within the relationship up to a point. Those who work with youth should guide them by giving sound, biblical, and practical advice. And youth leaders must advocate and support youth while leading them to the correct resources, which will definitely include referrals to professionals in some instances. **Make sure that your church has the contact information for all of the resources in your community that youth battling mental health issues will need.** If something does not exist, this will provide a great opportunity for ministry development by your church, perhaps in collaboration with other churches and your city officials. While this strategy is implemented, those who minister to youth must not treat afflicted youth differently than other youth.

As a social work major, I learned two theories that can be implemented when ministering to youth with mental health issues; they are the Strengths Perspective and the Empowerment Theory. The Strengths Perspective magnifies a person's strengths, which encourages them to focus upon the aspects of their life that are going in the right direction instead of focusing on their deficits. The Empowerment Theory causes one to rediscover or regain control over their current condition and become self-determined to move beyond the present obstacle(s). Youth leaders (with training) can use both approaches when ministering to youth in general but especially to those with mental health issues.

God will use youth workers to make a difference for our children when a commitment is made to engage in ministry beyond the barriers. Prevalent mental/emotional health issues among this generation can no longer be overlooked. The hearts of our young people are hurting and they are seeking avenues to deal with their challenges. Now is the time for the Body of Christ to rise up and take its rightful place to reclaim our youth. Psalm 34:19 says, "*Many are the afflictions of the righteous but the Lord delivers him out of them all.*" Deliverance is always available and the Lord is searching for those who will say "*Here am I, send me*" to reach the youth of this generation.

Notes

1. The quote by Paul Valéry was obtained from http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/paul_valery.html accessed 15 December 2011
2. More information can be obtained about Dr. Amenson and his work with youth through the Pacific Clinic at <http://www.pacificclinics.org/sites/default/files/docs/PCTI%20Catalog%20Summer%20Fall%202011.pdf> accessed 15 December 2011