

## Ministry Beyond Barriers

Jonathon D. Counts

The Body of Christ, the Church, Pastors, Christian Educators, Youth Ministry Leaders and Believers can no longer ignore or push aside the ever increasing dilemma of mental health challenges that are seeking to destroy a generation. Youth of today are dealing with depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, stress, attempted suicide, eating disorders, low self-esteem, trauma related to all of forms of abuse, substance dependency, obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, bipolar disorder, sleep disorders and many others classified in the DSM IV.

There was a young lady who was very active within her youth ministry and 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 about their belief system. The young lady was also a part of the immediate family of her youth pastors but she dealt with a mental health issue relating to an eating disorder called anorexia. This young person masked what she was experiencing inwardly because there was no avenue to express or deal with mental health issues. And the questions arise within, what are we going to do about it? Will we allow this dilemma to increase even the more or are we going to take a stand and assist our young people so they can experience total healing as well as deliverance?

Presently, youth ministry must go beyond the norm just having a youth meeting every quarter or having a youth bible study every other week without “real” practical application. 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 type of ministry that seeks to deal with their issues at hand especially mental health concerns. In many instances young people will not openly admit their challenges immediately but an atmosphere must be created where there is a comfort zone for them to release and open up about what they are dealing with. Youth leaders must make a commitment to embrace young people and their issues so peace can be discovered once again. Mental health issues obstruct peace from the minds, hearts, and souls of persons so as Christians peace should be found within our churches, ministries, and witness because peace, rest, and comfort are all a part of the character as well as nature of Christ. As Matthew 11:28 says *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* If ministries designed for youth do not tackle mental health issues in some way then the minds of our youth will be significantly damaged which opens the door unfortunately to the increase in suicide rates and anything else that seeks to harm the Temple including substance abuse. Paul Valéry says “A man who is “of sound mind” is one who keeps the inner madman under lock and key.” 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 a lock and key. Will we accept the challenge?

Therefore, one of the main reasons why we should even consider ministering to youth who are in a battle with a mental illness is because Jesus did. In the Synoptic Gospels we see “real life” examples of Jesus ministering to those vexed with a demonic spirit within the mind. For example, in Mark 5:1-20 Jesus heals a demon-possessed man. Marks 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. The Gospel writer 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 to, “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 from the example of Jesus we are called to do the same. Who is the young person in our Gadarene who dwells in tombs and cries their selves to sleep while cutting themselves? What young person in our youth groups are so vexed to the point that no one can control them? Who in our youth departments need the touch as well as command of Jesus to unattach them from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, low self-esteem, trauma, 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 the illness or evil spirit leaves the minds of our young people. Research states that African Americans are fearful when it relates to treating mental illnesses in our community. We are ashamed to deal with the struggles within on every level and we cover up our weaknesses with religiosity. Youth have seen the example of their forefathers so they have adopted the same mindset. As a result, youth leaders must break the silence and seek to support youth who are bound by mental health struggles.

Concerning the notion of ministering to youth with mental challenges, youth leaders must prepare themselves for such circumstances. Youth workers should attend sessions where clinical practitioners can shed light on different mental disorders affecting young people and how one can detect the beginning stages of those challenges. Training with clinicians is a very effective strategy to confirm that youth leaders are prepared and equipped to work with this current generation. Dr. Christopher Amenson, Ph.D., a much trained psychologist explains how youth workers are to lead youth to Christ by befriending, guiding, and advocating for them and the same formula applies to ministering to youth with mental health concerns. Youth leaders can make a difference by being a listening ear to young people who are struggling inwardly. Youth should have a trusting relationship with their leaders and able to take comfort in knowing that

there is confidentiality within the partnership. Those who work with youth should guide them by giving sound, biblical, and practical advice to work through their issues to prevent a negative outcome. And youth leaders must advocate and support youth while leading them to the correct resources which will definitely mean professional assistance in many instances. While this strategy is implemented those who minister to youth must not treat afflicted youth differently than the others.

As a Senior Bachelor of Social Work major I have learned there are two theories that can be implemented with ministering to youth with mental health issues which are the Strengths Perspective and the Empowerment Theory. The Strengths Perspective magnifies a person's strengths which encourage one to focus upon the aspects of their life that are going in the right direction instead of focusing on their deficits. So youth workers should boost their youth's strengths which offer a source of hope and it is quite therapeutic. The empowerment theory causes one to rediscover or regain control over their current condition and become self-determined to move beyond the present downfalls. Therefore youth leaders can use this very easy approach when ministering to youth in general but especially to those with mental conditions.

God will use youth workers to make a difference with challenged youth when a commitment is made to engage in ministry beyond the barriers. Prevalent issues among this present generation can no longer be overlooked as well as disregarded. The hearts of our young people are hurting and they are seeking other avenues to deal with their challenges including those mental difficulties but now is the time for the Body of Christ to rise up and take its rightful place in the Kingdom to reclaim our youth of today. 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 the hearts of those who will say *"here am I send me"* to reach this generation.