

Sample Story for Communities of Faith

My name is Susan Gregg-Schroeder and I am a United Methodist minister. I live with mental illness. I also have family members living with mental illness. I founded Mental Health Ministries in 2001 to provide resources to educate congregations to be caring communities for persons living with a mental illness and their families.

Tell Your Story

As one of the pastors at a large church in San Diego, I had no idea what was happening to me when I had my first episode of clinical depression and hospitalization in 1991. Even though persons struggling with mental illness often go first to their faith leader, most of us did not receive the training in seminary to provide appropriate support and to know when to refer persons to mental health professionals.

Even though I am ordained pastor, I felt disconnected from myself, from others and from God. I felt that God had abandoned me in my darkness. As I learned more about my depression, I realized that my church had never openly talked about mental illness. The shame and stigma resulted in my family and me hiding my illness and hospitalizations from the church community for two years. We suffered in silence.

With the support of the senior pastor, I finally wrote an article for our church newsletter called, "The Burden of Silence." The senior pastor wrote an accompanying article. The following week we had an informational meeting. The room could not accommodate the 130 persons that showed up.

Ask

One in four families sitting in the pews has a family member who has a mental illness. Many are suffering in silence as our family did because these illnesses of the brain are often seen as the result of a moral or spiritual failure. In Biblical times, both physical and mental illnesses were thought to be caused by sin or demons. Today we can identify and provide treatment for most of the illnesses described in the Bible.

The most powerful way you can help your congregation understand mental illness is to share your story. You can then provide resources to help educate about these illnesses. Resources for all faith traditions are available through NAMI FaithNet. NAMI also provides educational and support opportunities like the *Family to Family* class and *In Our Own Voice*.

It takes all of us working together to find ways to educate our congregations to become caring communities and to offer hope to persons and families who continue to suffer in silence.