

MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS WEEK - OCTOBER 7 TO 13, 2007

AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH IS LIKE “A STAIN GLASS WINDOW”

When we see a stain glass window in a church, we are struck by the beauty of the story it tells. The window usually depicts a story from scripture or an aspect of our faith. Taken as a whole, the window gives a complete picture of a particular story or inspiring moment. When we approach the window and look closely at the art, we see that the window is made up of many pieces of glass. The pieces have different shapes and sizes, some are large and some are tiny. We see that the pieces are made of different colors. Upon closer inspection, we see that the pieces have flaws in them, some have lines or cracks, other have tiny air bubbles in the glass. But taken together as a whole, the unique pieces, big and small, of various colors, with all their flaws transcend their individuality and come together at the hand of the artist to give a dynamic story of faith. But what happens if part of the window is missing? What if we were to remove all the brown pieces of glass, or remove the large pieces, or the ones with bubbles in them? The picture would be incomplete. We would not get the whole story.

The body of Christ, the faith community, in one sense, is like a stain glass window. It lives the story of redemption and salvation in the reality of everyday life. The pieces of the story are made up of many kinds and sorts of people – young people, elderly people, married people and single people, people of color, people of different shapes and sizes, people who are divorced, people with different sexual orientation, people with various disabilities, etc.... Like the stained glass window, the body of Christ is made up of many parts. If we intentionally or unintentionally exclude, discriminate against or ignore one or more of the parts, we do not get the whole picture. We are missing the full story. The picture is incomplete.

Often people with disabilities are excluded from the body of Christ and leadership in it because of lack of access to our churches and sanctuaries or by attitudes that treat people with disabilities as less than a person. For people with mental illnesses, a less obvious disability, the societal stigma and misperceptions of the disease often keep people from participating in our parishes because the stigma and misperception by society is felt within their own community of faith. Parishes, rather than mirroring the cultural biases of society, should be challenging those assumptions and accepting and reaching out to all people - to open doors and minds to the gifts of all God's people. Parishes that truly welcome and include everyone in a proactive way portray the story of redemption and salvation as a clear and beautiful image of God's Kingdom. In places where there are barriers, either physically or attitudinally, the image of the God's Kingdom is far less clear and the story is incomplete.

October 7 - 13, 2007 is Mental Illness Awareness Week. Parishes can be instrumental in reducing the stigma of mental illness and supporting people with mental illness and their families by raising the conscious of the faith community about the facts¹ concerning mental illness and recovery:

- Mental disorders fall along a continuum of severity. About 6 percent of the population or 1 in 17 Americans suffer from a serious mental illness. It is estimated that mental illness affects 1 in 5 families.
- The World Health Organization has reported that four of the 10 leading causes of disability in the US and other developed countries are mental disorders. By 2020, Major Depressive illness will be the leading cause of disability in the world for women and children.
- Without treatment the consequences of mental illness for the individual and society are staggering: unnecessary disability, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide and wasted lives.
- The best treatments for serious mental illnesses today are highly effective; between 70 and 90 percent of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports. A key concept is to develop expertise in developing strategies to manage the illness process.
- Early identification and treatment is of vital importance.
- Stigma erodes confidence that mental disorders are real, treatable health conditions. We have allowed stigma and a now unwarranted sense of hopelessness to erect attitudinal, structural and financial barriers to effective treatment and recovery. It is time to take these barriers down.

During Mental Illness Awareness Week parishes can offer the following:

- Prayers of the Faithful for people who have a mental illness and their families
- Homilies about mental illness and recovery
- Depression screening
- Presentations on mental illness and recovery
- Presentations on justice issues related mental illness and the healthcare system
- Advocacy for improved mental health services

For additional information and ideas on how parishes can be more welcoming to people with mental illness we invite you to visit the following website:

Archdiocese of Chicago-Commission on Mental Illness – www.miminsrty.org

Deacon Tom Lambert

Our Lady of Mt Carmel Parish

¹ Taken from the NAMI Website – www.nami.org, *What is mental illness: mental illness facts*