



# BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CALIFORNIA SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT *because we are Catholic.*



“That is the purpose of our mission: to identify the material and immaterial needs of the people and try to meet them as we can. Do you know what agape is? It is love of others, as our Lord preached. It is not proselytizing, it is love. Love for one’s neighbor, that leavening that serves the common good.”

– Pope Francis

## Mental Health & the Church

A sold-out live audience of 3,200 filled the Worship Center at Saddleback Church and an estimated audience of 30,000 watched online as Bishop Kevin Vann and Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren and his wife Kay hosted the “Gathering on Mental Health and the Church,” a day-long conference March 28 that several speakers and participants called “unprecedented” and “historic.”

Also presented by the National Alliance on Mental Illness—Orange County (NAMI-OC), the conference

was organized to encourage people living with mental illness, to educate family members and to help church leaders and staff to more effectively deal with mentally ill people who come to them for help.

The “front line people in churches deserve a medal of honor and thanks” for dealing with people with mental issues who come to them as a first resource, said Bishop Vann. “We hope that this day will equip us and them to respond a little better.”

The mentally ill come to churches as “a place of hope,” said Pastor Warren. “We in the church have a longer history of dealing with this kind of thing than any government.”

Speaking in the opening plenary session of the conference, “The Role of the Church in Mental Health,” Bishop Vann and Pastor Warren recalled their own experiences in facing the challenges of mental illness in their pastoral work and, in the case of Pastor Warren, his own family. Both discussed how their mutual friendship



*Bishop Kevin Vann and Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren*

*Continued on next page*



## Mental Health & the Church (continued)

grew after Bishop Vann offered comfort to Pastor Warren after Warren's 27-year-old son Matthew took his own life a year ago after a lifelong struggle with mental illness—"a kid with a tender heart and a tortured mind," said Pastor Warren.

With widespread deficiencies in publicly run mental health clinics and other institutions dealing with the mentally ill, churches have become the places those with mental problems seek out, said Bishop Vann.

"Some 65 percent of people who have these struggles, the first place they go to is church," he said. "There are no coincidences; we need to believe that God in his love has brought these people to us. How do we bring the light of Christ to all these people?"

That question was addressed in various ways throughout the day at 20 workshops hosted by speakers representing various religious organizations, the medical and psychological communities, academics, and other health professionals and community workers.

The gathering was prompted not only by the friendship and mutual concern about mental illness between Pastor Warren and Bishop Vann, but as a result of statistics on mental health in America that participants called "disturbing."

- About one in four adults suffers from a mental disorder in a given year, and one in 17 is afflicted with a serious mental illness such as major depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.
- About 60 percent of mentally ill adults received no treatment in the past year, says the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Mental illness, said the speakers, is not a problem that can be addressed by any single organization or approach. In the second plenary session, "Integrating Physical, Spiritual and Mental Health," Dr. Aaron Kheriaty, an

associate professor of psychiatry at UC Irvine, said that "science and religion should be in dialogue" when dealing with mental illness" and that the church can offer hope that the medical and scientific communities may not be able to provide.

Church leaders and staffers must accept that they are on the front lines in mental health care, said Father Luke Dysinger, a Benedictine monk and professor at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo. The parable of the Good Samaritan, he said, points out "our responsibility for healing" and that the mind, body and soul are closely interrelated.

"Our bodies affect our souls," he said. "Our brains affect our souls."

The third plenary session, a panel discussion titled "Helping the Helpers: Crisis Management for Church Staff," explored various attributes that church workers need to be able effectively to deal with mentally ill persons who arrive at their door. Among them: humility, authenticity, self-awareness, empathy, compassion, resilience, unflappability, and "someone who is comfortable in their own skin."

Topics that were addressed during the 20 afternoon workshops included depression, the stigma of mental illness, suicide risk reduction, church counseling, support groups and recovery ministries, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and addictions.

Speakers in the Worship Center were bracketed by signs featuring identical quotations from 2 Timothy 1:7—"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

*By Patrick Mott*

*Reprinted with permission from Orange County Catholic.*

*For more information, go to:*

**cacatholic.org**

**Diocese of Orange: rcbo.org**

**For video/audio presentations from the mental health conference, go to: [mentalhealthandthechurch.com](http://mentalhealthandthechurch.com)**