

Ministry needed for those impacted by mental illness

By Bill Norton *

Five steps are needed for faith communities to have an understanding of mental illness and to provide ministry to and with persons with mental illness and their families, the Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder told a gathering of clergy and laity in early November at St. Mark's UMC in Raleigh.

Over 100 persons attended the first mental health conference organized by the NC Conference Committee on Disability Concerns.

Susan Gregg-Schroeder, the keynote presenter, is a national leader, speaker, and author in connecting congregations and mental health ministries. She is the mental health coordinator for the California-Pacific Conference.

She shared with conference participants that she did not understand mental illness but lived with it while serving others until being admitted to the hospital with depression. It was following her treatment and study of mental illness that she began working for a better understanding of the illness.

She urged congregations to 1) support and conduct education programs on mental illness topics, 2) be committed to a covenant statement so the congregation is known to welcome in-



The Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder (center), keynote speaker for the mental health conference, talks with Dr. John M. Crowe (left), chair of the conference Committee on Disability Concerns, and Dr. Charles M. Smith (right), executive director of Connectional Ministries, before the conference began. Advocate photo by Bill Norton

dividuals with mental illness and their families, 3) offer continuing training for ushers and greeters and others and use other means of welcome to individuals with mental illness, 4) to offer support and friendship to those with mental illness, and 5) to be advocates for those with mental illness with gov-

ernmental agencies, health insurance providers, and to keep track of pending legislation pertaining to disability and mental illness.

John Tote, NC executive director of the Mental Health Association, talked about the history of the association in the state and how more is known about

mental illness but misunderstanding remains and that this major health issue in the state is often ignored.

He asked participants to work with their congregations for a better understanding and treatment of mental illness in North Carolina.

Some other points shared during conference were:

- One in four families have a member with mental illness.
- Families are not getting the help needed.
- Churches are in the dark ages in understanding that mental illness is treatable.
- Faith communities rarely provide the support for individuals and families affected by mental illness.
- Out of nine million people in North Carolina, 1.4 million individuals have experienced mental or emotional illness.
- Out of the 1.4 million, 500,000 have serious mental health issues.

Future conferences on the elderly and caring for care givers are being considered by the NC Conference Committee on Disability Concerns.

* Bill Norton is conference director of communications and Advocate editor.

SEJ, General Conference delegate forms to be available in January

Forms for biographical information of individuals who would like to be elected as delegates to the 2008 General and Jurisdictional Conferences will be available for clergy and laypersons in early January.

Two booklets will be printed: one for use by conference lay members and another with information for use by conference clergy members.

"The addition of a booklet containing clergy candidates is new for the 2007 conference," said Jerry Bryan, conference secretary. "Lay will have a form, and clergy will have a form. The process will be similar to that followed by laypersons in past years."

Conference rules place the process in the hands of the conference secretary. Details are being completed and will be available in early January.

Current plans call for a clergy form and a laity form, along with qualification details, to be available from the conference website, nccumc.org.

Laity interested in being considered for election as a delegation should complete the appropriate form and return it to Robin Harry, Office of the Board of Laity, United Methodist Building in Raleigh by March 31.

Clergy will complete the designated form and return it to the Office of the

Conference Secretary by March 31.

Booklets of laity forms will be produced for use by lay conference members and a booklet of clergy information will be produced for clergy use. Clergy will elect a specific number of delegates and laity will elect the same number of lay delegates.

During the 2004 conference 11 clergy and 11 laypersons were elected General Conference delegates and an additional 11 clergy and 11 laypersons were elected to become the jurisdictional delegation of 22 clergy and 22 laypersons. Added to this group, five laypersons and five clergy were elected as alternates.

"We have not received the specific numbers to be elected to the 2008 conference," Bryan said. "Election is not restricted to persons listed in the booklets. Any person, lay or clergy, meeting the qualifications can be elected."

A major responsibility of the General Conference is changes to the Book of Discipline, the United Methodist book of laws. A major responsibility for the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference is the election of bishops.

The 2008 General Conference will be held in Fort Worth, TX April 23-May 2. The Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference will be held July 15-19, 2008 at Lake Junaluska.

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