

NAMI Takes a Multi-faceted Look at Faith and Mental Illness at 2009 Convention

by Karen Costa

What do a Reverend, a Rabbi and a Muslim imam have in common? It may sound like the beginning of an old-time joke, but this time there is no punch line.

The 2009 NAMI Annual Convention in San Diego provided workshops on faith and mental illness hosted by the FaithNet Advisory Council to share innovative ideas and projects underway in the grassroots communities. One session, “Hard Questions about Faith and Mental Illness: A Multi-faith Response,” included panelists Reverend Susan Gregg-Schroeder, Rabbi Raphael Asher and Dr. Amer Araim. Each spoke from personal experience and encounters with mental illness and faith. The workshop focused on frequently asked questions within the mental health community regarding faith such as “how do we understand mental illness and our faith?,” “how can the faith community help support me and others like myself?” and, most often, “where is God?”

Moderator Craig Rennebohm of Mental Health Chaplaincy in Seattle made a point to emphasize that “[we] are only scratching the surface, but it’s important for us to come together and begin to explore [these] hard questions addressing mental illness and faith.”

The workshop began with United Methodist Reverend Gregg-Schroeder, founder and director of Mental Health Ministries in San Diego. She spoke on prayer, community education, the evolution of understanding mental illness within the church and the question “where is God during my suffering, why me?” As someone living with major depression that included suicide attempts, Reverend Gregg-Schroeder



explained that pain has value.

“If we are open to learning from our suffering, our difficult times can lead us to self-awareness and self-transformation,” she explained. This outlook allows small moments of grace and relationships to grow, heal and comfort the soul.

Rabbi Asher of Congregation Temple B’nai Tikvah in Walnut Creek, Calif., boldly opened by saying, “before any of the world religions can profess to be part of the solution to the mistaken attitudes toward mental illness, they must accept that, historically, world religions have been part of the problem.”

Taking a more interactive approach, Rabbi Asher read a story from the Sages about two Rabbis and an unspecified illness and then asked attendants what they got out of the story. Responses reflected the traditional NAMI spirit as participants interpreted the message of universal understanding and connection between health and mental illness.

He addressed the constant anxieties surrounding mental illness experienced by persons living with mental illness, their families and their caregivers. The answers, Rabbi Asher said, can be found in empowering actions such as mitzvot (doing good deeds) and study. The fulfillment of a deed, no matter the size, and support from a group gives a

person the feeling of accomplishment and self-worth instead of insignificance and isolation.

Dr. Araim, imam of the Dar-Ul-Islam mosque in Concord, Calif., Dr. Araim emphasized Islam’s belief that Allah (God) cares for everyone and gives all humans strength. The problem is that not all humans are just or humane in their actions and, for this reason, the vulnerable groups are always subject to attack or maltreatment. Whether you are of faith or not, Dr. Araim pointed out that all people deserve to prosper and share in the bounty.

Dr. Araim’s main message for immediate action was to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

“We must emphasize the individual,” he said. “To do this, we need to find stigma and remove it. We should not deny it or be shy to talk about it, because if we don’t recognize the stigma in the opinion of the many people who have mental illness...then we cannot fight it.”

So, what do a Reverend, a Rabbi and a Muslim imam have in common? The answer is belief in mental health education, awareness, self-empowerment and that change is possible with a little faith. ☪