

Preaching on mental illness often rare, survey finds

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

Protestant clergy rarely preach about mental illness to their congregations and only one-quarter of congregations have a plan in place to assist families of the mentally ill, a recent LifeWay Research survey found.

“When we look at what we know statistically—the prevalence of mental illness and the lack of preaching on the subject—I think that’s a disconnect,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of the research firm, a ministry of LifeWay Christian Resources, which is an agency of the Southern Baptist Convention.

When it comes to clergy preaching about mental illness, researchers found the following:

- 66 percent mention it rarely, once a year or never
- 26 percent speak about it several times a year
- 4 percent mention it about once a month
- 3 percent talk about it several times a month

The survey among Protestant churches was funded by Colorado-based Focus on the Family and an anonymous donor whose family member suffered from schizophrenia. It included the perspectives of pastors, family members of the mentally ill, and churchgoers who have suffered from illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.

Kay and Rick Warren, authors whose 27-year-old son, Matthew, suffered from mental illness and killed himself last year, commended the survey’s findings.

Kay Warren urged church leaders not only to preach about it but allow those struggling with mental illness to give testimonies to their congregations.

“Yes, preach a message, but put in front of your people those who are living with mental illness so they can share their stories and become human in that process,” she said in a late September conference call about the survey.

While 68 percent of pastors said their church maintains a list of local mental health resources for church members, just 28 percent of families are aware of such resources. The survey also found that less than half of pastors—41 percent—said they had taken seminary courses on caring for the mentally ill.

Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, said about 35 of the association's 270 member schools offer master's degrees in counseling or in marriage and family therapy. A recent study by Baylor University scholars found that of 70 seminaries with master of divinity programs, a majority offer elective courses on counseling but few students take them.

Meanwhile, almost a quarter of pastors surveyed—23 percent—said they had personally struggled with mental illness.

"I think it helps us to understand why some pastors have a sense of empathy, not just sympathy," Stetzer said. "It surprised me in the sense that people were very forthright about it."

LifeWay found that slightly more than a quarter of pastors—27 percent—said their church has a plan for supporting families with a mentally ill member.

The results are based on a survey conducted in May of 1,000 Protestant pastors.  
—Religion News Service

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