Preaching on mental illness often rare, survey finds

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.

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

Ukraine Baptists displaced, yet aid victims of conflict

Ukrainian Baptists report that about 5,500 of their members have been displaced from their homes. They are among the 100,000 people displaced as a result of conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Thousands of people are wounded, and some have died.

A letter from the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christians-Baptists to the Baptist World Alliance said that churches and church-related health-care centers are providing aid to the displaced and wounded.

“In these difficult circumstances, we are called to enhance the ministry for the sake of victory over evil and in every possible way, to help stop the war,” the union wrote.

Though there was a truce between pro-Russian militias and the Ukrainian army, fighting has destroyed bridges, supply lines, apartments, vehicles, and more.

An e-mail BWA received in early October, from an author unnamed for safety reasons, reported that “bloody confrontations leading to more deaths continue.”

Amid shelling and “tanks moving through the streets,” Christians “hold prayer meetings in the city parks and squares, establish centers of free psychological and medical assistance, host, feed, and dress the refugees.”

In early October, Ukraine’s parliament—whose speaker and chair, Oleksandr Turchynov, is a Baptist elder—hosted a meeting with church association leaders.

“Turchynov declared that the restoration of Ukraine is impossible without the restoration of people’s trust in government,” the author of the e-mail wrote, referring to special parliamentary elections in late October.

In July the head of the Ukrainian Baptist Union joined other Christian leaders in a statement reporting mistreatment and murder of pastors and ministers and the confiscation of churches. Protestants in Ukraine make up less than 1 percent of the population.

“The purposeful attacks of armed militans against evangelicals are accompanied by abductions, beatings, torture, threats of execution, pogroms at the places of prayer meetings, [and] captures of prayer houses, rehabilitation centers, and other places of worship,” they wrote in the statement.

The Baptist Times in the United Kingdom reported in July “the killing of four Baptists who were dragged out of their church in Slavyansk in June and whose bodies were found in a mass grave earlier this month.”

Igor Bandura, vice president of the Ukrainian Baptist Union, addressed the Baptist World Alliance Annual Gathering in Izmir, Turkey, in July. He noted that Ukraine had 21 years of peace between independence from the Soviet Union and protests beginning in November 2013, when the government lessened its economic ties to the European Union in favor of closer connections to Russia.

“When the conflicts started, the first thing the churches did was to start to pray more,” he said, “begging God for help, for peace, for reconciliation.”

—Baptist World Alliance