



Ministering to those with Chronic Mental Illness *by Elaine Ritterling*

“And you will have confidence, because there is hope.” Job 11:18a

*T*he Michigan District Committee on Mental Illness chose the above Bible verse for its motto because it truly believes and knows there is always hope, even when a family member is stricken with a severe mental illness.

Mental illnesses are brain chemical imbalances, not character defects; they are not caused by demons or sin, or the result of poor parenting. They will affect one in five families. Children and adolescents are not immune from these “no fault” brain sicknesses either, with approximately three million having a serious mental illness.

Yet mental illness is often called the “no casserole sickness.” When someone is ill or injured in an accident, they receive cards, gifts and other expressions of love. Outside of pastoral visits, many mentally ill and their families express sorrow and feelings of isolation over how their illness is ignored by fellow

members of the parish in which they are members.

Lack of knowledge breeds stigma and misunderstanding. Studies show that stigma is the hardest handicap to overcome as the mentally ill become stabilized on their medication and attempt to return to work and society. Because of the stigma and misunderstandings concerning mental illness, many mentally ill and their families keep quiet and do not want anyone to know they are dealing with such illnesses.

Families often feel they are living on a roller coaster as their loved one alternates between periods of seeming “normalcy” to severe psychosis; and coping with these changes is a never-ending challenge. Since mental illnesses are brain disorders, the ill person’s actions, speech and habits are affected; and it is necessary to remember he or she needs the same loving attention we would give

if they were confined to a bed. During the bad times in my son's illness, my daughter and I used the word "pneumonia" as a reminder to treat him with the same love and consideration we would anyone ill in bed.

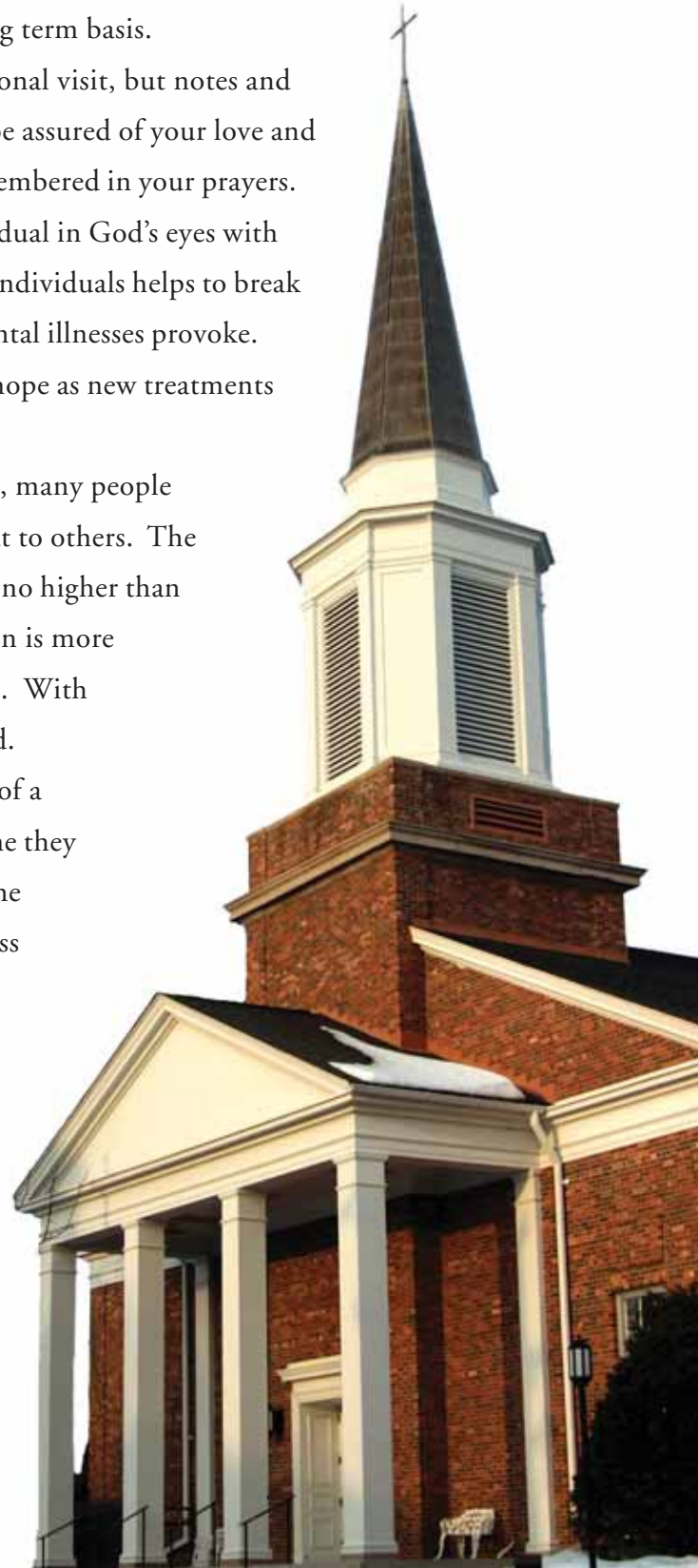
The Great Physician has called upon us as His messengers to minister to those who are ill and suffering, especially those within the household of faith (Galatians 6:10); and we need to extend that love to include those suffering from mental illnesses as well as their families, who struggle to cope on a long term basis.

The mentally ill may not always be up to a personal visit, but notes and cards are always welcome; and the family needs to be assured of your love and the knowledge they are not alone but are being remembered in your prayers. Each person with a mental illness is a unique individual in God's eyes with special gifts and challenges. Seeing these people as individuals helps to break down the barriers of fear and misunderstanding mental illnesses provoke. Their families need to be reminded there is always hope as new treatments and medications are developed.

Because of sensationalism by all forms of media, many people think all mentally ill are dangerous and pose a threat to others. The percentage of mentally ill that become dangerous is no higher than that of the general population. A mentally ill person is more likely to harm him or herself before harming others. With proper treatment and medication the threat is erased.

Periodically we read in the news or hear on TV of a mentally ill person being incarcerated for some crime they committed, usually as a result of their illness; and the police do not understand symptoms of mental illness and mistreat and in some instances even kill the ill person. It is so important that we educate our law officials to learn how to properly treat the mentally ill with whom they come in contact.

It is doubly important the ill person be made to feel welcome when he or she is able to attend worship and participate in church activities even though dress or speech may not be the norm. A man suffering from schizophrenia



simply stated, "I want people to know we are all human beings and wish to be treated like anyone else."

Upon reflection of my own experience, our son's illness led us to the Michigan District Committee on Mental Illness and we have been members since it was officially organized thirteen years ago. It has been difficult for our

son to realize he must take his meds even when he is feeling well and has stopped several times which necessitated hospitaliza-



tion. Words cannot describe the agony of going to court to get the necessary paper work to have our son committed involuntarily to the hospital and watch the police and ambulance come to take him to the hospital. But we are thankful for understanding judges and humane police. Currently, our son has stabilized on his medication and is looking for work.

Thirteen years ago the Michigan District, in a bold move under then President Dr. John L. Heins and Chaplain Tom Oie, formed the Committee on Mental Illness to address the problems facing its pastors, teachers, and congregation members to better understand

those afflicted with mental illness and provide more effective ways to help them and their families. For a long time, the Committee has been the only such group in Synod. The Committee has exhibited at District and Synodical Conventions as well as Health Fairs, Christian Growth Conferences, and pastoral conferences. It has also held seminars and

talked with and provided individuals materials.

The Committee has just completed a "Mental Illness Manual" to aid pastors, teachers, and church

workers in ministering to the mentally ill and their families. This manual can be found on the District web site www.michigandistrict.org by clicking on "Resources." For a hard copy, or materials on serious mental illnesses such as Alzheimer's, depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and suicide in children, teens and adults, please call the District's toll free number 888.225.2111 ext.204.

Elaine Ritterling and her husband, Orville, have been married for 49 years and have three adult children and three grandchildren. They are members of St. Paul's, Farmington.