

Mental health offers mission opportunity to churches

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HOUSTON—Mental health may offer the 21st century church its greatest mission opportunity, behavioral neuroscientist Matthew Stanford told a statewide conference in Houston.

“One in five Americans experience mental illness in a given year—44 million adults,” Stanford, chief executive officer of the [Hope and Healing Center](#) in Houston, told participants at the No Need Among You Conference.

The [Texas Christian Community Development Network](#) sponsored the event, Oct. 25-27 at Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston.

Lack of treatment

However, he noted, six out of 10 adults and half of children and adolescents receive no mental health services.

“The majority of people in the United States with mental illness receive no treatment,” said Stanford, former professor of psychology, neuroscience and biomedical studies at Baylor University.

Barriers to treatment include accessibility, affordability and acceptability, he noted. Stanford pointed to the prevalence of mental illness particularly among two populations—the homeless and the incarcerated.

“Thirty percent of the homeless show evidence of mental illness,” Stanford said.

Furthermore, there are 10 times as many mental ill individuals in jails and prisons as in state hospitals, he reported.

Opportunity for ministry

Churches are uniquely positioned to minister to people with mental health issues, he insisted.

“Individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to go to clergy before engaging a physician or mental health provider,” he said. “This is especially true in minority populations.”

Often, mental health professionals have viewed ministers as gatekeepers charged with the responsibility of making appropriate referrals, but a major problem exists with the gatekeeper model, Stanford asserted.

“Nobody told them (clergy) they are gatekeepers,” he said.

Ministers need training to recognize mental illness and guidance in learning when, where and how to provide referrals, Stanford said.

‘Relieve suffering, reveal Christ, restore lives’

While referrals are appropriate in many circumstances, churches and their leaders also can offer direct ministry to people who have mental health issues through support groups, he insisted.

Stanford pointed to peer-led trauma recovery groups he helped launch in Libya for people traumatized by natural disasters, war and famine. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, churches along the Texas Gulf Coast could offer similar lay-led groups, he suggested.

He cited [*Healing the Wounds of Trauma*](#), a book from the American Bible Society and its Trauma Healing Institute, as an easy-to-use, biblically sound, field-tested resource. Stanford serves on the institute's advisory council.

Churches are called to “relieve suffering, reveal Christ and restore lives,” he said.