

## **The Deacon's Son**

One afternoon as I sat in my office at Holy Comforter, the phone rang. I answered. The caller identified himself as a deacon at a predominantly African-American Baptist church in Atlanta, a congregation with a long and storied history of fighting for social justice and civil rights. Many of its members were among the community's elite.

Members of Holy Comforter whom he met at a local meeting of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) had referred him to me. He related an incident during his congregation's worship the previous Sunday. At the center was a homeless man with some form of mental illness. He had attended their worship services for a while. I inferred that they had been willing for him to attend but had not gotten to know him. All had gone well until the previous Sunday, when the man's behavior became disruptive. Ushers approached to calm him, but he responded violently. The police arrested the man.

Then came the deacon's question: "We are sure that he will be released from jail this week. We are meeting tonight to decide what to do when he returns. I thought you might be able to help us." He paused, and I was quiet. I asked myself, "What can I possibly say that will help with their decision? We don't have problems like that at Holy Comforter."

My experience with our many worshippers who lived with mental illness was that they rarely, if ever, disrupted our services. Some would occasionally engage in behaviors that annoyed others, but violent disruptions were not part of our communal life. That, I think, was because Holy Comforter had spent years welcoming people with mental illness into the life of the parish and had even created a day program for them, the Friendship Center. Our members with mental illness were just that – members, and they knew it and felt it. Holy Comforter was their community. Their stake in the community affected their behavior, even as they struggled with their illnesses.

Before I could speak, the deacon spoke again, "You know, my son has schizophrenia. I put him in a hospital up East, because I couldn't find the care I want for him here. Tonight will be the first time I have told my fellow deacons

about my son. We don't talk about mental illness in the Black church." This disclosure explained his presence at the NAMI meeting.

The ground under our conversation shifted. No longer was it confined to the disruptive homeless man. It was about how we as the church deal with mental illness. I assured him that the "White church" isn't very good at dealing with mental illness either. We talked about our harmful silence and what we might do to make our churches feel like home to all God's children, including people with chronic mental illness, whose behaviors sometimes discomfort and occasionally disrupt.