



Community Heals

“The Will to Embrace”



A brief history of Holy Comforter

- ▶ 1893: Founded in heart of Atlanta near textile mills
- ▶ Mid-1980's – After decades of struggle (Great Depression, World Wars, racial unrest, white flight, racial integration, internal issues), almost decommissioned
 - ▶ Priest on Bishop's staff pleads for one more chance and becomes Vicar
 - ▶ Walks streets inviting all who would come
 - ▶ Most who come recently discharged from mental hospitals; live in group homes
 - ▶ Bishop keeps HC as parish with ministry to people with mental illness
- ▶ 1996: Atlanta Olympics and temporary Friendship Centers
- ▶ 1997: Friendship Center at HC made permanent ministry



My history with Holy Comforter

- ▶ 2003-2005: vocational discernment and seminary field work
- ▶ 2006-2014: Vicar and Director of Friendship Center
- ▶ My first question as Vicar:
Why should anyone support HC? What does HC do?
- ▶ My answer:
HC offers community to people who often can't find community.



“The Will to Embrace”

- ▶ Community heals but it is not easy.
- ▶ Community heals but the work is never finished.
- ▶ A healing community wills to embrace the Other.
 - ▶ “The Other” = not me or mine
 - ▶ “The Other” = not what I understand
 - ▶ “The Other” = not what I have experienced

“In social contexts, truth and justice are unavailable outside the will to embrace the other.” – Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*



Safe & Welcoming Community

- ▶ My question:

 - Why aren't people with mental illness more visible in many churches?

 - Why do people with mental illness pass by other churches to come to HC?

- ▶ Research question for my D.Min. project:

 - What makes churches feel safe and welcoming to people with mental illness?

- ▶ Research Method:

 - ▶ Interview 12 members of HC/FC community with lived experience of mental illness and churches

 - ▶ Qualitative analysis of transcripts

 - ▶ Final paper reported how interviews and analysis informed my question with theological reflection

 - ▶ Title: *Mental Illness & Belonging: A Pastor's Inquiry*



What research taught me

- ▶ Feeling belonging subsumes feeling safe and welcome.
- ▶ Feeling belonging depends on presence of certain key experiences:
 - ▶ *Participation*: Am I invited and empowered to participate fully in the life and work of the community?
 - ▶ *Regard*: Does the community accept and value my participation?
 - ▶ *Understanding*: Is the community open to understanding me and my illness, or does it yield to the stigma of mental illness?
- ▶ These experiences form layered supports for a robust sense of belonging.
 - ▶ Belonging rests on participation.
 - ▶ The value of participation rests on the community's positive regard for that participation.
 - ▶ That positive regard rests on understanding of mental illness and of people affected by mental illness. Stigma inhibits understanding.

“Love is a wholehearted ‘yes’ to belonging.” Bro. David Steindl-Rast



Conclusions

- ▶ Specialized communities for people with mental illness are not the answer.
 - ▶ Inclusion in every community is.
 - ▶ Community Inclusion Resources: <http://www.tucollaborative.org/>
- ▶ Steps toward that goal:
 - ▶ Seek the “will-to-embrace.”
 - ▶ Educate the community about mental illness.
 - ▶ Engage: Sit and listen to another’s experience of mental illness.
 - ▶ Regard people for who they are, not for their illness.
 - ▶ Recognize that mental illness may require accommodations that vary person to person.
 - ▶ Invite and encourage participation to fullest extent of each person’s capacity.
 - ▶ Focus on gifts and abilities, not on limitations.
 - ▶ Get ready for community to become an experience that shatters and surpasses your expectations.



Mental Illness, Society, & the Church

Writings by Mike Tanner

- ▶ *King Saul & the Stigma of Madness*
- ▶ *Mental Illness & Violence*
- ▶ *Mental Illness & Belonging: A Pastor's Inquiry*
- ▶ *Stories of Holy Comforter*
- ▶ *WCCI Presentation: Community Heals*

Available at <https://belonging.today/>

Videos about people of Holy Comforter

- ▶ Partnership: Holy Comforter & Mercer University Center for Study of Narrative
 - ▶ Introduction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB6orSgFZLo&feature=youtu.be>
 - ▶ Friendship Center: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_Tj8YteoAg&sns=em
 - ▶ Individual stories:
 - ▶ Bob: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnJs4_NVi-8&feature=youtu.be
 - ▶ Sytha: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u32BsoQiun0&feature=youtu.be>
 - ▶ Brenda: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKMgilDJqXk>
 - ▶ Emily: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKK_voqaAdo&feature=youtu.be
 - ▶ Lorenzo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkpKIAV-2jl&feature=youtu.be>
 - ▶ Kathy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRTEA4Z_M2c&feature=youtu.be
- ▶ Creating a Garden of Comfort: <https://vimeo.com/49466999>
- ▶ Churches & the Mentally Ill: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/06/22/june-22-2012-churches-and-the-mentally-ill/11386/>
- ▶ Video Collage: <https://vimeo.com/271889738>



COMMUNITY HEALS

A Video Collage
Life at the Friendship Center
Holy Comforter Church

Atlanta, Georgia

Filmed, edited, & Produced By Daniel W. Tanner, 2008

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All Rights Reserved.

Song *New Way To Be Human*

Performed by *Switchfoot*

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