



Eva Stimson is the editor of *Presbyterians Today*.

Through the dark valley

People struggling with mental illness need the light and love of Christ.

Cathy Smith, a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, was hospitalized with bipolar disorder in the spring of 2005. This was the first of a series of dismal sojourns in the psychiatric ward, where hallucinations wreaked havoc on her mind while doctors searched for a combination of treatments that would stabilize her condition.

In an essay she wrote during that trying period, she said, “When I am in the psych ward, I feel extremely isolated from God and the world outside. There is nothing therapeutic about being there. It is just a place to keep people safe for a short time and then send them back out to the streets.”

Smith’s sense of isolation was compounded by the stigma associated with mental illness. She felt uncomfortable requesting prayer or even talking about her condition with friends in her congregation. Eventually, she stepped out in faith and asked for help—and members of the congregation responded. They put her on the church prayer chain. A group of women knitted Smith a prayer shawl. People sent cards and cooked meals. They organized child care so Smith’s husband could visit her in the hospital and offered to drive her to and from doctor appointments.

In her essay, Smith described how regular calls and visits from Westminster’s pastors made her stints in the psych ward bearable: “Every visit I get from a minister makes such a huge difference in my time there. When a pastor comes, we talk about how things are going for me, and we talk about what’s going on at church. We read

Scripture and we pray together. These visits can penetrate the hopelessness that I feel and remind me that God is with me, especially in my darkest moments.”

Today, Smith’s health has improved, and she says it has been close to five years since she was last hospitalized for mental health concerns. One Sunday, she and a Westminster member with a physical disability shared their stories with the congregation as part of a sermon on healing by associate pastor Doug Mitchell. Her essay, “Created in the Image of God,” is posted on the website of the Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network (www.pcusa.org/psmin) along with other useful resources. Articles in this issue of *Presbyterians Today* offer additional information and highlight the work of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and its partners to support people like Cathy Smith and their families.

With more than a quarter of American adults suffering from a diagnosable mental condition in any given year, and with skyrocketing rates of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, no church can isolate itself from those with mental health needs. Those of us seeking to follow Jesus cannot avert our eyes from people in need of his healing compassion—no matter how uncomfortable they make us feel.

The fact is, those of us who are blessed with mental health today may at some point in our lives find ourselves walking through a dark valley of depression or other mental trauma, longing for someone to extend to us the light and love of Christ.

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