

Standing with Her in the Rain

By Lisa Schubert

Samantha approached me outside the church on Thanksgiving morning with her hair disheveled and her coat covered with dirt smudges and rain drops. She demanded to borrow my cell phone to find if the Thanksgiving dinner she had requested from a charitable organization would be ready for pick-up in an hour. I was in a hurry. I needed to be inside preparing to lead worship. I begrudgingly let her borrow my phone, but I insisted on dialing the number myself and standing with her in the gentle rain.

Samantha issued commands to the person on the other end of line. When she hung up, the rant continued against our church, our staff, the weather, and this meal that would serve as her Thanksgiving dinner. I had to let her go mid-rant, but not before reminding her that I would keep her in my prayers.

My encounters with Samantha have continued over the past few months. She's almost always confused, angry and paranoid. She tells stories about growing up with another member of our staff, who never met her until recently. It's hard to know how to respond to Samantha.

A friend called me recently to ask if our church had any resources for helping congregations to welcome those who struggle with mental illness. I pointed her in a few directions, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) at www.nami.org. Even as I offered her the information, I felt uneasy. Connecting with those who have mental illnesses is a complex, difficult journey.

It was raining again on Monday when I saw Samantha. She was sitting in the front lobby of the church. She shouted at me as I walked out the door, "Be careful out there! Two guys tried to kidnap me, and I wouldn't want that to happen to you." Unwilling to believe her, I replied, "Samantha, I'm sorry you had a rough morning. I'll be thinking of you. Hope your day gets better." I continued out the church doors and opened my umbrella.

I later discovered that Samantha was mugged that morning. Thankfully, the police believed her while I had blown her off. They arrested the alleged perpetrators that afternoon.

I'm embarrassed by my lack of gentleness and compassion toward Samantha, and I know I'm not alone. I wonder what it means for the Church to embrace, accept and listen to those who have mental illnesses. I wonder how church leaders like myself can grow and help others to deepen their care for people like Samantha.

There are no simple answers, but I think the answer starts in a simple place: We stand with them in the rain.

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