

NAMI FAITHNET

BRIDGES OF HOPE

Linda Baron-Katz
Co-chair
NAMI Queens/Nassau FaithNet

On Wednesday, May 17, 2017, clergy from all faiths throughout Long Island and Queens came together to learn and explore ways to help and support congregants, families and their loved ones struggling with mental illness. This third annual NAMI Queens/Nassau FaithNet event “Conversations with Clergy and Community on Exploring Faith, Religion and Spirituality as Resources for Individuals and Families Struggling with Mental Illness” was held at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset, NY. Over 100 faith leaders and community members attended.

Ellen Ritz, co-chair of NAMI Queens/Nassau FaithNet, welcomed everyone. After an inspiring invocation was delivered by Pastor Ned Wight of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Daniel Frankel sang Turn Turn Turn”. Linda Baron-Katz, also co-chair, then introduced the speakers. Our first speaker was Chaplain Van Frankel, who leads the Spiritual Care Program at Zucker Hillside Hospital, read a passage from the Psalms of King David (Psalm 19) which is about human suffering and having hope. He also spoke how in the Gospel, Jesus felt compassion about the desire to love and bring peace to this world. Chaplain Frankel expressed that spiritual healing is more about believing in a higher power and stated that many Atheists who question G-d believe in something that is higher than themselves. The second speaker, Dr. Isma Chaudhry, President Islamic Center of Long Island, is an interfaith activist and champion for the rights of Muslim women. Dr. Chaudhry spoke about the role of community and read a verse from the Koran, “I’ve created you in strides and nation”; which believes that every faith

builds a sense of attachment like self-esteem and confidence in an ability to succeed on this earth. Dr. Chaudhry also expressed that faith-based leaders must play a role in dispelling the myths of mental illness, in making their communities understand and embrace the facts of mental illness and in coming together to bring hope and change.

After this, Ellen Ritz showed the Powerpoint presentation titled, Bridges of Hope. This explained all about NAMI and what faith-based leaders can do in their communities about mental illness. Ellen Ritz started the presentation by stating what NAMI is, its goals, and the kinds of programs that are offered such as Family to Family, Peer to Peer, In Our Own Voice, Ending The Silence, in order to help families and loved ones understand the meaning of mental illness. She then spoke how many individuals do not recognize the symptoms of mental illness and how it can affect the way we think, feel, and relate to others. The Bridges of Hope presentation also explained some of the mental health disorders and how if left untreated symptoms can get worse and run the risk of suicide. The most important thing that was shown in the Bridges of Hope presentation was how faith leaders can play a major role to help families and those in their congregations struggling with mental illness. Questions most often asked to faith leaders are, “Where is G-d?” Why do bad things happen to good people? How will I cope?, etc. Activities that faith leaders can do in their congregation are running a support group, build a Mental Health Library, host a Mental Health Conference, etc. After the presentation was over, the audience participated in table discussions asking questions like, “What is your (church, synagogue, faith group) already doing to provide a bridge of hope for people touched by mental illness?”, “What would you like to see it do?”

Finally, our last two speakers were Father Damian Halligan, who ministers at St. Anthony’s Parish in Oceanside, New York, spoke about a support group called Recovery, Inc of

its ten step program and how they share each week a story about someone's recovery from mental illness. Pastor Steve Tomlinson, recently completed his doctorate degree of Ministry at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Spoke about how important it is to reach out to those affected by mental illness to support them with encouragement, patience, wisdom, and above all to listen and communicate with them in a language they understand.

At the conclusion of the event, Reverend Diane Monks gave a special benediction.

This event was such a success that I feel we all learned and gained a tremendous amount of knowledge, faith, and hope to help those struggling with mental illness within our communities.