

Dear Friends,

Have you read – or have you heard of - *The Purpose Driven Life* by American Baptist pastor Rick Warren? It is a Christian self-help book and has been criticised for applying eisegesis (where the author imposes their own interpretation on scripture), but was hugely popular among evangelical Americans, remaining on the New York Times Bestseller List for over 90 weeks and selling over 50 million copies around the world.

More recently, Rick Warren has become known for something a little closer to my heart! In 2023 the church he founded, Saddleback Church, was expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention for ordaining women as pastors. He wrote an open letter to the church on that occasion which you can read here - <https://baptistnews.com/article/an-open-letter-to-all-southern-baptists/> (It reads like a lot of the statements we were making to the NSW/ACT Baptist Association!)

But when Kay Warren, Rick's wife, took to the stage at the Baptist Congress last week, I thought, at first, that she was a little too 'American' for me! But a few moments in, she started sharing her story about their son, Matthew, who lived with serious mental illness for most of his life and died by suicide in April 2013. Since then, Kay has helped establish support networks for families, places where people can receive accurate psychoeducation, support one another, and be fully incorporated into the life of the church.

What she shared with us followed the acrostic CHURCH, and she wanted to emphasise above all is that any sized church, you don't have to be a Saddleback sized church, can provide these five areas of support for individuals and families impacted by mental illness.

- **C stands for Care – care for and support individuals and families.**
- **H stands for Help with practical needs.** “Can we provide a meal?” she asked. “Can we look after other children or run someone to a medical appointment?”
- **U stands for Utilise and train volunteers.** There are many resources available for training people about how to support those impacted by mental illness.
- **R stands for Remove the stigma.** Kay spoke about how mental health is part of physical health, not separate from it, and that, like the many illnesses that affect the body, one in five of us will experience mental illness every year, and 45 per cent – virtually half of us - will be affected by mental illness at some time in our lives. As I said in the sermon a couple of weeks ago, sometimes churches are not very good about talking about this subject. Mental illness is regarded as the “non-casserole” disease, as one writer puts it!
- **The second C stands for Collaborate with the community.** Just as there is training available for supporting people impacted by mental illness, there are also supports in our communities we can be linked in with.
- **Finally, the second H stands for offer Hope.** We have a message of hope; that God knows and cares for each individual, that each person's life is of value and that God walks with us through the darkest valleys in our lives.

For Rebecca Hilton and I, as we listened to this, our thoughts were with Jolene Knox and Justin Stevens and their family as they grieved for the life of Errol. It was a message that reminded us of what the church can be, how the church can respond in times like this; by offering care, help, utilising volunteers, removing the stigma, reaching out to the community and, finally, offering hope.

Please keep the Knox and Stevens families in your prayers, and others who we know are impacted by mental illness. Please pray about how our church can continue to be CHURCH. This Friday, 18 July, at 1pm the church will gather with the Knox and Stevens families to give thanks for the life of Errol. There will be afternoon tea after the service and, if you can, please bring a plate of food to share.

Isaiah 42:1-3 says this of the servant of God, the one who we identify as Jesus and who we follow,

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice."*

A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. Our God is a God of compassion, love, care and hope for those impacted by mental illness

Peace be with you and among you,

Belinda