

Introduction

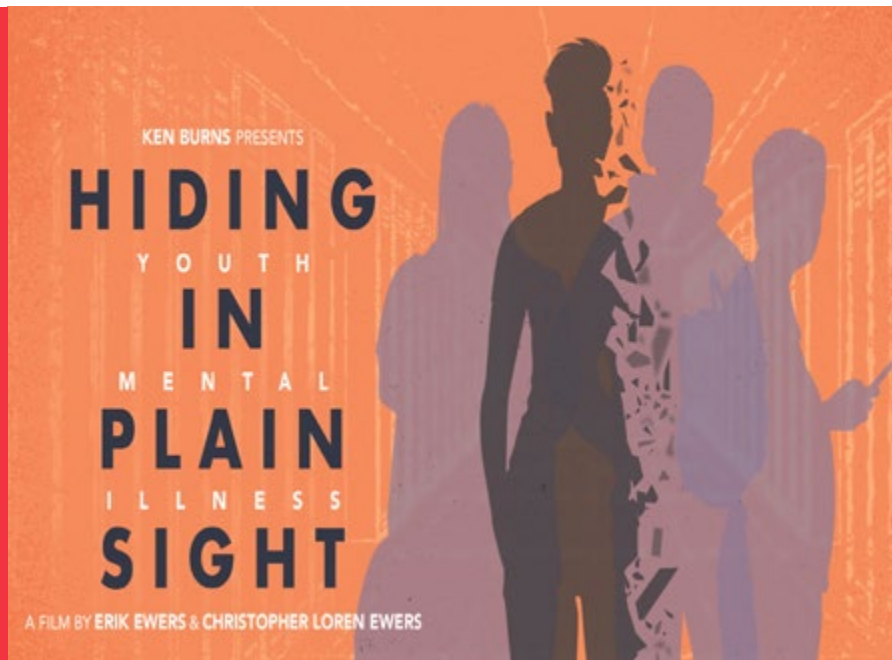
The Why

We are living in difficult times. We name this to start a conversation about where we go from here. For those of you who attend the Worship Labs or watch the services on YouTube, you know that we address the context of the times and history in all meetings. We realize that some of you are only connected to us through this email list. As such, allow us to engage with you here about how we can heal and work towards easing the suffering in this world, while working to build a kinder, gentler world alongside it.

Our hope for this newsletter is to continue building beloved community and brave spaces to heal from trauma and disconnectedness. Please share your concerns, questions, and hopes to help shape the conversation going forward. Let's grow this as a monthly place to forge deeper understanding with one another.

Rev. Amie Vanderford

Co-Founder/Pastor



JULY 2022

THE LAB NEWS

The LabOratory Church & Project L.E.A.S.T. are hosting a Youth Dinner & Screening of **Ken Burns Presents "Hiding in Plain Sight: Youth Mental Illness"** followed by a Q&A on Mental Health. Learn more on page 8.

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The Incubator
Where ideas take root...

Our Team

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A Monthly Publication of...



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Pastoral Reflection

Listening to Become Safe

by Rev. Amie Vanderford

To be blunt, the implementation of theocracy, and the rise of fascism, has essentially been cemented with the recent Supreme Court rulings. As I mentioned in last month's column, I am sharing specific tips on how white folks who care and want to do better can learn to be safer in community. I am directing this primarily to white folks because due to our unconscious biases and privilege, we are usually the least safe people in multicultural discussions and networks, *even when we mean well*. You see, BIPOC folks have been warning us about the dangerous power structures in our country for a long time, centuries in fact. You may sense irritation from these communities as we (as white people) process our grief over the over-turning of Roe vs. Wade because while this type of fear of oppression may feel new to many white folks, it has been their experience their entire lives. Too often white folks who realize we may need to do better in understanding other peoples' social locations will say we want to "listen and learn" from others, yet become defensive and shut down when hearing something we did wrong, or didn't do at all. While we truly do need to do these things (amongst other things), we first need to learn to *listen in order to become safe* for the people from whom we say we want to learn, and whose work we want to join.

A good first step is to practice listening deeply to others without vocalizing defensiveness or justifications about something we didn't like hearing. One of my favorite Black Anti-Racism TikTok educators, @portia.noir, has this great rule for new subscribers to her channel to just listen to her content, without commenting, for 30 days. Those who do not heed her rule and comment anyway become the subject of her videos in the form of a teaching moment, where she publicly explains why what they said was inappropriate, and she will invite them to learn and do it differently. Can you guess what happens next? More often than not, the person will dig their heels in and continue to be defensive, and sometimes become aggressive and hateful, or call her divisive (or even call her racist!) because 'she made them uncomfortable.' Essentially, the commenter is not hearing why she has those instructions, nor respecting her boundaries, and

"We first need to learn to listen in order to become safe for the people from whom we say we want to learn..."

as she will very clearly tell them, they are 'centering' themselves. They are gaining free teaching from her, so it behooves them to truly listen and be respectful of her. You see, those who have multiple layers of oppression see things about life that privileged groups are often blind to.

Now, let's talk about why it is so important for us to listen to what people tell us. When they are willing to be vulnerable and honest with us about their needs and where we can do better, if we do not hear what they are saying, and immediately turn it to our own feelings, then we have shown that we care more about our feelings of comfort, and/or being right, than about the person in front of us who is being real with us. In a world full of lies and manipulation, the only way we are ever going to heal relationships with one another is by making it safe enough for people to be real about how they truly feel. And in return, when it is our time to express our feelings, wants, and needs, we, too, will be safe to do so. Safety in relationship is a two-way street! When we practice listening to people with different experiences than us, we can be made aware of our areas of ignorance and unconscious biases, and we not only learn about different experiences, we also better understand our own. When we listen, we are also going slower, we are observing life around us more closely, and we will be less likely to be controlled by our reactive words and behaviors that may cause harm to self and others. In my own life, I tend to have a speedy nature, and this has burned me oh so many times! As I learn to go slower and listen more, I promise you my life has become less painful for me and those around me.

As we listen, we will also benefit from bracketing our emotional reactions about being told we were harmful or wrong for processing at a later time. This can be a very painful thing to do, especially if our own childhood trauma is triggered, misunderstood, unheard, or diminished, yet if we have harmed someone, our first focus should be listening to that person. Our feelings

remain important even when they are not brought up in that moment, and that is why we recommend therapy and spiritual work on an ongoing basis—we all have a lot of pain and harmful cultural programming to work through. A good side affect of us working on ourselves on an ongoing basis while also doing this work of deep listening without defensiveness, is that when we do this, we are also actively avoiding causing new harm. There will still be clashes and relational work to do with the folks we are already in mutual conversation and relationship with, however, this is a separate conversation.

There are still times and places when we must speak up, of course, and sadly we usually seem to save our outrage for those who aren't white, and give all the chances in the world to white people, especially white men. I encourage us to begin to notice for whom we hold contempt and whose bad behavior we let slide. For whom do we speak out, and for whom do we hold our tongues? Who is deserving of consequences and who isn't? These are things we can better see as we speak less and listen more.

There are many spiritual practices that will help us develop our listening skills, including silent (or guided) meditation, prayer time, and study or reflection time such as reading the perspectives of others, as well as listening to instrumental music while doing activities such as coloring, knitting, or listening to nature itself while gardening, walking, or other activities. When we practice listening to others, our environment, and our internal selves, we are also practicing listening for the Spirit. As Thaddeus shared in his mental health column last month:

"When thinking about the will of God for our lives, we can look for cues in nature, and this is a form of observing and listening on a grand scale. If we are loud in our mind, body, and spirit, we can miss the quiet pull of wisdom. After all, the Spirit speaks to us in a still, small voice."



the garden lab

The harvests continue!

The flowers are blooming, the bees are visiting, and we continue to harvest tasty greens and root veggies to share. We are elated to see the very first blooms of the Echinacea plants that we received as a donation just over a year ago, as it adds something special when we need to wait more than a season to see them. The Nasturtium and Marigolds are trying to take over every inch of space available, and they are complemented by the beauty of our first time seedlings of Zinnias, Cosmos, Calendulas, and Lavender! The Yarrow, Milkweed, Chamomile, and Sage herb plants have not yet flowered, but they are coming along nicely!

While there have been plentiful radish harvests from early in the season, we are noticing that some of the other root veggies, while producing bushy green leaves, are not developing their tasty roots as well, which is usually a sign of too much nitrogen in the soil. We have managed to harvest a few beets; however, the first round of turnips

failed to develop. The carrots are looking promising, as are the rutabaga, but the kohlrabi are not looking great. The updated plan is to add some soil amendments for better nutritional balance for the next round of planting root veggie seeds.

For the animal contingent, the squirrels are continuing to look for weak links in the fencing, but have been unsuccessful, and we have noticed a couple of rabbits, but they haven't come near the beds. The neighborhood cat, Slink, continues to visit, and has invited some of his cat friends. We are grateful to the folks who have donated cat food for this new animal-feeding aspect of The Garden Lab ministry!

The mental health and physical benefits of caring for God's creation continues to be a blessing to all involved especially in this time of great turmoil! If you want assistance getting your first plant(s) going, we are happy to help! Simply send us an email, info@thelaboratorychurch.org and let us know what you need.



Mental Health

Mental and Emotional Management

by Thaddeus Shelton, Jr., MFT, CSAYC

In the last issue, I began talking about deep introspection and self improvement as a means to improving the mental health of self and community. Because life comes at you fast sometimes, slowing down can really expose what is happening around us. You might agree that the COVID pandemic demonstrated a test case in slowing down reality. Because you have some controls that you may not be aware of, we'll talk today about self-regulation, which is defined as "the fact of something such as an organism regulating itself without intervention from external bodies."

Here is a look at some of the ways mental health and spiritual concerns intersect. Let's start with how to build focus. Building focus in mental health terms translates into 'self-control,' which is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23). The human mind and emotions are constantly being bombarded by trauma, and these impacts develop entrenched neurological pathways in the brain. The limbic and other systems host the most basic behaviors in reactivity. Because the pace of life can be so much faster than our recovery cycles, we can

end up feeling burned out. As a result, people can feel like they are spinning, and sometimes even spinning totally out of control. The ability to direct one's focus is severely limited during this time (in reactive or survival mode), because our central processing unit (CPU), the brain, gets bogged down, so we sometimes have to wait for processing to settle us into our reality. Even our computers buffer and lag due to the inability to handle the glut of processing it sometimes takes to accomplish a task.

Unfortunately, consumerism culture adds to the overload of our brains by exposing us to never-ending 'urgent' messages and calls to action in a competitive race to capture our attention and our dollars. Most people unknowingly participate in reinforcing this conditioning of society. Even psychotherapy has succumbed to the pace of modernity by privileging various "brief" approaches.

When we are attempting to build or rebuild certain behaviors in ourselves, it does take intention. If you are able to maintain intention, I believe you possess enough willpower

to begin rehabilitation of your ability to focus. Depending upon the type of symptoms present, a person may need some form of medication therapy to "take the edge off" enough to make self-control possible.

Prayer is another place in the Christian walk where God shows concern for our mentality. Prayer is more than just communication with The Creator, it is actually building new neural pathways. The scripture backs this claim up by promising "to make all things new," if we'll let things be renewed. The word also says "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (See Revelation 21:5 and Romans 12:2). These scriptures speak directly to whatever state of mind you may be in. The instructions and promises we find in the Bible present both challenges and opportunities, depending upon how you view and experience its words.

The spiritual practices and traditions of our faith are designed to reformat us back into the image and likeness of our Designers. With intergenerational trauma, family and larger systems' conditioning, it can be a challenge to find anything believable these days. These dynamics contribute to

"Let us decide today to care for the individual cells and coordinated systems of a healthy communal body."

many people turning away from faith, and choosing to lean on their own understanding instead.

Because we come to earth as infants, we have to grow into the understanding of the society and the social location we are born into. With each location having a set of expectations associated with it, these dynamics can be hell to navigate. It can be especially hard on the developing psyche and emotions of people. The family system also has a way of assigning social importance and priority on things it holds dear.

No one has been observed as being perfect other than Jesus, so unlike him, we may need a little more help managing how we feel. As relational beings, our mental health is impacted by how much we feel a sense of safety and acceptance. Mental and emotional wounds can be healed by intimacy with Christ through a combination of prayer, communal support, and therapy/pharmacology. The right medication can take the edge off of the difficulties of daily living and allow us the headspace to think in a way that is different and productive. All these things are designed to work together for the betterment of life, so definitely be encouraged to use these tools.

Redirecting internal dialogue through gratitude is also an excellent way to work with maintaining a state of relative peace and contentment. In past conversations we've covered some of the mental exercises that are helpful, such as how to settle our minds for bed and to start the day off on a positive note.

Now I would like to lift up the practice of building new neural networks by purposefully practicing self-regulation through meditating on gratitude specifically. Because the available space for holding ideas is limited in humans, two things can not hold the same space at the same, allowing gratitude to take up more space helps us cope with the hard things of life. We believe God is asking us to use the available space for what edifies us rather than drains us. By exercising our God given right to choice and self-determination, we can literally block out intrusive thoughts through focusing on what we have versus what we don't have.

Finding creative ways to self-regulate is subject to the abilities of the individual person experiencing symptoms. When it comes to thought disruption or dis-regulation, we each possess knowledge and relationship with our own situation(s) that no clinician can see better. The behaviors and practices I am submitting to you here is a small path, and sometimes that's all we need. After all, intentionally pursuing individual healing (in all aspects of life) is what the Spirit is interested in. To be "made whole" will most likely include work in relationship with self, God, and others. Each domain has its own set of challenges and rewards, with each area being central to a balanced life.

This is where it all begins and ends, with healthier individuals building healthier society in community together. Consider the metaphor of the body of Christ as containing all the parts it needs to sustain life and thrive. If the body turns against itself (mentally and emotionally), it is like the debilitating effects of an autoimmune disease, a condition arising from an abnormal immune response to a functioning body part. Let us decide today to care for the individual cells and coordinated systems of a healthy communal body. Now is the time to consider how we depend on each other before further challenges arise.

Dinner and Film Screening - July 31

Youth Dinner & Screening of “Hiding in Plain Sight” followed by Q&A on Mental

The LabOratory Church and Project L.E.A.S.T. invite youth, parents, and mentors to attend a special 1-hour condensed screening of the new mental health documentary Ken Burns Presents: “Hiding in Plain Sight: Youth Mental Illness” A film by Erik Ewers and Christopher Loren Ewers.

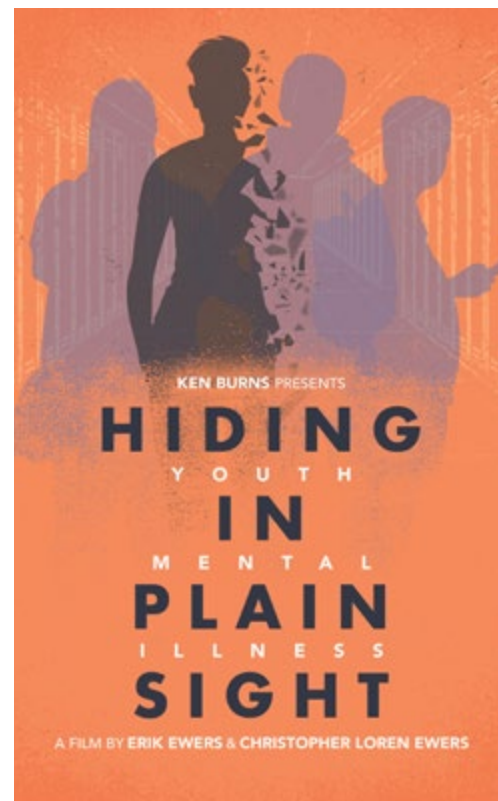
We will provide a free meal (limited to 80 attendees, with registration on a first come, first serve basis**), and there will be a youth-focused mental health discussion and Q&A following the screening with guest attendees including one of the filmmakers, film subjects, and local youth-centered mentors and therapists.

We gratefully [accept donations](#) to support the work of the Project L.E.A.S.T. mentoring program, the 4KEEPS Mobile Food Pantry, and The Garden Lab (community gardens).

Film Description

Mental illness is a significant global health crisis—as pervasive as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease—but it often exists in secret and is endured in isolation. It’s the place where sadness leaves off and depression begins; where anticipation becomes anxiety, enthusiasm becomes mania, and habit becomes addiction; the place where simply living becomes painful.

There are people struggling with mental illness all over the world: in remote rural communities, small towns, and major cities; in schools, the workplace, and in our homes. It is, in fact, a disease—a complicated one that has been a part of the human condition for thousands of years. Left undiagnosed, mental illness can last a lifetime. Left untreated, it can lead to addiction, homelessness, prison, or even death.



The issues surrounding mental illness are extraordinarily complex; the risk factors are daunting, the economics bewildering, the politics contentious. Public policy, research, and education can help. But the most important step—and often the most difficult one—is to start talking about it.

Through first-person accounts, this film presents an unvarnished window into the issues associated with mental illness and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that those who live with it face daily. It also confronts the issues of stigma, discrimination, awareness, and silence, and, in doing so, helps advance a major shift in the public perception of mental illness today.

What: Youth Dinner & Screening of “Hiding in Plain Sight”
When: Sunday, July 31, 2022
 6:00-8:30 pm
Where: Irvington Lodge
 5515 Washington Street
 Indianapolis, IN 46219

**If you plan to attend, [please register via the EventBrite registration form](#) so that we may know your meal preferences.

Additional Donation Links:



There are many ways to support The LabOratory Church and Stay Connected

Ways to Support

Support our work financially through any of our giving links at the end of this newsletter.

Volunteer to help at our **4KEEPS Mobile Pantry** and/or our **Garden Lab**

Participate in our mentoring program: **Project L.E.A.S.T.** (Love Everyone As Self Training)

Donate or lease farmable land for our use

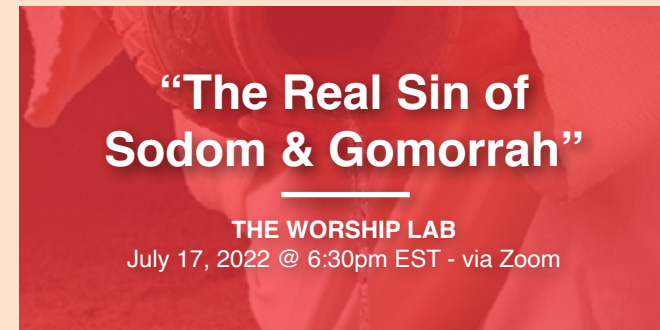
Link your **Kroger Plus card** to our 4KEEPS Mobile Pantry, and we'll receive a percentage of your total grocery bill as a donation. There is no cost to you, and it won't affect your other Kroger Plus card benefits!

How to link the card to The Laboratory Church:

- Log in to your account: www.kroger.com
- Scroll to and then click on **Community > Kroger Community Rewards**
- Click on **Search for your organization**
- Search by NPO number GS580 or "The Laboratory Church"
- Select the organization and click Save
- Your **Donation Summary Status** should display as "Enrolled."

Ways to Connect

Attend The Worship Lab via Zoom on the **1st & 3rd Sundays** of the month **@6:30 pm ET** (link is below and on our website: thelaboratorychurch.org)



Share this newsletter with friends you think might appreciate it, and/or on your social media.

Subscribe, Like and Share content from our [YouTube channel](#).



We want to hear from you!

Via the QR code, please share your questions, concerns, and hopes to help to shape the conversations going forward, and if/how you have been impacted by our work.

Support our mission

Looking to get involved!? All are welcome & encouraged. See below for ways to contribute!



thelaboratorychurch.org
info@TheLabOratoryChurch.org
[@thelaboratorychurch](https://www.instagram.com/thelaboratorychurch)



At **The LabOratory Church**, we couldn't do the work we do, without financial support from people like you.

To make a donation, please visit any of the links below or contact us with questions.

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Stay Tuned for the August Issue of The Incubator!



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