

WISE Partner Profile: MIRACLE Network

What is the MIRACLE Network?

The MIRACLE Network is a partnership led by Progressive Baptist Church that brings together churches and other organizations in an effort to promote mental wellness among Milwaukee's African American faith community. MIRACLE began in 2012 under the leadership of the Rev. Walter Lanier, who found the opportunity to use his pastorship at Progressive Baptist Church to address the community's mental health needs and decrease the stigma of mental illness that he had witnessed during his early career.

In its beginning, the work of MIRACLE was focused on convening network partners to establish a shared vision and identify community resources. Over time, the work has expanded to include messaging, events, trainings, and other opportunities to support mental wellness among partnering congregations and the broader community.

What is MIRACLE's approach?

MIRACLE Network's approach includes four main components:

- 1) Ministry among church members,
- 2) Collaboration with other local churches,
- 3) Collaboration with others with mental health expertise, and
- 4) Advocacy.

The strategies being used are unique and **targeted** to the **local** African American faith community. Network members cite historical reluctance to acknowledge mental illness within the community, stemming in part from assertions of inner strength and trust in a higher power. Distrust in the healthcare system has further compounded this stigma, resulting in decreased access to effective prevention, support, and treatment. MIRACLE seeks to use churches' influence to promote open dialogue and create a supportive environment for those struggling with mental health issues as well as their loved ones.

In its ministry among church members, MIRACLE uses the **power of story** to provide a theological framework and normalize discussion about mental health topics. Sermons and religious instruction have drawn on both biblical and current-day stories to illustrate needs and provide models of compassion and caring. The role of church leaders lends further **credibility** to the messages, and supporting mental wellness in everyday interactions with church members is seen as an extension of pastoral care.

MIRACLE's strategies are **continuous** and evolving. In addition to regularly conveying messages from the pulpit and providing resources to members, more recent strategies have included hosting annual community health fairs and offering support groups for individuals and their family members. A summit is being planned for 2015, which is intended to provide local clergy members the opportunity to come together and share resources to advance mental wellness among the congregations they serve.

What have been the results of the effort?

MIRACLE members report that the partnership's efforts have already resulted in some **positive changes**, including a greater receptiveness among church members to the messages being communicated. In addition, there is a perception that church members have become more willing to discuss mental health topics and that there is a more supportive environment for members to disclose their experiences and struggles to clergy and other church members.

Overall, MIRACLE's accomplishments to date have been attributed to passionate leadership in bringing community members together to address needs and reduce stigma associated with mental health issues.

Key recommendations that have been identified by members include:

- Hold regular meetings of network partners to keep the initiative moving forward.
- Convene stakeholders who have a shared vision, are open to new ideas, and are action-oriented.
- Call upon community groups with specific expertise who can bring diverse resources to the table.

What partnerships and resources have been most valuable?

In addition to the other churches that are part of the MIRACLE Network, several other partnerships were cited as playing a valuable role in MIRACLE's achievements, by providing linkages to resources, trainings to church and network members, and guidance on strategies. Specific partners include:

National Alliance on Mental Illness – Greater Milwaukee: MIRACLE Network member that has been a key partner in providing education and support to other members, including Family to Family, ASK (Access, Support & Knowledge), and "Pieces" productions.

Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee: Provided QPR (Question, Persuade & Refer) training to members.

National Alliance on Mental Illness – Texas: Provided extensive resources specifically geared towards faith communities, including:

- *Strength For His People: A Ministry for Families of the Mentally Ill*
- Medical College of Wisconsin – Institute for Health and Society: Provided articles and other resources on the topic of mental health in African American communities, including:
 - *Perceived Racism and Mental Health Among Black American Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review*
 - *A High-Profile Executive Job as Defense Against Mental Ills*
 - *Mental Health in Black America*
 - *Mental Health in the Black Community*
 - *Black Men Overcoming Stigma of Depression*
 - *Suicide Rate Among Blacks Is Cause for Alarm*
 - *How Do Courts Deal With Mental Health Issues?*
 - *Mental Health in the African American Community Fact Sheet*
 - *What a Difference A Friend Makes*
 - *Anything But Crazy: African Americans, Spirituality and Emotional Wellness*