



Hello Doctors,

Blessings this Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior.

We are excited to share the article below since it is a great outreach/summary of who we are, what we do and what we would like to do. Please read and share with colleagues. Encourage them to visit our website and partner with us. The article is posted at: <https://www.cmda.org/library/doclib/Psych-Article.pdf>.

Visit our website at cmda.org/psychiatry for more details about our section and activities. Please send comments to us at psychsectioncmda@gmail.com or post them on our Facebook page (CMDA Psychiatry Section) and help us improve our section and activities, as we seek to better enable members integrate their faith and practice.

**Camaraderie in Faith: How CMDA's Psychiatry Section Found Strength in Numbers
by Aaron Burch**

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"I had a patient who made a big impression on how I viewed the importance of religious faith in a psychiatric practice."

—Brian Briscoe, MD

Chair of CMDA's Psychiatry Section

This patient—we'll call him "Howard"—was suffering from a moderately progressed stage of Huntington's disease and the depression that often accompanies the illness. After failing numerous antidepressant medications, his depression had not improved. He had attempted suicide twice within a six-month period and had been admitted to the psychiatric floor where Dr. Brian Briscoe was rotating at the time as a senior medical student. As Dr. Briscoe approached the patient's bedside, he noticed Howard had a Bible in his hand and, to break the ice, asked if he often read the book.

“He told me he thought God was punishing him for all he’d done,” Dr. Briscoe said. “Howard believed God had stricken him with Huntington’s as direct punishment for having sold drugs to children in his late teens and 20s. He had limited insight into the fact that he had inherited the disease through no fault of his own.”

After they talked, Dr. Briscoe asked the chaplain to come and speak to Howard. The chaplain discussed 1 John 1:9, as well as a number of other theological truths about the nature of God’s grace and forgiveness. And the next day, Howard came out of his room on his own accord for the first time in more than a week.

“He was still depressed, but something was different. His countenance was brighter, and the entire nursing staff noticed,” Dr. Briscoe said. “Howard was still facing a very difficult road of suffering ahead, but something was subtly different about his perspective and overall demeanor.” Simply talking to Howard about his faith in a meaningful way had made a

difference. And through that moment, Dr. Briscoe came to recognize the tremendous importance of faith in caring for persons struggling with mental illness.

“Unfortunately,” stated Dr. Briscoe, “my secular training left me ill equipped to discuss religious and spiritual needs with my patients, and it also left me void of an understanding of how I might live out my Christian faith in my professional life, especially in psychiatry.”

FINDING A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

As a medical student, Dr. Briscoe joined CMDA and maintained his contact with the group through residency. As a practicing professional, never having forgotten the lesson he learned as a medical student, Dr. Briscoe joined CMDA’s Psychiatry Section and is now serving as its chair. “I discovered the Psychiatry Section could be a safe, reputable resource for Christian students, residents and practicing psychiatrists to consult with colleagues who shared their faith, as well as to

explore the various ways in which psychiatrists have found to live out their faith in and through their profession,” he said.

The Psych Section, as members affectionately call it, has been helping psychiatrists discuss issues of faith and support their peers for more than 50 years. Its roots extend back to the 1950s when evangelical psychiatrists began meeting and collaborating in American Psychiatric Association (APA) panel discussions. The group was formally created in Chicago in 1963 when a group of 21 psychiatrists voted to affiliate with CMDA, known then as the Christian Medical Society.

At the APA conference in 1964, the Psych Section members ratified the constitution and presented their first public seminar with the topic, “Positive Approaches to a Christian Understanding of Anger and Hostility.” By 1965, founding psychiatrists anticipated the section would make a public presentation each year that was of relevance to their professional colleagues in conjunction with the APA’s

conference.

Over the years, numerous prominent psychiatrists have shared their faith and their wisdom through the section. Past chairs include Dr. Armand Nicholi, editor of the *Harvard Guide to Modern Psychiatry*; Dr. James D. Mallory, author of *The Kink and I: A Psychiatrist's Guide to Untwisted Living*; and Dr. Irving Wiesner, who served as chair of the Psych Section and chair of the APA Committee on Psychiatry and Religion along with fellow past chairs, Drs. John Peteet and Alan Josephson.

Dr. Wiesner recently spoke about the organization and admitted that finding the Psych Section during a troubling time changed his life for the better. “The first Psych Section meeting I ever went to was in 1983,” he said. “I was in the midst of a divorce. I was battered and bruised and just coming back to the Lord. I was so shaky that when I attended the APA conference, the only thing I attended the whole weekend was that Psych Section meeting, and

it was lifesaving. These were people who understood me in more ways than one. Going to those meetings has been a significant source of joy in my life ever since.”

Now, some 55 years after they began, the Psych Section’s panels and meetings within the APA conference are the organization’s most vital hub. Each morning of the conference, the group hosts a breakfast gathering for physicians to come in and start their day with prayer and reflection.

The Psych Section also hosts one evening banquet during the conference, which is punctuated by a thought-provoking guest speaker. Friends and colleagues find renewed strength each year by sharing difficult cases and stories of overcoming adversity. “There’s even a case meeting we hold at the APA where a member will present a difficult case to the group and other Christians will give feedback on how to handle it. To me, that support and fellowship you don’t get anywhere else is what makes the Psych Section so special,” said Dr.

John Yarborough, a past chair with a practice in Northern California.

“These are fellow Christians who are practicing in your same field,” he said. “It gives me the knowledge that I have a group of people to call upon to pray with me or to lend an ear to the situation I’m facing. That’s tremendously powerful.”

FINDING STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

“The Psych Section helped me to remember that I am a Christian first who works as a psychiatrist. We all have fellowship with our church members or in other aspects of our lives, but it can be difficult to find that fellowship in the practice of psychiatry. This group is a safety net of sorts.”

—John Yarborough, MD

The opportunity for mentoring and friendship is part of the bedrock on which the Psych Section sits. Because the populations of medical schools throughout the nation are

constantly in flux, finding a supportive group of Christians in psychiatry can be difficult. The section offers a respite from that isolation by making the community available nationally.

As young psychiatrists join, they turn to more experienced mentors for help on difficult cases. Once the young doctors develop and grow, they soon find themselves assisting other newcomers. Dr. Yarborough, who practices as a child psychiatrist, regularly mentors a younger section member about to enter her own child psychiatry fellowship.

“We try to keep in contact and just pray in support of what’s going on,” Dr. Yarborough said. “It’s helpful for her because she’s not at a training center where there are multiple Christian attendees.”

Another benefit of the section is a wealth of academic opportunities coming from proximity with Christian peers. For example, past chair Dr. John Peteet, who co-edited the *Handbook of Spirituality and Worldview in Clinical*

***Practice* with fellow past chair Dr. Alan Josephson, found the group to be an excellent place to express his academic curiosity. “The handbook was a project that grew out of some of the presentations we were doing at the APA,” Dr. Peteet said. “Freud used the term ‘worldview’ to distinguish between spirituality and a scientific point of view. So we picked up on his term to refer to spiritual traditions. In the book, we had people who represented many different worldviews authoring individual chapters, so we had a Christian, a Hindi, a Muslim, a Jew, an atheist, etc.”**

In the text, those authors approach psychiatric care from unique theological perspectives, each asking, “How can you be sensitive to where the patient is coming from, not offend them and obtain information that is helpful to you?” The handbook was published by the APA and praised by psychiatrists for its in-depth look at how religious belief is reflected in practice.

FINDING A SHARED CALLING

“These doctors touch part of the human person that no other field of healthcare does,” said Marshall Williams, who organizes the annual meeting and communicates news to section members in his role as Psychiatry Section Administrator. He recently took over the role from his wife Sherri. As a couple, they’ve served the section for more than a decade.

“It’s an awesome responsibility and opportunity to help someone who is going through a physical, emotional or spiritual battle,” he said. “Our doctors can speak to all three issues in a responsible way. They have solutions other medical folks may not, just because they process the physical and emotional issues as believers. They’re just a great bunch of doctors. They have hearts of gold.”

While the Psych Section is primarily known as a national organization, hearts of gold aren’t limited by any borders. Dr. Sam Thielman is a

longtime member and outgoing chair of the section (as well as the group's historian) who has spent much of his adult life overseas working for the U.S. Department of State. "For me, the Psych Section has been an opportunity to network with a lot of Christian colleagues and be involved with projects I wouldn't have been otherwise," Dr. Thielman said. For example, he was one of the chapter authors in the *Handbook of Spirituality and Worldview in Clinical Practice*, and he helped Dr. Peteet with another book, *Ethical Considerations at the Intersection of Psychiatry and Religion*.

Dr. Thielman has found the section to be helpful in treating missionaries with mental health issues. "That is an area with some huge needs related to trauma healing, needs which aren't being met much at all," he said.

One of the physicians who helped him accomplish his goal was Dr. Frauke Schaefer, a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. Together, they and other Psych Section doctors networked with psychiatrists all over the world

to address the needs of missionaries dealing with burnout, anxiety disorder, PTSD and more. Their work resulted in the website www.docsjoininghands.com, which focuses on developing those networks for both psychiatrists and missionaries.

“The Psych Section gave us a voice last year to better address the needs of missionaries, and several psychiatrists expressed interest in either traveling overseas or seeing missionaries within their practice,” Dr. Schaefer said. “They have been so helpful and supportive.”

Whether abroad or here in the country, the organization is a sounding board for Christians in psychiatry to express themselves and help members in all their endeavors. Some physicians are spiritually awakened with a single experience, as Dr. Briscoe was when he spoke to that patient in need years ago. For others, the balancing of faith and practice is a lifelong endeavor. Either way, the Psych Section is here to help.

“Using your faith in practice depends on the level of faith and personality in the psychiatrist. Some compartmentalize. Some would never reveal they were Christian,” Dr. Weisner said. “I’ve spent the last 37 years of my life integrating my practice and my faith. It’s been the passion of my life, and the CMDA Psych Section has helped me with that. You can’t put a price on that help. It’s absolutely precious.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Burch graduated from Western Kentucky University in 2011 with a degree in journalism. After spending three years as a reporter for a local newspaper, he became Communications Specialist for the Greater Louisville Medical Society where today he manages the publication of two magazines and a monthly newsletter.



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line at our website, cmda.org/psychiatry. Please do so as you feel led. All income is used for outreach at APA, GMHC, Transform and other venues where doctors and residents/students considering or practicing psychiatry can be reached.