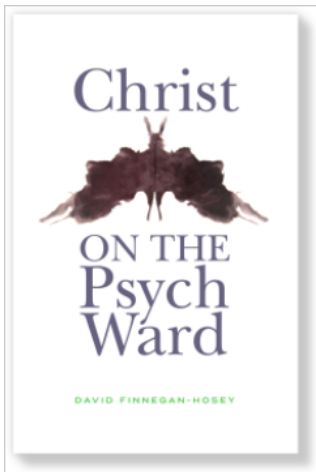


Christ on the Psych Ward
Discussion Guide
Created by David Finnegan-Hosey



This discussion guide is intended for groups who are reading *Christ on the Psych Ward* together. Some questions assume that the group is part of a faith community, but these questions can be modified with relative ease if this is not the case. The questions can also be adapted for individual use.

The guide contains three framing questions for each chapter. Don't feel like you have to stick to these questions, or rush through to make sure you answer all of them. These questions are designed to prompt conversation, not to limit it! Your group might want to take a look at the questions before you begin each chapter.

For more resources, or to contact the author, you can visit www.christonthepsychward.com. David would love to hear from your group!

Creating a Space for Difficult Conversations

Christ on the Psych Ward addresses some difficult topics, including suicidal ideation and self-harm. These topics can be hard to talk about, and for people with first- or second-hand experience of them, can be potentially triggering. Therefore, it is important to set the stage by creating a space for difficult conversation that feels safe and supportive.

I suggest you begin each discussion with a grounding/centering exercise. Take a few moments to be present in the space. Focus on how your body feels – are you touching the floor with your feet? What does the chair feel like beneath you? Pay attention as you breathe in and out. If the conversation ever begins to feel overwhelming, you can return to this grounding practice.

Set some ground rules for the discussion. These can include things like: It's ok to step out of the space if you need a break. It's ok to bring the group back the grounding practice. You might also set rules around listening to each others' stories without interrupting, respecting differences of opinion, and confidentiality.

Christ on the Psych Ward is premised on the idea that it is important for people to share their stories of mental health struggles. With that said, it is important to recognize our own limits and the limits of the group. Your discussion group is not a professional therapy group, and that's ok. You might consider gathering resources beforehand for group members who decide that a professional therapist, group therapy, or psychiatrist would be helpful to them. One such resource is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (there is also a online chat hotline available at suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat)

Discussion Questions

Introduction

- 1) Before you dive into a discussion of the book, take time to share stories or beliefs you've heard about mental illness? How have you heard mental illness talked about in your faith community or family or origin? In popular culture? In your school or workplace?
- 2) The book begins by talking about stories. Can you remember a time when you had to decide whether or not to share a difficult story about your own experience? Who did you share it with and what was that like for you?
- 3) The author recounts a meaningful conversation about modeling vulnerability. What does the word "vulnerability" evoke for you? Does it have a positive or negative connotation, and why?

Chapter 1

- 1) The author describes his admission to a hospital psychiatric unit. Prior to reading this chapter, what images or impressions did you have of psychiatric hospitals?
- 2) This chapter includes a journal entry in which the image of "Christ on the Psych Ward" first appears. What words or images stick out to you from this entry?
- 3) As a reader, how comfortable are you with the idea of a "vulnerable God"? Is this idea of God similar or different to your own understanding of God? Do you think God can be powerful and vulnerable at the same time, or are those two ideas mutually exclusive?

Chapter 2

- 1) This chapter focuses on the absence of God. Why does the author claim it is important to talk about God's absence?
- 2) Has there ever been a time when you wondered whether God was absent? If that experience was in your past, how do you think about it now?
- 3) This chapter cites biblical passages characterized as laments, especially from the psalms. How familiar are you with lament psalms? Does your faith community ever use prayers of lament in worship?

Chapter 3

- 1) Have you ever heard mental health struggles explained as being the result of sin or a lack of faith?
- 2) The author shares an interpretation of the Genesis 3 story that focuses on the concept of shame. How have you read and understood this story? What is your reaction to the interpretation offered by the author?
- 3) What are some messages you have received that “told you that you were naked” – in other words, voices that suggest you are not good enough or are lacking in some way?

Chapter 4

- 1) The author discusses different symptoms of mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, mania, and self-harm. Before reading this chapter, what were some of the associations you had with these terms?
- 2) This chapter focuses on grace. What does grace mean to you?
- 3) The chapter concludes by talking about communion. What has your experience of communion been? Does the author’s description of communion resonate with your experience, or not?

Chapter 5

- 1) This chapter focuses on images of God. What is your “go-to” image of God – i.e. the image you are most comfortable with? Is there an image of God that makes you uncomfortable? If so, why?
- 2) In your experience, how often do faith communities use feminine imagery to describe God?
- 3) The author shares that was unsure how to react when his father cried next to him in the hospital. What sort of reactions do you have to people showing strong emotion, and do those reactions change based on gender?

Chapter 6

- 1) The author recounts a group activity led by social workers in the hospital. Try the activity out as a group. Name five supports - people or things you can rely on in times of need.
- 2) What do you think of the idea that through Jesus, God understands what it means to experience loneliness? Is this a comforting or discomfoting thought?

3) The author talks about the support he received from people who didn't share his religious beliefs. Can you think of a time when you received support from someone whose beliefs were very different than your own? How did that experience affect your own understanding or beliefs?

Chapter 7

1) Do you think mental illness is like physical illness? Are there any differences between mental illness and physical illness?

2) How does your faith community take care of people who are sick?

3) How does your faith community talk about – or not talk about – demons and/or the devil? What do you think about the author's discussion of demons?

Chapter 8

1) When you hear the word "recovery," what comes to mind?

2) The author cites theologian and scholar John Swinton, who talks about two continuum: a "mental illness" continuum and a "mental health" continuum. Does this idea make sense to you? Why or why not?

3) What do you think of the idea that a person's call can simply be to experience healing? Does this change the way you think about the term "call" or "vocation"?

Conclusion

1) What is your reaction to the author's contrast between vulnerability and the idea of returning to past greatness? Does this contrast resonate with you? Why or why not?

2) The author challenges churches to not only "minister to" people with mental health struggles, but for churches to allow themselves to be "ministered to." What might this look like in your own context?

3) The book ends with the image of a labyrinth. Have you ever walked a labyrinth? As a group, discuss if you would be interested in finding a nearby labyrinth and sharing the experience of prayerfully walking it?