

Religious Rx: The roles of faith and a religious community in the management of mental illness

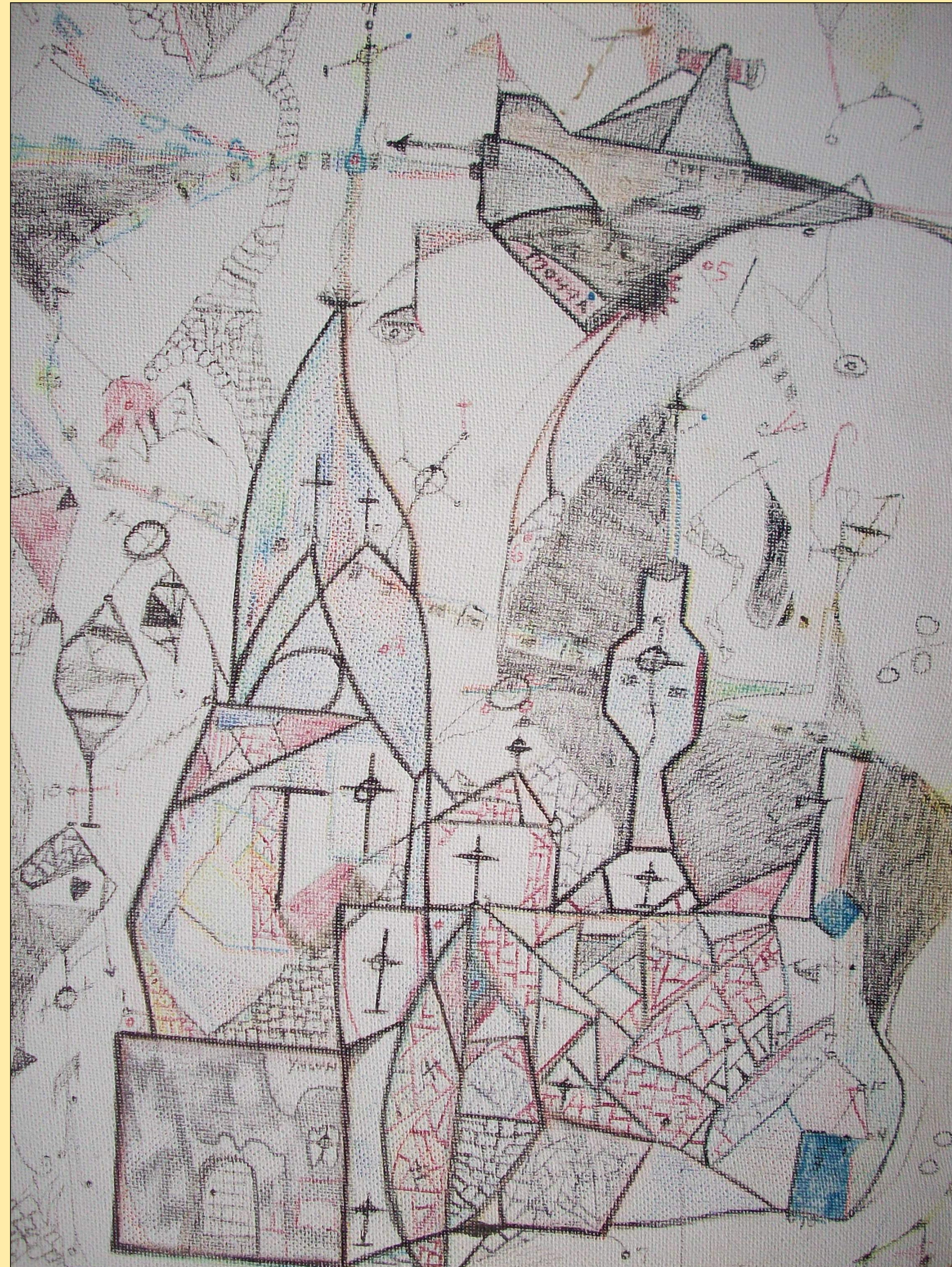
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Introduction

“You are loved by God in the universe, and healing can come from that.”
–Trudy, a participant with bipolar disorder

“I don’t think God’s gonna heal me. But see, I have a hope factor.”
–Kyle, a participant with schizoaffective disorder



Artwork of church sketched by Jeremy, a participant with schizophrenia

Does religion offer relief from mental illness symptoms?

One in seventeen Americans is diagnosed with serious mental illness (NIMH 2009). Despite its prevalence people with mental illness are stigmatized, creating barriers to effective treatments and recovery. The best treatments today are highly effective; between 70 and 90 percent of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life with a combination of medication and psychological therapies (NAMI 2011). Additionally, studies have shown benefits of social supports.

For those with religious belief, participation in a religious community could offer social support and provide incentive to maintain treatments. However, historically some religious institutions have marginalized those with mental illness, and even today many churches continue to avoid addressing issues of mental illness.

This ethnographic project is a study of Hallelujah Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, seeking how Hallelujah Church meets both the spiritual and psychological needs of its members with mental illness.

Methods

Data collection methods include:

- HSIRB approval
- Participation- observation at church services, events, fellowship group
- Open ended interview questions
- Fieldnotes

Data analysis methods include:

- Narrative analysis
- Transcription of interviews and fieldnotes
- Identification of key concepts and trends
- Links to existing literature



Woman caught between light and darkness, painted by Trudy, a participant with bipolar disorder

Results

Hallelujah Church provides opportunities for social identity beyond label of *mentally ill*

- Worship and fellowship group
 - Chances for leadership, showcasing talents
- “Hallelujah gives me the self confidence. You know when they asked me to be a Deacon, I thought that was great. I guess I was voted in unanimously.”*
–Robert, a participant with depression

Religious participation creates social support networks

- Having a sense of purpose
 - Being part of a community
 - Incentive to persevere
- “When you go you just feel love. I feel it from everybody! The stuff that I’ve been going through, they’ve just really showed me attention, and I just eat it right up!”* –Laverne, a participant with depression

Religious practices provide relief from symptoms

- Praying
 - Studying Bible
 - Listening to Christian music
- “I was thinking to myself, man, I gotta start doing something, I’m so sick. So I started doing that- listening to music and praying..and that really, really helped. But then I had to take medicine also..But that (music and praying) was really the key.”* –Jeremy, a participant with schizophrenia

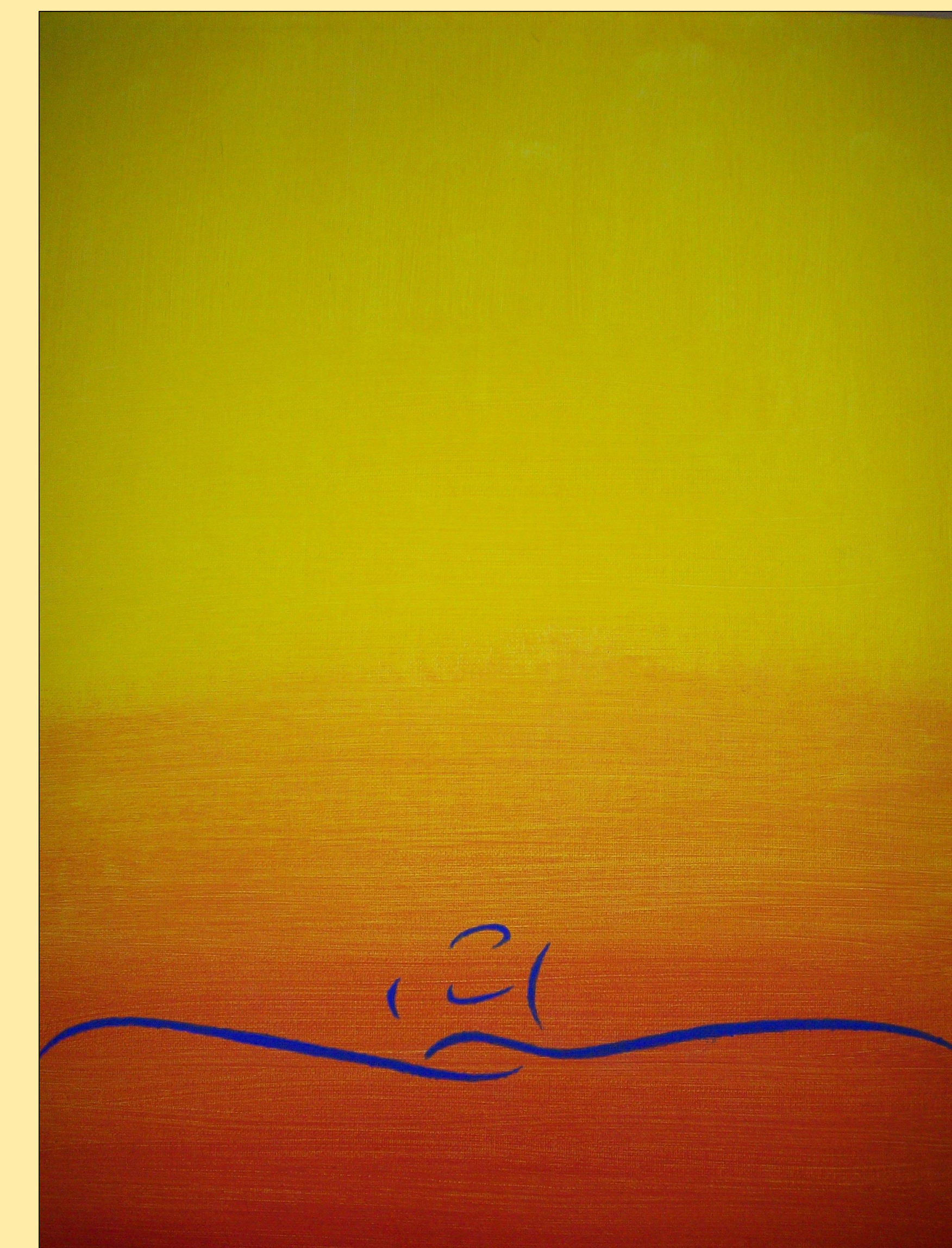


“If I didn’t have the Lord in my life, I would be dead. I’m sure I would be dead.”
–Patsy, a participant with depression

Discussion

Religious beliefs and participation can provide social support and management of mental illness

- Ways of uniting separate fields of religion and mental health care
 - Well trained and educated church leadership is crucial
 - Accusations of evil spirit/demon possession harmful
- “I think the church is a very important place, but it has to be the right place.”*
–Trudy, a participant with bipolar disorder



Artwork of man resting head in hands by Robert, a participant with depression. He painted the man as an abstract and in blue, explaining, *“That’s how you feel when you’re depressed.”*

Acknowledgments and Literature

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To protect participants’ identities, all names have been changed, including the name of the church studied.

2011 National Alliance on Mental Illness. What is mental illness?
<http://www.nami.org>
2009 National Institute of Health. Health Topics: Statistics.
<http://nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/statistics>