

## A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF MENTAL HEALTH PAST 307/MINS 405

This course explores the practical and theological implications of the experiences of people living with mental health challenges. It explores a number of key areas with a view to helping the church as a Body, and Christians as individuals faithfully to understand and respond to complex mental health issues. The course will use a multidisciplinary approach to explore some of the ways in which theology in its theoretical and practical dimensions can throw fresh light on mental health issues in ways that are challenging of, but complementary of other perspectives. Amongst other things the course will develop understandings of mental health experiences such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression, as well as thinking through crucial issues in relation to areas such as dementia and brain damage. At the end of the course students should have a firm grasp of the nature of mental health and ill-health from a variety of perspectives and should be able to offer understanding and assistance to people living with mental health issues.

**Lecturer:** Prof John Swinton, is the Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen and the founder of the Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability. John is a major figure in the development of disability theology and in 2016 was awarded the Michael Ramsey Prize for theological writing for his book *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*. He is the author of many books including the *Mental Health: The Inclusive Church Resource* with Jean Vanier) and *Spirituality in Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a “forgotten” dimension*.



As an Intensive Course, the paper requires all students to attend a week of lectures in Dunedin, from 1pm on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> January to 1pm on Friday 31<sup>st</sup> January. Students are expected to arrange their own travel and accommodation. Lectures will be held at University of Otago, apart from a public lecture:

### **Mental health first aid: Christian resources**

Tuesday, 28 January, 2020, 7:30 – 9 pm, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

# OUTLINE OF TOPICS

## ***Module 1: Introduction to Practical Theology and Mental Health***

An introduction to the core disciplines that underpin the course, namely practical theology, disability theology and mental health studies. This module will provide students with the tools and perspectives necessary to engage with the issues that form the remainder of the course.

## ***Module 2: Understanding Depression and Anxiety: Towards a theology of liberation & joy***

This module will focus on developing a deep understanding of depression and anxiety. It will focus specifically on a theology of joy and how a proper understanding of joy helps us to understand depression in new and faithful ways. Issues and questions addressed will include the following:

- What are we to make of the fact that God seems to disappear when people are deeply depressed?
- Does Jesus *really* mean for us not to be anxious?
- How do we deal theologically and practically with suicidal thoughts?
- How are we to faithfully understand the act of suicide?
- Is Scripture helpful or unhelpful in dealing with depression?
- What kind of liturgy do we need to develop to incorporate people who feel depressed and anxious?
- What kind of community do we need to become to handle sadness faithfully?

## ***Module 3: Understanding schizophrenia***

This module will explore two of the most serious forms of mental health challenge: schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. These experiences offer challenges to what we consider to be normal and open up deep and vital practical and theological issues. The module will explore the nature of psychotic experience with a particular focus on the spiritual and theological dimensions. Questions addressed here will include:

- Why is it that recovery from schizophrenia in Africa is significantly better than for recovery in the Western world in general and the US in particular?
- What exactly does it mean for someone to hear voices?
- What might it mean for our understanding of schizophrenia that some of the most powerful religious people in history – Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King – all heard voices.
- What kind of community do we have to become to offer friendships to people with severe mental health challenges?

## ***Module 4: Bipolar Faith?: Reflecting theologically on bipolar disorder.***

Building on the perspectives developed in the previous 3 modules, this module will offer a different way of thinking about religion and spirituality in the context of bipolar disorder. Questions addressed will include:

- Are the spiritual experience that people go through during psychotic experiences “authentic” or are they a product of their “illness”?

- How are we to understand and respond to people who live with delusions that have religious content?
- What is the relationship (if any) between sin and the demonic and major mental health challenges?
- What kind of worship practices do we need to develop in order to incorporate people who live with enduring schizophrenia or bipolar disorder?

### ***Module 5: Forgetting Whose We Are: A practical theology of dementia***

Dementia is more feared than cancer. Why is this? What is it that scares us about dementia? The fear of losing our memory? The fear of losing our-selves? The module will explore dementia and offer a perspective that indicates that dementia is as much a social, psychological and spiritual experience as it is a neurological one. We will re-think dementia in the light of God's memory and offer a counter-story to the negative stories that are told about dementia within western cultures. Theological reflection on dementia helps us to understand what it means to be fully human when we have forgotten who and whose we are.

Throughout, students will be expected both to engage with the reading that is prescribed and to think through how this applies to their particular situations and content.

The Course can be undertaken in two ways:

#### **EITHER 1) For credit with the University of Otago**

The paper can be taken for credit towards a University of Otago qualification as PAST 322 or MINS 414. The former can be credited to a Bachelor of Theology degree or the Diploma for Graduates. At 400 level the paper can be credited to a range of taught postgraduate programmes including PGDipTheol, BTheol (Hons), Postgraduate Diploma of Ministry or the Master of Ministry, or for the Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma in Chaplaincy or the Master of Chaplaincy. Further details about these qualifications can be found at: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/theology/study/postgraduate/>. Alternatively, the paper can be taken as a 'Certificate of Proficiency' and credited to a qualification at a later point. Online enrolment for the course opens in September. To enrol go to [www.otago.ac.nz/study/enrolment/](http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/enrolment/).

**Contact:** For further details contact David Tombs, Department of Theology and Religion [David.tombs@otago.ac.nz](mailto:David.tombs@otago.ac.nz) or 03 4798 798

#### **OR 2) Auditing the course**

You can attend the course as an audit student by contacting Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. This will cost \$500. Under this option, you would not do any assessment, and the paper would not be credited to a qualification, but it can count as ongoing professional development for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

**To register** for the audit option, contact: The Registrar, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership; [registrar@knoxcollege.ac.nz](mailto:registrar@knoxcollege.ac.nz); 03 473 0783.

For ministers in the PCANZ in good standing, who make application to KCML, study grants amounting to 50 per cent of course fees have been pre-approved.