

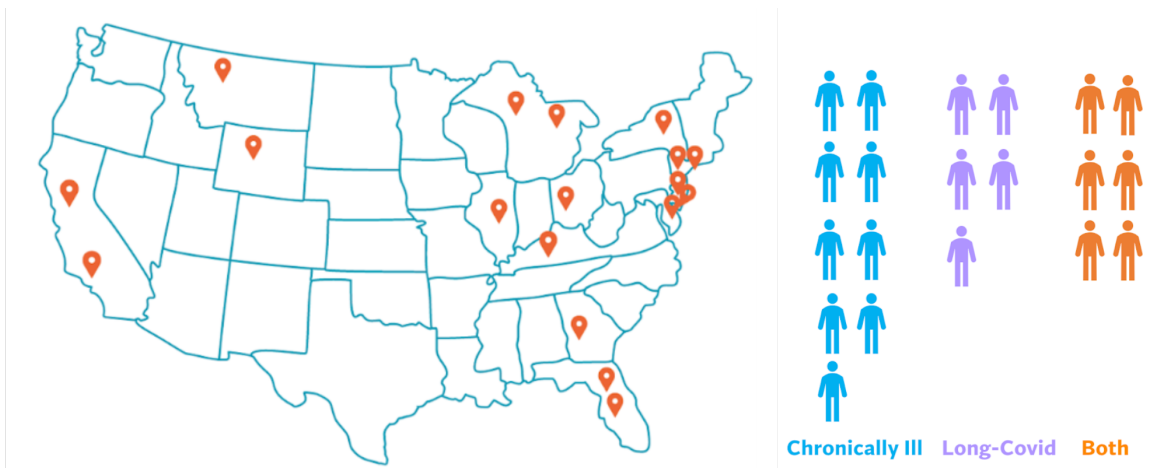


LONG COVID & CHRONIC ILLNESS:

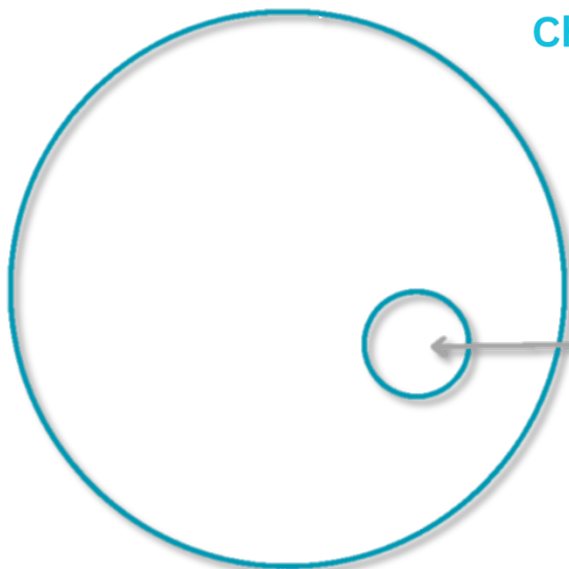
Understanding Christianity, Worship, & Access

Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety and Emma Worrall

Overview: Demographics + Terminology + Findings



18 subjects across the U.S. were interviewed from Nov 2022-Jan 2023 via Zoom. **9 subjects** identified as chronically ill, **5 subjects** identified as having Long-Covid, and **6 subjects** identified as having both.



Chronic Illness:

- ◆ An illness that never goes away.
- ◆ There is no cure, but it is not terminal.

Long-COVID:

- ◆ Also known as “Long-Hauler.”
- ◆ When COVID symptoms do not cease.
- ◆ Chronic fatigue, shortness of breath, & cognitive dysfunction.
- ◆ Symptoms are fluctuating, relapsing, & significant.

Overall Findings: What's Working

Unprecedented Access:

Many subjects reported increased access to Christian worship and community via online spaces since the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Finding Community Online:

Subjects formed connections online through both secular and Christian groups, including Facebook, Slack, and WhatsApp.

Short-Term Care:

Food chains, prayer lists, and other acts of service help those with chronic illness, specifically during emergencies.

Overall Findings: What's Not Working

Lack of Access to Community:

Many subjects reported feeling lonely and isolated and not having access to community in offline spaces.

Lack of Long-Term Care:

The church's approach to caregiving is based on a band-aid, short-term, or crisis model, leaving behind people who suffer from long-term illness.

Shame + Owing Responsibility for Illness:

Many chronically ill people take responsibility for their lack of access rather than considering it may be a problem that the Church can or should help manage.

So what can the church learn from people living with chronic illness?

WE NOTICED TWO CONTRASTING THEOLOGIES IN OUR RESEARCH.

Theology: Traditional Hermeneutic

- ◆ God is an all-powerful healer, and Jesus is conqueror and miracle worker.
- ◆ Illness = temporary, movable by great faith, & not particularly integral to who a person is.
- ◆ Hope = being cured (conflict between illness and wellness).

"[My chronic illness] is not who I am. It's just a circumstance..."

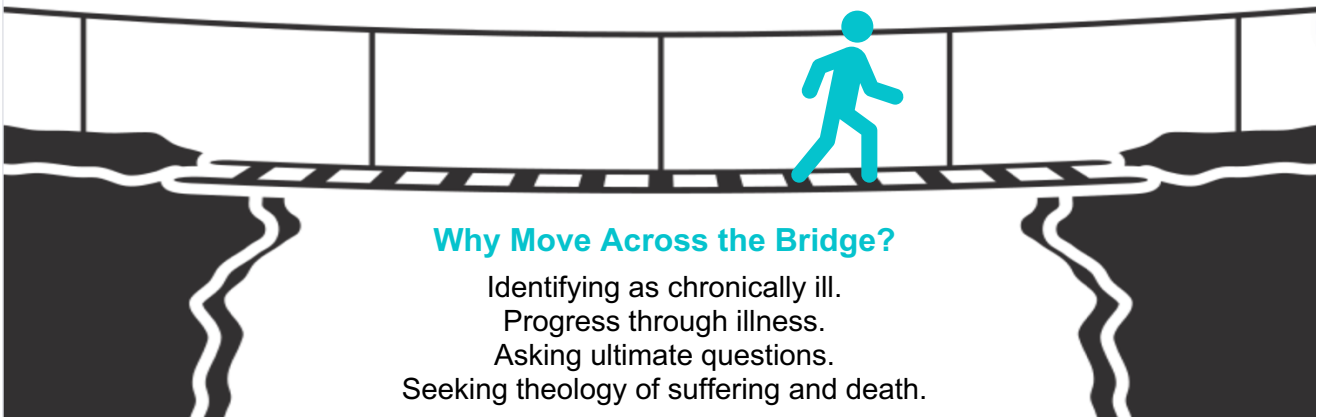
Theology: Chronic Illness Hermeneutic

- ◆ God is disabled & Jesus, as Emmanuel, is with them in suffering.
- ◆ Illness = part of their identity, but as a paradoxical one (being a great teacher & a great source of suffering).
- ◆ Hope = in connections with God and community (some saw hope for a cure as harmful).
- ◆ Some focused more on gratitude.

" Maybe God's job wasn't taking away the pain, but being bigger than the pain could ever touch."

Traditional Hermeneutic

Chronic Illness Hermeneutic



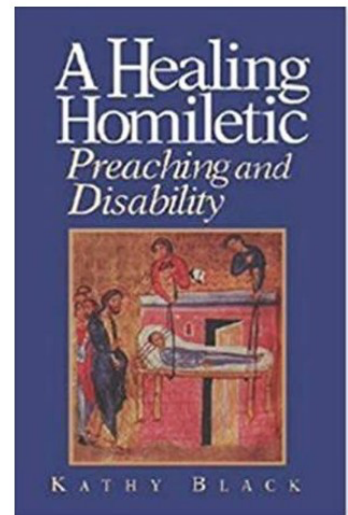
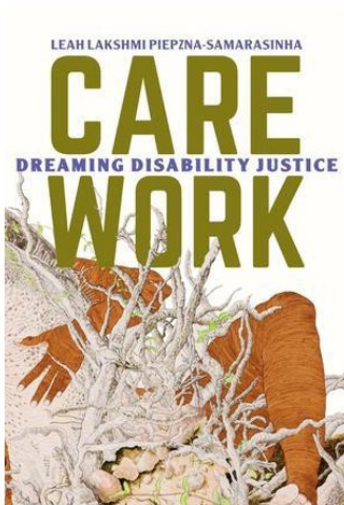
Why Move Across the Bridge?

- Identifying as chronically ill.
- Progress through illness.
- Asking ultimate questions.
- Seeking theology of suffering and death.

ADVICE FOR THE CHURCH

1. **Don't weaponize surprise.** By saying things like, "You're still sick? Or "You haven't gotten better yet?" it makes the situation more about you being "in the know" rather than truly caring for the person.
2. **Improve on Long-Term Care.** Even if the person does not reach out for help, they will need help for the rest of their lives – with transportation, meal trains, and pastoral care. **Picture yourself as Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus carry his cross.**
3. **Rites of Passage.** One of our participants said, "We have baby showers for women when they become mothers – to make sure they have everything they need. What about us? Why isn't there a party for when you are diagnosed with a chronic illness? I need a registry!" How can the church provide newly diagnosed people with the things that they need?
4. **Be with. Don't fix.** We can take our lead from **Jesus weeping with Mary and Martha when Lazarus died.** When chronically ill people come to you with a problem, they are not asking you to go into "problem-solving-mode." **Share their burdens. Cry with them. Be angry with them.**
5. **Burden and privacy.** Sometimes it is a burden for chronically ill people to receive help. Keep in mind if the food is something they will need to heat up later. What if they can't get up? Also, help does not need to be physical presence. **Remember that the chronically ill also deserve the right to privacy.** Sometimes, they are in states that are dehumanizing.
6. **Representation.** Find ways to include the chronically ill in church ministry and to **uplift their stories as examples of faithfulness, not as problems that need to be fixed.** Maybe add images of the chronically ill throughout the sanctuary. Possibly invite those with chronic illness to help interpret text or even preach. **Uplift their voices and visibility in the community.**
7. **Do not drop online services."** It is only once the pandemic started and all of society shut down that we found ways of reaching the homebound. Yet, there have been many who have always been homebound. One participant said, "**With the pandemic, we found out what we could have been doing all along, but we said it was impossible.**" Online services represent an important and vital ministry through which chronically ill people connect to faith.
8. **Remember. We are not God.** Chronically ill people urged the church to remember to approach their experiences with humility, and to remember that they are not God. **As a church, we need to acknowledge the mystery of God when it comes to suffering and questions about what God is doing.** And we also must acknowledge our role in the suffering of others.

Resources



**Community Support
for Long COVID**

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