

NINA MOINI: September is National Recovery Month. It's meant to raise awareness about addiction and mental health and to celebrate people in recovery. Pastor Seth Perry of Elim Lutheran Church in Scandia has spent the past few years trying to make those conversations less stigmatized in his community. When he was on *Minnesota Now* a few years ago, he shared his own struggles with mental health, and how opening up about it changed the way he approached his work as a pastor.

Well, since then, his congregation has created a Mental Wellness Outreach Committee, and he's launched a podcast about mental health and recovery. He's with us now, to share more about what he's doing for Recovery Month. Thanks for being with us, Pastor.

SETH PERRY: Thanks for having me, Nina. Appreciate having me on the show. It's great.

NINA MOINI: Well, it's great to have you back. I think it's great for everyone to know that people are on mental health journeys, pastors and everybody alike. Will you tell us a little bit, take us back to what made you think it's time to start having more intentional conversations with your congregation about it?

SETH PERRY: So I'm in long-term recovery, and my clean date is April 12, 2010. I live with bipolar one, and I have a recent diagnosis of PTSD. So all the way back in 2023, I opened up to my congregation about my history. I really felt the stigma of addiction and mental health in the church since about 2010, when I decided to become a pastor. So going public, I shared my story, and people started sharing their own stories in my congregation and our surrounding community here, in Scandia, Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: I think in various communities, mental health, talking about it, talking about substance use disorders are stigmatized in different ways and in some of the same ways, and in different cultures and in different, maybe, religious congregations and things like that. Can you tell me about what it looks like to face stigma in a congregation or in a community, and then what it looks like to stop it in its tracks through work like this?

SETH PERRY: Yeah, so I'm in a rural congregation. So first of all, there is the factor of what it means to be out in the countryside. There's numerous specific and unique mental health and addiction factors that have to do with access and have to do with being a rural congregation, where people are farming, and where you don't have neighbors right close to you. So those are challenges.

But also, we're a Scandinavian Lutheran community here, and there's some deep cultural roots here, where people are very stoic. People don't share, maybe, what's going on when they're struggling. And so when I opened up about it, we kind of looked at that systemic thing in the denomination of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, where people don't share those deep struggles. They're not open if they have an issue with addiction. If they're maybe having some suicidality, or they're struggling with other issues related to their mental health, that they don't seek help. So the church ends up being a place where people can take that first step, and that's what we've been doing over the last three years.

NINA MOINI: So tell us about *Our Stigma*, that's your podcast, right, and just kind of what it's been like to make this a regular part of conversation.

SETH PERRY: So we started the podcast and launched it May of last year. And our second season is streaming now on all platforms, and you can find it at www.ourstigma.com. And each episode, it goes through a topic that we have actually gathered from members of our congregation here in Elim and other pastors. So issues that are really relevant to people.

In this podcast, we talk about things like isolation, the opioid crisis, loneliness, naloxone, peer support, support for people who are caregivers of people who deal with mental health and addiction issues. And on the podcast, my co-host and I, Nicole Thacker, we discuss those issues, then turn it over to an expert to give us some expert opinions. We have some people that are mental health professionals on the show. We have pastors. We have peer support workers come on to the show. And we have some influencers in the mental health space also come on as guests to tell us, here's some great solutions to the problems that we're presenting in each episode. I've been really grateful to have those conversations, and like I said, you can check those out right now.

NINA MOINI: What has the reaction been like from members of your congregation? Is it generational? I feel like most people know somebody if they don't themselves struggle with mental health or addiction. But I wonder what it's like, just from folks who've been in the congregation a long time, maybe newer members? What types of responses do you hear?

SETH PERRY: So here's the great thing about all of this. You start talking about stuff like this, and then you'll have an 11 or a 12-year-old, who's in our confirmation program, talk about the mental health struggles or the bullying that they're experiencing at school. But at the same time, I could have a 92-year-old retired person in my congregation come up to me and say, I have a great-granddaughter, I have a granddaughter, I have a son that's dealing with a dual diagnosis. What can you tell me about your life experience, pastor? Where can I find help for myself?

So I've always got people dropping in, picking up books from my library. I have a recovery library right here in my office, to my right, that has all sorts of books that are perfect for people of all ages. I have conversations and coffee with people in the community. So it really affects absolutely everyone in our community. And when we worship together, we know we're doing something to make a difference, because we're very intentional here at Elim about having sermons, worship, and conversations that are something that tell people that they matter. That's the big focus.

NINA MOINI: And what about other pastors or other churches and congregations or other houses of worship? Are people looking to what you're doing is leading the way in this conversation?

SETH PERRY: Yeah, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, we have a bishop's office here in Saint Paul. I've gotten a lot of support from them, and they represent about 110 congregations. A lot of people are doing parallel work in their congregations. A lot of people are opening up the discussion about mental health. Some people are even ahead of me, as well. There's a lot of congregations all over the Twin Cities that have been doing this work for a long time. And so as soon as I started doing the work, I found a lot of allies in this space, as well.

NINA MOINI: So tell us, in the last couple of minutes we have left together, what you're doing for this National Recovery Month, in particular. I understand there's a big event coming up, Taco Daze. Big deal there in Scandia. Can you tell us about what you're doing throughout the month to spread awareness?

SETH PERRY: Sure. We are launching our Mental Wellness Committee Campaign this fall at Taco Daze, which is in Scandia, Minnesota, from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM, which is right here, September 12. And it's happening this Saturday. Come into Scandia and check it out.

You will see us at the corner of Oak Hill and Olinda with our outreach booth. And at that outreach booth, we are selling needlepoint frames that say "You matter" on them. You can get one that just says "You matter." You can get one that has someone's name on it to give it to someone in your life who needs inspiration.

At that booth, we also will be providing information about our addiction team training, which we're forming an addiction team here at our congregation to train laypeople to support others who are dealing with addiction. And that training is coming up on October 8. We'll have all the information about that at the booth, as well.

And we have naloxone training. This is something I'm really excited about.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

SETH PERRY: In our church, we are doing a full naloxone training with the Center of Addiction and Faith organization, that's helping us with that on Saturday, October 10 from 9:30 to 12:00. So we're promoting that and so many other wonderful recovery-centered events at our booth in Taco Daze, and we're looking forward to making a huge impact moving forward this fall in our community.

NINA MOINI: And naloxone, of course, just for anybody, it's becoming more common, and you can access it a lot of places, but that is to help reverse the effects of an overdose of an opioid.

SETH PERRY: Absolutely.

NINA MOINI: So getting the word out about lots of different things. Just lastly, pastor, just since we have you, some people may be listening, they may not have a congregation or a house of worship or maybe, much support around them at all. But what would you tell a person struggling with, perhaps, mental health or addiction who may be listening as, maybe, a first step?

SETH PERRY: The one thing that you need to remember, and this is for anyone who may think that they are struggling today, and it's just three numbers, 988. That's the first place to go if you're alone, if you're someone who's introverted, if you're in the middle of a crisis. 988 is a response line that will walk you through anything. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, self-harm, suicide, thoughts, all of those things, you're not alone in this, OK. If you need help, it's just that easy. Three numbers to call on your phone.

And I'll tell you this. I'm someone who has called 988. So don't forget it. I'm well into my career, I'm someone respected in my community, but I have had to reach out for help, as well. So, never forget that any community organization in your community is ready to help you. They are there. Hang on, you matter, and reach out.

NINA MOINI: Thank you very much for your time, Pastor Perry. We appreciate it.

SETH PERRY: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Pastor Seth Perry of Elim Lutheran Church in Scandia.