

The politics of dis-ease: A pastoral comment on Richmond's mayoral campaign

Commentary by

Rev. Alvin C. Bernstine

As I watched the opening games of the National Basketball Association's 2010-2011 season, a riveting infomercial was repeatedly shown. I was more captivated by the infomercial than I

was by the game. It was a brilliant infomercial that noted that one out of every six adults suffers from mental illness, and it was noted that the stigma associated with mental illness is more painful than the disease.

It struck me that the recent campaign against the re-election of Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin has painfully become the politics of dis-ease. The Richmond police and firefighters unions have launched a fierce and vicious campaign to unseat the mayor based upon her experience with clinical depression. It is actually a campaign that seeks to sway voters with shame-based, shameless and painful stigmatization of mental illness.

As a pastor, parent, family member, public servant and an

emerging clinician in community mental health, I find their strategy extremely disturbing. I find it disturbing that the people we trust to protect us in case of fire or personal threat are being used to poison political discourse with harmful stigmatizations.

To make the statement that "I believe it is important for the citizens to know everything they need to know about the people who serve them" is disingenuous. The same could be said, and probably needs to be said, about firemen and police. Many of Richmond's citizens would feel a lot safer knowing the psychological histories and profiles of men and women with guns—more so than a mayor with a pen. Such information might be helpful in determining how a 15-year-old's arthritic dog is shot for being perceived as a virile attack dog, and demented people are shot for attacking police with envelope operators.

I pick no fight with the firefighters or police unions, or posture for the re-election of the current mayor. I just find the use of her past struggles with mental ill-

ness as a campaign strategy unhealthy for the citizens of Richmond. It is not helpful when those who we believe represent elements of good within the community inflict further pain upon those who suffer from something they have no control over. It is

not helpful to sufferers of mental illnesses who only seek to live normal lives, to love, work and make a contribution to community when people with power try to disqualify a noted personality for doing the same. It is not helpful to families who struggle with the painful reality of a family member's illness. The mayor should be cited and commended for rising above the often debilitating suffering of depression and providing us with a model of someone who can.

I am equally disturbed that the candidate(s) that the unions support have not come out of hiding and vigorously rebuked this painful, shameless, discourse. Any candidate who wins office by exploiting the politics of dis-ease is ultimately a loser, for he loses the respect of the citizenry. I should

note that in a recent political forum with the candidates, I observed that Mayor McLaughlin was the most buoyant of all the candidates. (I also noted other candidates for office who seemed to be suffering from dementia, delusions of grandeur and narcissistic disorder).

In an effort to remove the shame and stigmatization that often accompanies mental illness, the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, in collaboration with Contra Costa College, will be sponsoring a three-day conference on mental illness. The conference, entitled "Helping Families Live Healthy Lives in an Unhealthy World: Steps Toward Mental Wellness," will be held Nov. 5-7. It will feature noted clinicians, sufferers and family members of the citizenry of Richmond. I invite the firefighters and police unions to join us as we work together to make Richmond a city of pride, and not a place of perpetual pain.

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