



EASTERN SYNOD of the
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October 6, 2008

The Right Hon. Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0N2

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

Subject: Towards the Adoption of a Canadian Mental Health Strategy

I am writing to encourage your continued support for the adoption of a Canadian Mental Health Strategy to address the urgent and pressing problems presented by mental health illness in Canada.

At the recently concluded 12th Biennial Convention of the Eastern Synod Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the following motion was unanimously passed by the assembly:

Motion 5.3: Towards the Adoption of a Canadian Mental Health Strategy

That the Eastern Synod review and study the report prepared under the auspices of Senator Michael Kirby on a Canadian Mental Health Strategy for Canada (the “Kirby Report”) with a view to encouraging the federal and provincial governments to develop a national mental health strategy.

Rationale: It is estimated that 1 in 5 Canadians will be affected by mental illness during their lifetimes. Many of these individuals are amongst the most vulnerable members of our society. Canada is the only major Western country without a national mental health strategy. Adoption and implementation of the Kirby Report is an urgent priority given the inadequate resources currently dedicated to addressing this serious public health issue that affects all strata of society.

This recommendation was reviewed, studied and endorsed at the most recent meeting of the Officers of the Eastern Synod Council, of which I am chair. This motivates my writing to you today.

As you are aware, the foundation for a Canadian Mental Health Strategy was outlined in the groundbreaking report entitled *Out of the Shadows At Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Health Illness and Addiction Services in Canada, Final Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology* (the “Kirby Report”), by The Honourable Michael J. L. Kirby, Chair and The Honourable Wilbert Joseph Keon, Deputy Chair, released in May 2006. Of the over three-hundred task force reports of various kinds on the national health care system that have been produced, the Kirby Report was the first one that dealt with only mental health.

One of the key recommendations of the Kirby Report was the creation of a Canadian Mental Health Commission. This recommendation became a reality with the announcement of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (the “Commission”) in May 2007, which was officially launched in August 2007. It is heartening that this Commission has been endorsed not only by the Federal Government of Canada but also by all Provincial and Territorial Governments. It is also heartening that the Commission has been endorsed by stakeholder communities across the country.

The primary role of the Commission is to be a catalyst for reform of mental health policies and practices. The three key initiatives of the Commission are to conduct a 10-year anti-stigma campaign, build a pan-Canadian Knowledge Exchange Centre, and elaborate a national Mental Health Strategy for Canada. As Bishop of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, I wish to express my full support for the Commission and its mandate. In this regard, the goals of the Commission are consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ which is to bring healing and wholeness to creation not just in the future, but in the concrete now. Members of faith communities everywhere are no different than other citizens in suffering the burdens of mental illness in their families and communities. Urgent action is necessary to address the pressing needs of some of the most vulnerable members of our society, including mentally ill children and youth and the homeless, who have been largely stigmatized and forgotten by the rest of us.

To this end, I commend the Federal Government’s commitment in its Budget 2007 of funding of \$55 million over five years for the Commission and the most recent announcement in August 2008 by Federal Health Minister Tony Clement of a total investment of \$130 million for the Commission over its ten-year mandate. I also commend the Federal Government of Canada’s announcement in Budget 2008 of an additional \$110 million to the Commission for research projects to help Canadians with mental illness that are homeless.¹

While these steps are laudable, they are only a beginning. Canada is the only G8 country without a national mental health strategy. The fact that, in the words of the Honourable Michael Kirby, in Canada we have made the streets and prisons the asylums of the 21st century is simply intolerable.² The social and economic consequences of the current situation are staggering. The transformation of the organization and delivery of mental health services support is an urgent priority as the mental health system has suffered from significant neglect and because of the discrimination which is faced on a daily basis by people who are living with a mental illness, which the Honourable Michael Kirby has made abundantly clear.³

¹ Government of Canada Confirms Funding for Canadian Mental Health Commission, Health Canada News Release 2008-134, August 18, 2008.

² Speech by Michael Kirby to the Empire Club of Toronto, May 2007.

³ *Ibid.*

A multi-government coordinated attack on mental health issues remains an unfulfilled reality. I call upon the Federal and Provincial and Territorial Governments to continue the good fight to help bring to fruition the goals of the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the recommendations of the Kirby Report in the coming years.

In closing, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to write to you regarding this important matter. I also wish to express my appreciation for your consideration of the same.

With all of God's blessings,

Sincerely,

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Bishop Michael J Pryse, Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
MJP/cd

cc. The Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Health
Ed Stelmach, Premier of Alberta
Gordon Campbell, Premier of British Columbia
Gary Doer, Premier of Manitoba
Shawn Graham, Premier of New Brunswick
Danny Williams, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador
Floyd Roland, Premier of the Northwest Territories
Rodney MacDonald, Premier of Nova Scotia
Paul Okalik, Premier of Nunavut
Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario
Robert Ghiz, Premier of Prince Edward Island
Jean Charest, Premier of Quebec
Brad Wall, Premier of Saskatchewan
Dennis Fentie, Premier of the Yukon Territory
The Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop, ELCIC
Archbishop Fred Hiltz, Primate, the Anglican Church of Canada