

Mental Health Initiative Grant - 2025 Annual Report

In 2024, Bethany received a Mental Health Initiative Lilly grant through the Center for Congregations. The church received \$40,000 to educate, increase empathy for those with neurodivergence and/or are struggling with mental illness, reduce stigma associated with mental illness/differences, and provide programming to support mental wellness. Bethany has used the grant funds in combination with more than \$14,000 in monetary and in-kind donations to establish Bethany's growing Mental Wellness Ministry. Below you will find a description of this ministry and the impact it has made in 2025. The MHI grant project proposal included a combination of one-time events/experiences and transformations/additions that will remain available to support the mental wellness of Bethany and its community after the grant's period of performance ends on January 15, 2026.



Advertising



Throughout the year, Bethany has promoted its mental wellness programming by advertising on Facebook; expanding Bethany's website; conducting two campaigns on WNIN, the local NPR radio station; being an exhibitor during the National Alliance on Mental Illness Walk; communicating via email, phone calls, texts, and word of mouth; and attending Zoom meetings of the Mental Health Matters community organization. In addition, Pastor Michelle was given the opportunity to appear on the Lifestyles TV program to discuss Bethany's Mental Wellness Ministry and promote the Mental Health and the Church Event.

Art Ministry – “Art Journeys”

Jean Page is a former art teacher (among *many* other things) with a passion for leading people to peace and enrichment through art. She designed Bethany's art ministry, “Art Journeys,” for people of many ages and abilities to work with a wide variety of media, including (but not limited to) clay, paper, drawing and coloring utensils, paint, and fiber.



While many of the supplies have been purchased using MHI grant funds, Art Journeys has received several generous donations including a kiln, the labor to convert a daycare potty training bathroom into a vented and fire-resistant room for the kiln, tables and storage furniture, and money for building improvement materials and a pottery wheel. Between five and eight people attend Art Journeys regularly and report feeling less stressed and more peaceful after participating. This group has become a supportive community that values curiosity, kindness, diversity, empathy, and connection.



Events

Leader Retreat – On March 15, Bethany leaders met to discuss the need to address mental health in the church, review Bethany's MHI project, and experience a taste of the programming that was available at that time. Each attendee received a gift bag containing self-care items, like fidgets, snacks, noise attenuating earplugs, and insulated cup; practiced mindfulness meditation and became familiar with the sensory support “equipment” in worship with Pastor Michelle; practiced *lectio divina* meditation with John Rich; participated in a short Tai Chi session with Matt Rundle; and had an art session with Jean Page.

Mental Health & the Church – On August 30, Bethany hosted a Mental Health and the Church Event open to the community. Rev. Dr. Sarah Griffith Lund, author of several books about the intersection of the church and mental health, pastor, and United Church of Christ denominational leader, was the event's keynote speaker and panelist convener. Her interactive and personal witness was meaningful and inspiring. The discussion panel was another highlight, covering the topics of church trauma, stigma, support networks, and theology, among others. The event also included a resource fair with five



exhibitors and catered meals which enabled everyone to interact, share stories, and make connections. Thirty-two people attended in person and four participated remotely. Of these 36 attendees, 25 came from outside the Bethany Christian Church Community. Everyone who offered feedback stated that the event was more than meaningful, it was *important*, and many asked when we would have the event again.



Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) Training – On June 27 & 28, Jean Page and Pastor Michelle took the parent and caregiver TBRI virtual training and learned a great deal about how trauma affects a child's mind and body; why it is necessary to use non-traditional methods to teach, support, and care for children and youth who have experienced trauma; and different techniques and interventions that allow traumatized youth and children to heal and thrive.

Group Space(s)



Quiet Space – The church repurposed the room adjacent to the sanctuary (formerly called the “cry room”) as a comfortable sensory space including a new sofa, rocking chairs, a bean bag, a spinning chair, colorful rug, sensory tent, sensory swing (not yet assembled), sensory toys, and books. Innerspace Center for Emotional Health donated \$200 worth of sensory equipment in appreciation of Bethany making it possible for several of its clients to stay in care (see Therapy Fund below).

Small Group Space – Bethany set aside space in the basement for small groups to meet with comfortable seating, television, blu ray player, rug, pillows, small tables, and lamps. The furniture, including two sofas and a La-Z-boy power lift recliner, and décor were donated.



Support Groups

While Bethany hasn't begun hosting support groups yet, it has laid the foundation for doing so by creating the small group space (see above), exploring different program materials, and consulting with NAMI/FaithNet which envisions a network of faith communities hosting support groups so someone could find a meeting to attend regardless of the day (or time of day).

Therapy Fund

So far, Bethany has used MHI grant funds to enable 17 clients of Innerspace Center for Emotional Health to continue their therapy by covering costs not covered by insurance or Medicaid or for those experiencing financial difficulties.



Pastor Self-Care

The Mental Health Initiative grant program emphasized supporting the mental wellbeing of each recipient congregation's pastoral leadership. Bethany's MHI Team included significant programming to care for Pastor Michelle, improve her resilience, and increase her mental and spiritual resources. She reports that the experiences she has had and the care she has received as a result of the church's Mental Health Initiative grant have been transformative.

Three-Day Retreat – From April 9-11, Pastor Michelle participated in a renewal retreat in Brown County State Park, which included hiking, playing, and resting.

Spiritual Retreat – From May 5-10, Pastor Michelle attended a private spiritual retreat at Dancing Spirit Equine Facilitated Learning and Coaching Center in Lyons, Colorado. Programming included intense spiritual direction, equine therapy, several forms of meditation, a sound bath, horseback riding, and hiking.



Other Self-Care Support – Bethany's MHI grant included covering Pastor Michelle's therapy and spiritual direction sessions, psychiatric medications, horse lessons, and gym membership.

Tai Chi, Yoga, & Meditation

Mental wellbeing requires care of a person's body, mind, and spirit. To offer this support, Bethany included practices of movement and stillness in its MHI grant project. One-third of the basement wellness space is dedicated to this programming, including new flooring (most donated), yoga and meditation equipment (some donated), and mirrors.

Tai Chi – Matt Rundle leads weekly Tai Chi sessions during the academic year for a free-will offering. Participants have learned (are learning) to move in slow synchrony through different forms, breathing meditatively, and feeling the Chi – the tingling life energy that flows through everyone. Participants include church members and non-church members alike and each class is attended by as many as six people.



Yoga – Bethany's grant covered yoga instructor training for Shawn Sterne who will lead classes beginning in 2026.

Mindfulness Meditation – Pastor Michelle led weekly 30-minute mindfulness meditation sessions beginning in May. Due to lack of participation, this program was suspended in September.

Worship



To support adults and children in worship, Bethany used MHI grant funds to purchase sensory toys, weighted blankets, noise canceling headphones and earmuffs, and supplies for bags that children can use during worship that include fidgets, art supplies, lacing cards, and other activities. Members of Keenagers, Bethany's fellowship group for adults available during the day, painted the bags with handprints and the words "Bethany Busy Bags".

New and Upcoming...

1. During the annual meeting, the congregation voted to approve Deena Gibson, Adrienne Jones, Jean Page, Shawn Sterne, Ryan Wagler, and Vanessa Wagler as members of the new Mental Wellness Ministry (MWM) Committee. This team will plan and coordinate future MWM programming.
2. Yoga classes
3. Support groups: Divorce Care and Parent Support
4. Childcare during worship and church activities.