



Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, CBS Ambassador Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling brings us a conversation with Daniel Whitehead. Daniel Whitehead is the CEO of Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries. His other roles include being an adjunct faculty member at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, serving as a committee member on the International Network on Theology and Mental Health, and being a member of the advisory group for the Center of Spirituality, Health, and Disability.

Previously, Daniel spent 10 years in full-time vocational ministry, including eight years as a senior pastor. Daniel hails from the UK and resides in Vancouver with his wife Annie and two children. He's also a certified mediator and holds a double master's degree in theology.

So, enjoy the insights now from this conversation with Daniel Whitehead and Andrew Stirling.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Andrew Stirling: Daniel, it's a great privilege for us to have you as a guest on our podcast today and thank you for taking the time in your very busy life to be with us.

Daniel, you have a fascinating background. Can you tell us something about your faith and how it's developed, and who were the main influences in your journey with Christ? Just a brief kind of overview of how you've come to the faith that you have.

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, thanks, Andrew.

It's a joy to be with you. I think, for me, when I think about who's really shaped my faith and how did I come to faith, I can't really look any further than my parents. I grew up in a Christian home, and I think my parents have this unique gift.

I always felt like whoever would come in our door or whoever we would meet would be met with hospitality and kindness and good humor. So, I think those things were just implicitly modeled to me. They're not things I ever thought about until being older and being a parent myself, that I go, oh, yeah, just the innate sense of hospitality, of laughter.

These were kind of hallmarks of the faith that was modeled to me. So, faith was, even in difficult times, which again, I saw my parents go through very difficult situations in churches, because churches are made up of people, but it always seemed to be met with such good humor and with grace and forgiveness. So, I think my parents have been the biggest influence.

But I also think of my grandparents. I think of previous pastors and mentors I've had. But I think my parents would be the main ones who kind of really did a great job of modeling and promoting, as it were, a faith that I wanted to have for myself.

Andrew Stirling: Were there times in growing up, though, Daniel, where you had moments of doubt? Or was, in a sense, you were surrounded by these great cloud of witnesses, and you sort of naturally gravitated to that, and it became a natural part of

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

you? Or was there a moment where you're going, these are great people, but I'm not sure that their faith is what I want to adhere to?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, no, to qualify that, I think my experience of, I remember as a young man, like being 12 or 13, attending a church, and honestly, this will sound so cruel, but I'll just be honest. I remember thinking, there aren't many people that inspire me in this place. And I don't know that I put those words to it, but I'm like, this is kind of boring.

I don't really know why this is relevant to me. And so, yeah, at the age of 13, I stopped. I stopped going to church. I disengaged from Christian community. I would say my values were largely shaped by the Christian worldview. So, I continue to believe in God and continue to be an advocate for faith in Christ.

All my friends knew that about me. But in truth, it didn't mean a lot until I was 18. And I had, you know, quite a dramatic experience of God and the work of His Spirit at an event that I kind of went along because I was, I guess I was searching, I was looking for some kind of meaning that I was missing.

And that was quite a dramatic turnaround for me at the age of 18.

Andrew Stirling: When you say an event, is this something other than within your own church that you'd been going to? Or should I say not going to? Or was it outside? Or like, where did this sort of occur?

Daniel Whitehead: It was a big festival, a big Christian festival that used to happen in England. So obviously, I'm from the UK originally.

I'm now Canadian as well. But yeah, it was a big Christian festival that used to gather like 10s of 1000s of young people every summer. Which is one thing I think was a very formative part of my spirituality as a young adult, being part of that community and seeing a community that's beyond me or beyond bigger than just me and my ideas.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

So, I think that was a very formative part. It's actually interesting, I was in Atlanta last year at an event, and they had this guest speaker turn up. And he's pretty well known, but he turned up to speak.

And I'd never had a chance to meet him. And I said to him, you know, many years ago, I was at this event, and this American preacher came out. And he preached this message.

And I didn't say what he preached on. And I said, his name was Louis Giglio. And that's who I was talking to.

And Louis said, I preached through Colossians that week.

Andrew Stirling: He remembered?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, 20, 25 years ago, he remembered.

Andrew Stirling: Don't ask me what I preached about 25 years ago, Daniel.

Daniel Whitehead: I don't know, last week.

Andrew Stirling: Oh, that's wonderful. Daniel, for 10 years, you eventually went into the pastorate and eight years as a senior pastor of the church. So, when did you receive your call to the ministry? And what was the nature of, first of all, the pastorate that you serve, but also the nature of the call that you had?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, well, I mean, the church I used to lead was like a community church. And it was essentially a kind of non-denominational charismatic church that was part of a network of churches in the UK.

So yeah, it was kind of interesting. I came into it as a very young man. And in the nature of my calling, I kind of think of that. I mean, there are phases to it. But if I break it down, I think there's twofold. One, I was actually after my undergrad, I was in South Africa doing some voluntary work.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

And it was whilst I was there that a good friend, a trusted friend, someone I'd met in South Africa, this kind of mentor to me in many ways, just put this idea out there. He said, have you ever thought about being a pastor? And honestly, my reaction, initial reaction is no, why would I do that? But inside, there was something that connected. It just connected when he said that.

And it was pretty remarkable because I was 22 when I was in South Africa for a prolonged period of time, like six months. And I was 23, nearly 24 when I was asked to lead a church. So, and that happened in the most dramatic and traumatic circumstances.

I was a part-time youth pastor for this church. Again, that's kind of interesting how that transpired. But a year into my journey, which we were kind of, the idea was that it would be a multi-year journey for me to eventually maybe one day lead that church or a church.

My mentor and pastor and probably my best friend at the time, he died really suddenly. So, I'd been married a month, I was 23. And the elders discerned that they felt the Lord was calling me to step into that at a young age, and that they would sort of hedge me in and work with me through that.

So, I was 24 when I started leading an established church that had, you know, had five leaders over 30 years before me. And I had to work that out pretty quickly.

Andrew Stirling: So, in terms of the nature of that ministry, and your preparation for what you do now, in your formation, you have, I think I'm correct in saying a couple of master's degrees, which is pretty impressive.

What were the disciplines that you studied there in that field of study? And how did that sort of move you beyond the boundaries of being in that pastorate that you were in? Or did you do those while you were in the pastorate?

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, so I actually, strangely enough, I had another master's that I never completed. I was so close. And I just didn't, don't ask me why I feel embarrassed about it.

I feel shame about it. But I was doing a master's in missional leadership while I was leading the church. And I ended up, I did a couple of other masters, which I did get.

And one was in church history. And, or majoring in church history, you have to cover all the, obviously all the basics, like Greek and exegesis and all those things. And my second master's was a research masters, which focused on global Christianity and different kind of emerging theological perspectives around the world.

And I think for me, I mean, one thing I learned leading a church as a young man was that I'm entrepreneurial. And I kind of say that reluctantly, partly because I don't really like owning any label, because it puts the pressure on. It allows people to go, no, you're not.

But no, I am. And I've realized like, oh, not everyone sees the world this way. Not everyone looks at the world and sees opportunities.

Not everyone looks at the world and can make connections. And so, I learned that kind of the hard way, leaving a church, because it was like 50% of the people loved me as an entrepreneur and 50% barely tolerated me as an entrepreneur. And I kind of feel for those 50% now, I'm like, man, I, yeah, I couldn't be what they needed me to be.

So, yeah. And I think my studies really have been shaped by my experiences of the world. Like for me, context is really important.

Hence the kind of interest in history. Like how have we got to here? I find myself as a person often looking backwards to try and make sense of the present.

Andrew Stirling: As Kierkegaard said that didn't he? I mean,

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Daniel Whitehead: He did.

Andrew Stirling: Live it forward, but you understand it backwards.

Daniel Whitehead: Yes. Yeah.

And that's interesting as well. Cause like in entrepreneurial environments, people say, talk about the future. Don't talk about the past, but I'm like, no, we got to talk about the past. We have to.

So, I think that was that kind of my first, the reason I did that in my first one. And then my second one was really just about living in the world and seeing the complexities of it and leading a church absolutely teaches you about complexities.

If you are willing to, I would say, do that authentically, you will find lots of complexities very quickly when trying to pastor a group of people from different backgrounds and perspectives. So I think for me, it's those studies have further shaped and strengthened my own belief that very little is straightforward, but that the things that are things you can really build your life around, but almost everything else, certainly the things that our culture wants to talk about, those things are really grey and tricky and liminal.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, they are. They are very true. It's fascinating listening to you because I mean, in a sense, it sort of echoes some of my own experience.

And I received my call to the ministry in South Africa. And, you know, it was very powerful. And I attended a major conference, South African Christian Leadership Assembly, and it changed me and gave me kind of a sense of the context of South Africa and being, I think I saw myself then as sort of a British person in Africa, but an African almost, only to be plucked out of that and put in the ministry in North America.

And that global sense of the universality of the church, the application of The Gospel, the universality of Christian discipleship crossing borders is a very powerful one. And

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

maybe the church today is maybe waking up to the reality of that, Daniel, in a new way. You're now though, and this is something that really, I'd love to sort of bear down on a bit, you're now the CEO of Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries in Vancouver.

Can you tell us something about that unique ministry, but also personalize it? I mean, what inspired you to take on that role, Daniel?

Daniel Whitehead: Well, it's a funny thing. I mean, and I really don't mind saying this in public forums because I just find it hilarious. It's a funny thing when I think about what motivated me initially to do that work, and why was I hired to do it? Well, you actually, this is where context becomes really interesting because in truth, the very non-pious answer is I needed a job.

Like I needed a job. I was a pastor who had essentially experienced burnout, but didn't have any framework or language to understand that. I had found my way to Canada and was doing some studies at Regent College as part of that, which was really more an excuse to go, I don't know what I should do with my life.

I'll just hang out in this place and kind of loiter with intent to see what might transpire. And along the way, through a serendipitous set of circumstances, I met someone who said, hey, have you thought about not-for-profit? And I know this little non-profit, they're looking for someone, they've been looking for a year, and that was Sanctuary. So, I took on a small non-profit, similarly to the church in many ways.

It's like my vocational journey, which has largely been about leading a church and then leading this organization in my life, given that I did the first one for eight years with two years as a youth pastor before that, and I've now been at Sanctuary nine years. But both of those journeys have been saying yes, feeling a sense of calling, saying yes, and then working the rest out and having a commitment to ongoing learning. And honestly, more often than not, learning the hard way.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

And I do, I am a believer in that. I mean, we're all wired differently, but I am someone who would rather start at a point and iterate my way to where I need to get to. I'm not going to spend lots of time on a polished plan.

I'm going to say, well, it's kind of a Britishism, let's get stuck in.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, let's get stuck in, yeah.

Daniel Whitehead: You know, that would be like when I used to play soccer or football.

And I say the same thing to my son, when he'd say like, I don't know what to do. I'd be like, get stuck in, just get in there. You know, you're working out.

Don't hold back, get stuck in. If you fail someone, get up, move on. So, I think that has been my approach, which in some ways is good and helpful.

In other ways, it can feel less helpful. But I think having self-awareness around that has been important. So yeah, Sanctuary has been this incredible journey, incredible gift to me.

And when I get to hear other people say it's been a gift to them, it's just a thrill. It's an absolute, I mean, I don't think that ever fails to genuinely move me. When someone will stop me, as has happened in the street before, like I'll be stopped by someone and they'll go, oh, you're Sanctuary.

Oh, let me tell you. It's just incredible. Because when I took it on, it didn't have the ability to reach people in different nations and different countries.

So yeah, that's been an amazing gift for me and hopefully for a lot of other people too.

Andrew Stirling: And so, our audience might not know what Sanctuary is and what you do. So, tell us something about that, Daniel.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

What is Sanctuary?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, so Sanctuary is really focused on how do we help churches become safer places for people's mental health? And with the kind of ultimate quest that every church would be a sanctuary for people's mental health, a safe place. Now, some people listening may say, well, it already is. Others will be saying, that is so necessary.

And I think most people, and I'm still ordained. I love the church. I'm part of a church. I volunteer. I speak regularly. My wife used to work for a church.

So, we're church people. But I think in my experience, many churches, as in people within churches, actually do find it hard to frame the subject of mental health in a way that is conducive and helpful for people to recover and people to be seen in their various diagnoses or various experiences. So, Sanctuary really focuses on creating resources that help churches to have better conversations.

And that is by bringing together theology, psychology, and real people's actual stories. And I think at the nexus of those three points, you find a way of framing and holding mental health that builds. And if you build that shared framework and language, and you model that, and you give permission to that, you actually begin to have some really healing conversations and healing ministries in the church.

So that's the whole purpose of Sanctuary.

Andrew Stirling: And so, who works with you? I mean, is it all dependent on you? Or is there a team of people who actually help those congregations? Because I can imagine that, you know, you would have a great variety of congregations who would be wanting your assistance in this and coming to the realization that this is something that's needed. What sort of team do you have?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, so we have a team of people, most of whom are based in Canada.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

We have a couple of people in the US and one person at the moment in the UK, but we have actual nonprofits set up in all three of those countries, though it's founded in Vancouver, Canada, where I live. So yeah, we have a whole range of people from a range of backgrounds, a range of experiences. And really it is that commitment to ecumenism, which was actually a big thing that drew me to the organization.

For me, being from the UK, I think ecumenism is pretty strong. And I actually attribute that to the post-Christendom experiment in Britain is pretty advanced. It's really far along, more so than my experience of living in Vancouver.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, I'd agree with you on that.

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah. And people tell me Vancouver is really secular.

And I'm like, it's more Christian than the most Christian city in Britain, wherever that is. Yeah. So, you know, I don't find faith to be as stigmatizing in Canada, my experience of living in Canada.

I think I could tell normal everyday people I'm a Christian and that wouldn't be a weird thing to say. In Britain, that's a pretty weird thing to say. So, I think the church, you know, has really said we need each other.

Yeah, you may believe that little nuance, I may believe this, but we need to be in relationship because if we're not, if we're divided, we're not going to do anything. So, I kind of bring that naivety, that foreign naivety that believes that the church is better together than apart. And we can actually learn from each other, and we can learn to love each other, not in spite of our differences, but in some ways because of them.

Because it's like, well, you bring this part to the body of Christ that I don't bring, but I bring this part, and can we celebrate that together? So, I think Sanctuary is a microcosm of that in trying to hold space, generous space for the whole body of Christ to enter into this, again, this point of connection, which is suffering in the form of mental health.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

The Bible Course: Taking a minute here out of the conversation with Daniel to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on the journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book. This eight-session course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible.

Using a unique storyline, The Bible Course shows you how key events, books and characters fit together. It's great for in-person groups, but it could also be used as a digital gathering tool. It can be used anywhere you like.

Watch the first session for free and review the accompanying course guide. Go to BibleCourse.ca to learn more. Bible course . c a. And as always, the links for this and everything else will be down in the show notes.

Andrew Stirling: It sounds, Daniel, I mean, the image that I have in my mind as you're speaking is the Apostle Paul. And, you know, and I can't help but think of, you know, Paul saying, the different parts of the body each need each other. And each to look after each other and to connect through the power of the Spirit to see, I can't say to my eye, I don't need you or to unpleasant parts that I don't need you, that the whole body works together.

And I'd agree with you, actually, that I think that there is, and I mean, the Canadian Bible Society is very much similar in its orientation here to be truly ecumenical and to be across confessional boundaries. And in a sense, even though I think you're probably accurate, Vancouver seems to me to be less secular than most of the British cities that I know I'm aware of, certainly my home city in Manchester, I would say definitely. On the other hand, I think we're facing the time in our lives as a church where we recognize the power of being with each other and of ecumenism and so on.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Daniel, the issue of mental health, and I'd like to turn to that for a moment, and our awareness of it has increased, I think, dramatically over the last few years. It's almost de rigueur now to talk about mental health issues and people are more open, I think, than they certainly were in dealing with that. What do you think has precipitated this awareness? And why is it important? In other words, why would a church even consider contemplating being a safe place? And that language isn't certainly not the language that I grew up with in the church.

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah, I mean, it's really interesting. I've been at Sanctuary nine years. I've seen a huge shift in nine years.

I can say like nine years ago, most people, when I tell them about Sanctuary, they go, what is it? What does it do? Why is that important? Mental health and faith, right? And now it's almost the complete opposite. In fact, there was one person I told once who wasn't a person of faith. I don't know who they were.

It might be an Uber driver or something. And his response was, oh, that's a great idea. Those guys really need help.

As in Christians. I'm like, well, yes, we do. So, you know, how has that shifted? Well, I mean, there's been a lot of work in culture to talk about talking about mental health.

I think the challenge with it being kind of in vogue or in fashion at the moment is it could fall into that category of it's almost like I heard again, I heard someone say this once where they talked about AIDS and they said, oh, is that still a thing? Because like in the 90s, it was like, that's what everyone talked about. And my fear is with mental health is the same thing could happen. Like it's fashionable.

But I would say it's much more than that, right? This is actually at the core of how God has fearfully and wonderfully made us. And we've learned more about the human brain in the last 25 years than in the rest of human history put together. So, we're actually learning something about the fearfully and wonderfully made-ness.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

And we're also learning that or realizing or accepting that languishing is part of the deal. And again, I have another kind of concern because people will talk about resilience. So, a lot of people say, let's talk about resilience.

Like, yeah, but you also have to talk about justice. Because you can't say, well, we need to be resilient so we can put up the systems of oppression. You're just validating the system that sometimes you need to say, that's not right.

That's making people need to be resilient. So, I think Christians have this dual vocation always. And so, at the moment, there's lots of talk of human flourishing.

Harvard have done this five-year study with 25,000 people across 20 countries to look at what helps, what aids human flourishing. And actually, faith is a big part of it. No surprises there.

But the tension, for me, is like, well, suddenly people are going to talk about human flourishing. But what about languishing? Like you can't just skip over that. Languishing is part of the deal.

And, you know, at Sanctuary, we've used that language of flourishing and languishing for years, right since it began. So, yeah, I think there have been shifts. There have been changes.

My concern is that, again, is it just a cultural narrative that is implicitly shaping a church's perspective? Which, to give you an example of that, you know, in culture, I would say mental health, more often than not, is really shaped from a biomedical perspective alone. So essentially, people are mental health or problems to be fixed by doctors or medical practitioners in isolation. Now, people do need doctors and medical practitioners and interventions.

But essentially, what I see is a lot of funding going into, certainly from the state, into symptom reduction, which is important. We need symptom reduction. But if you only put it into symptom reduction, it will be a bottomless pit.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

You will literally never satisfy the need. There is something else going on in society that you go, hey, this society is not conducive to people flourishing, or this is not conducive to their mental health. And why is that? And what are the things that might actually deal with that at a root level? Could it be that community and hope and belonging and purpose that these things have a role to play? And does the church have anything to say about those things? I certainly hope so.

I would say we should have a monopoly on those things. So, I think Sanctuary is really trying to adjust and adapt and amend even churches that engage in mental health. Very often, they unknowingly buy into a medical model that really says, well, we have a special group that we send people to.

Isn't that kind of us? I go, it is, as long as you're not doing it to absolve yourself of the discomfort and responsibility to be a good friend to that person. If you're trying to just refer them so you don't have to deal with it, then I think we actually have a fundamental problem theologically about how we understand sharing each other's burdens.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, very insightful.

Our audience at the Bible Society is, of course, interested in the relationship between the Biblical witness and addressing issues of mental health. It's fascinating in my experience in life that some of the most powerful messages that I've heard have arisen from a study of the laments in the Bible, and not always just the happy glorification and resurrection and joy, but actually the Psalms of Lament or the passages of Jeremiah and Lament and so on. But is there a sense that the Biblical witness is helpful here in dealing with the issues that you're dealing with? And are there any sort of specifics that you can think of that might help our audience?

Daniel Whitehead: Well, yeah, I think, I mean, you've already named the Psalms of Lament.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

I go, you know, I think, was it Bonhoeffer who referred to it as a songbook of the Bible? But, you know, as a reflection of our worship to God, 40% of those Psalms are laments. So, the inference is that lament is meant to be part of our worship, you know, brutal honesty about how terrible things are. And as Malcolm Guite, our friend would say, you know, people think there's something wrong with someone with depression, but I think there's something right with them, that they're seeing the world in a way that is valid.

You know, the world is a pretty hard place to live in, particularly at the moment when there's rumors of World War Three. Like, this would have been unthinkable 10 or 15 years ago. So, you know, I think we have to validate those feelings.

And the Bible certainly does that through the Psalms of Lament. These are people languishing but also finding God in the midst of their languishing. And there's these points apart from one Psalm, which ends with darkness is my only companion, which is valid, because I think there are some human experiences where that is some people's reality.

And again, if we don't want to admit that we have to go into the world and open our eyes. So, the Biblical record includes that, which I'm glad it does. Because imagine if it didn't, what is the hope for those people? But when I think about the New Testament, I tend to think of Jesus healing ministry, because, you know, if you're anything like me, I was implicitly and explicitly brought up to say, well, Jesus was healing people to kind of primarily demonstrate the power of God.

These signs and wonders were demonstrating his authority, and they were a prophetic vision of what is to come in the new creation. But really, through my help with our good friend, John Swinton. Yeah, kind of looking differently at these healings and going actually, what's the physical curing that Jesus did, removing a barrier to allow people to enter into healing.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

So, if you take the example of the woman with the issue of blood, you know, she had had this issue for 10 years, she had spent all her money trying to get help. So, she was ceremony unclean, no one would have spoken to it, no one would have touched her. And again, all the research we know now is that physical touch is a key part of who we are as human beings and mental wellbeing.

And then I think to like the laying on of hands and this idea of proximity and closeness. It's almost like the Scriptures knew these things about how we are made and the things we need. So, but when I think about the woman with the issue of blood, Jesus cures her, but He enters into a dialogue with her, which I think begins her healing, which is really about her finding her voice for the first time in 10 years, and everyone has to listen to her.

And Jesus removes that barrier that allows her to be touched, to be seen, to be spoken to, to enter the religious system. And I think with mental health, if we think about what are the barriers that prevent people from authentically entering into Christian community, some of those barriers can be stigma. Some of those barriers can be my preconceived ideas of what a good Christian life looks like, and what you and what your kid's life should be like.

If I can remove those barriers, I'm actually joining in Jesus' healing ministry to allow people to heal in relationship, because healing is always relational. It's always about relationships.

Andrew Stirling: It's interesting, Daniel.

I mean, I love hearing this. And you mentioned John, and I know John Swinton personally. He talks about the reluctance of churches sometimes to allow people who have mental struggles or disabilities to actually contribute to the ministry of the church.

Like the emphasis has historically been, here are people in need. We're going to try and help them in their need. So, they become sort of dependent on the church.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

The church is the one who has it all together and is there to help them. But in fact, the opposite doesn't always take place. The people who have mental problems or people who have disabilities can actually have a positive contribution to the life and the ministry of the church.

Is that something you see changing and what holds us back maybe from embracing that vision?

Daniel Whitehead: Yeah. I don't know that I have any particularly non-obvious insights, but I would agree with it. Obviously, I know John very well, and he shaped a lot of Sanctuary's work and he's one of our ambassadors.

But yeah, I think some of the things that prevent people from that type of inclusion is cultural pressures that exist implicitly. Essentially, if all we're being bombarded with in the media is these people are of value, these people are the people we aspire to be like, and those people, really, it's about a veneer of well-being. It's like if you're healthy and wealthy, you're winning. And if you're poor and unwell, you're losing.

And that is our culture's idea of what health is. The Bible actually presents a very different definition of health, which is a relational vision of health.

So, this idea of shalom, peace at the level of everything, peace between nations, between people, peace within individuals. It's like, how is your shalom doing? So, you could be an Olympic athlete narcissist who only cares about yourself, but you have lots of Instagram followers. And people will say, "wow, this man's so successful."

Let's get him to write a book and we'll read it. And meanwhile, you can have someone who looks very unsuccessful in the eyes of the world, who maybe lives with a mental illness, who may even be dying. And they know the peace of God.

I think according to a Biblical definition, that person is more healthy. And I've sat with people who are absolutely, I would say, you could put them in the category of some

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

of the most unseen people, certainly in our churches, maybe even in society. And I think about people that even feature in our course.

And if you're astute, you'll see them. And if you listen, you'll find depths and wisdom that you've probably never heard before. It would be impossible to experience the depths of God and his love and his prophetic vision.

It'd be impossible to find that from someone who hasn't been through the depths or the darkness of mental illness or languishing. And so, I agree wholeheartedly with John that the church should be a place that isn't just saying, oh, poor you, you have mental challenges, although empathy is important.

It has to move beyond empathy and move to, and what can you tell us? And I think when you look at the Psalms of Lament, often that's what happens, right? The person goes through the depths, they realize God is with them, and then they proclaim these truths that they otherwise could not have understood unless they'd been through the depths.

Andrew Stirling: And so many, Daniel, the miracles of Jesus, you know, has Jesus saying, you know, go and but don't go telling people in certain one tradition, but then they go ahead and do it anyway. You know, they have experienced the healing of Christ, and they want to tell people that they have had this healing and share their experience.

And even the stones shout out, you know, there's this sense in which, you know, you've gone to the pit, you've experienced healing, and now you go somewhere else. Years ago, when I was a boy in England, they had a thing called open air schools. I don't know if you've ever heard of those.

But they were schools where they tucked people away who had mental and physical challenges. They bussed us to school, and I had a physical ailment and couldn't go to a normal state school. So, I went to that for a few months and was surrounded by people who were physically and mentally and emotionally challenged.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

It was a very, I thought was going to be a very dark time. And yet in the midst of that, I witnessed people who had immense suffering as young people, but who had that peace that passes all understanding. And in the midst of it all, were able to, in a sense, have a positive impact, even on me, knowing that I was going to get better.

Actually, I was recovering and healing from my physical illness, but there were those who had deep personal scars, but they, in a sense, witnessed to me. Our time is coming to an end here, Daniel, unfortunately, because this has just been a remarkable conversation. What do you want us to pray for you? What would you like us, both personally, but also in terms of Sanctuary's ministry? I know our people do like to pray for things. So, give us some guidance, Daniel.

Daniel Whitehead: Thanks, Andrew. No, I really appreciate that.

I think, you know, in all honesty, this should be no surprise, and I'm sure the Bible Society are as aware of this as I am. But it's actually quite an uncertain time for nonprofits right now. It's an uncertain time for businesses as well.

So, I think we would just love people to pray for provision, for our team to be flourishing in what is a really tricky time. And I think we want to really just join with your people in praying that the church will become a safe place, and that together we can really change a narrative which often doesn't present the church as a safe place. I think together, if we pray and do these things and use the resources that are at hand, then, yeah, I think we can change it.

So, we'd love prayer for those things.

Andrew Stirling: Well, Daniel, be assured of that and be assured of our continued work in helping assist in any way that we can, and with our outreach to sort of healing the broken heart and helping people who have trauma. These are ministries which are vital to us and why your ministry and Sanctuary we know on the ground in Vancouver and, as you said, beyond, is so important.

Scripture Untangled

Season 10: Episode 12 | Daniel Whitehead | Can the Church Be a Sanctuary for Mental Health?

Be assured of our prayers, Daniel, and do give the best wishes of the Bible Society to your staff and some of the team that I know that you have, and our blessings and prayers are with you. Thank you so much for your time, Daniel. This has been most enlightening.

Daniel Whitehead: Oh, thank you, Andrew. It's really been a pleasure. Bless you.