

# Imagine with Me: Jocelyn Spence Talks about Mental Health & Ministry March 11, 2022



Terri Hord Owens: Hello Disciples, this is your General Minister and President Terri Hord Owens. I am back from sabbatical and so excited to be here with a new episode of Imagine with Me, where I have the awesome opportunity to talk imagine who we must be as a new church in this new world. Today's guest is Jocelyn Spence, who is the director there of Mental Health and Wellness Initiatives for the National Benevolent Association affectionately known as our NBA. So I am so excited to have Jocelyn here with me. Welcome, Jocelyn.

Jocelyn Spence: Hi, I am so happy to be here with you today.

THO: Jocelyn, you are relatively new to the National Benevolent Association, and one of the things I hope we can accomplish is to introduce you more broadly to the wider church and Disciples across the U.S. and Canada. And so why don't you tell us just a little bit about yourself your professional background and your work and ministry within NBA?

JS: Yes. Well again, thank you for having me today for this conversation. I am the Director of the Mental Health and Wellness Initiative for the NBA and I am a licensed therapist. I am a registered yoga and meditation teacher. I am a seminary trained minister and so, I have been trained on a number of different ways to take care of people holistically, and I bring all of those various experiences and my education and my work into what I am doing at NBA to provide more care as we are the people who are called to care and create those communities of compassion and care.

THO: I am so excited to have you as part of our wider church ministry team and as we're working to create those communities of compassion and care your as you said holistic preparation, I think is also exciting. We find there a lot of clergy now who were going ahead and getting the education and training doing therapy to do counseling work, whether you have those degrees or not, if your clergy you find yourself dealing with a lot of issues. In one of the big things that we have to learn is when to refer, right? When to refer to others, who have more professional expertise than we do. Before we talk about the kinds of things that are happening with clergy. What are some of the things that the trends that you're seeing just in the space of mental health and wellness in our society more broadly? We're marking two years right? Since we entered The pandemic I would argue that we're still not out of it. But what are the same of the trends that you're seeing?

And then I want to talk about some particular needs that you think clergy are having in this time and space.

JS: Yeah, with you mentioning the pandemic. Certainly, I think it's within this in the month of March. When we reach that. I think it was March 13th. That was the day that everything was officially shut down and US. And since that moment, people have been experiencing a lot of pandemic burnout. And that phrase is something that the World Health Organization recognizes the pandemic burner of how people have been in this ongoing collective trauma of not knowing when the pandemic is going to end and the pandemic causing additional issues for them, additional challenges with their mental health, with their wellness with their relationships.

The immense grief that has come up for people in, whether it was they have lost family members, or just people that they know, or just witnessing, the major amount of loss of people to Covid. But also, when we think about losing people during the pandemic and not always being able to participate in the typical grief, rituals and coming together because it's not safe or You know, thinking even earlier in the pandemic, where people were not even leaving the house at all. And so the pandemic has triggered other things in people. One of the examples that are often talked about is, if people felt neglected and how the pandemic has been handled, it may have triggered earlier issues of feeling neglected, you know, so some unhealed trauma. So, the whole experience has brought up a lot for people and people have found themselves at a place where the usual ways that they cope, they have kind of run out. Like, I am tired of doing that. These things that I have done before, are not working for me. There has to be another way.

So I would say the pandemic burnout is one of the biggest things as well as this resurgence around self care practices and communal care practices. Because what we realize is We need to be taken care of ourselves. But with the mental health care System, there are not enough people to help everyone individually, right? There's not enough therapist for everybody to have individual therapy. And so we're thinking through what are some of these more collective models and experiences that people can have that are therapeutic? If that's group therapy if that's support groups. And so there's been a rise of a lot of those conversations, as well and around trauma-informed care because people are coming to see how trauma has impacted our lives individually and then our society.

THO: I think that's so important that you speak about just collective ways, right? In, which we can share together and in which we can have access to resources. I know that over the last couple of General Assemblies. We would have Soul Care Moments during the assembly that NBA would provide for us pre-pandemic. We understood the need just to center in and to take care of ourselves in that kind of way and recognize just the stresses of everyday life even the stresses of gathering together and making important decisions. And, so I am really grateful for how you're framing that the need to really be in collective community, to help take care of one another. And the realization that not everyone has access to a one-on-one therapist. And I know the church has been blessed by the various workshops that you have been doing. And I

hope people will go to the NBA social media pages, and our web pages and make sure you follow NBA, so that you're aware of those kinds of events. I have attended them have been blessed by them. And I think it's really important, you know, having just come off of a sabbatical. One of the commitments I have made to myself is to ensure that rest and that self-care is not laid to the side.

JS: Yeah.

THO: That I don't think you realize how much you need that kind of care and just gentleness with yourself and allowing yourself. You know, we understand going to the spa for our physical bodies, but we need the same kind of spiritual wellness and mental health wellness, in order to do the work that we do. So I know that I will continue to take advantage of the sessions. The NBA provides in anytime. I could be in some kind of collective care environment. I am always looking forward to doing that.

You know, I am in a lot of meetings with clergy across the church and there's a lot of exciting thinking and planning and visiting that's happening. And yet, one of the things that strikes me is that our clergy are tired. Our clergy are fatigued. They are in many cases even using the word overwhelmed. And, and beginning to acknowledge the fact that what we have been living through is trauma. What are you seeing in your meeting with clergy and the particular needs that people who are serving as ministers are needing in this particular moment in time across the church?

JS: Yes. Absolutely. What you just said, the overwhelm, that pandemic burnout, clergy are experiencing grief, they are experiencing their own depression and anxiety and very high stress levels as they're having to navigate decision-making around the pandemic themselves while caring for those who are experiencing all of those same things and those realities. And we have never had this experience before write like this is all of our first time going through a pandemic in this way. And so there's not a guidebook that says this is exactly what you should do. And so clergy are experiencing those challenges because people are looking to them as the leader and oftentimes wanting them to be the one to say. This is exactly how we do it.

And so, Sometimes not being able to be as vulnerable about their humanity and sometimes maybe clergy's congregations not also realizing clergy they are human just like you. They have just taken up this call to do a little bit more and leading and guiding and caring. And, so I think those are some of the challenges, you know, for me, I think through how with the increase depression and anxiety and the lack of is that people are feeling clergy also need to be cared for and supported in their work that they are doing. As you mentioned, your own, sabbatical and prioritizing rest being able to have that integrated into their lives. Having the opportunities to sit and say, Here's what I am facing, and here's what I need, and people being able to show up to that for clergy, right?

THO: I think one of the things that I want to say right now with this moment is how important it is, for congregations to ensure that your pastor has those opportunities for rest. Be it

sabbatical, be it understanding that even you need adequate time in your schedule to think, to study...I was a bi-vocational pastor, and we have a lot of bi-vocational pastors out there in addition to pastors, who are also parents and people are maybe in school working on doctoral programs doing a lot of different things. They're active in their communities. They are lot of pulls on the resource. That is just you as a person. So I would encourage our congregations to prioritize for your pastor and ministries that employ pastors in all of our ministries who are employing people, we need to pay attention to ensuring that people have...you know, the corporate world, we call it "work-life balance," but we need to be sure that our congregations in particular are prioritizing that kind of rest. I know that my staff works hard with me to make sure that there are spaces in my calendar.

Where you know where I am not traveling or even spaces where I have big time, right? That I don't just move from meeting to meeting all day, but there are spaces during the week that I have to think to read. To feed myself intellectually and spiritually. And I think that's just so, so important. It was important before the pandemic. And, and I think we're now understanding if you didn't understand, trauma beforehand, and many of us have lived with various kinds of trauma in our lives, but the pandemic is just another layer that's on. So I just want to speak that to the church. Being sure that your pastor is getting that kind of time and rest in be a our Health and Social Service Ministry.

Joselyn, tell us now that you're in your in this role, what work for people who may not be as familiar with what NBA is doing. How is NBA working to address these needs that we have been naming? And what do you see happening, as we move forward?

JS: Yeah. So at NBA, we are, we offer a number of different. Ways that we are engaging the mental health and wellness work and helping clergy with what they are facing. I would say most recently. I did some workshops for clergy focus on how they may develop mental health resources for their congregations because so many clergy are looking, and they have people in their congregation who are asking for help and needing to be connected to services or meaning to talk about just mental health.

How do we talk about it in our congregations and make people aware and educate them? And so we have been able to have opportunities to sit together and just walk through?. Here's how you can do this, giving them skills and tools that they can take with them, giving them opportunities to talk to one another about what their ideas are, and how they might implement them, and learn from each other.

In the things that they have been facing. And then, in addition to our workshops, of course, we have lots of resources on our website of previous webinars that we have done on different topics related to mental health and wellness. Being able to have an equity cohort who's working on creating a retreat resource for clergy that we would be able to share later for clergy of color who have been experiencing, you know, a multitude of things throughout the pandemic as well. And so we're always thinking through how are we able to care for our leaders? And what space are we able to create for them?

THO: I really appreciate what you said about the, you know, we have been talking about the multiple pandemics, right? And in 2020, George Floyd following on the heels of other incidents of continued, you know, racist depression. There are women among us who are still dealing with all kinds of issues. Not only in churches, but in the wider society, March is Women's History Month, right?

And so, one of the things we need to recognize, is that women clergy have different issues and concerns than the male clergy do. And in some cases that journey is, is harder than others. But those multiple layers of concerns that many in our communities are dealing with. How are you finding people receiving this idea? Because the church has often talked about it, that mental health and wellness is just as important as our physical health and wellness.

How do you approach communities where those topics people may find them taboo or the idea that you might get even help from clergy? Let alone a mental health professional. How do you approach those communities to help it? Make be more comfortable for them to have those conversations?

JS: Yes, or a first outright acknowledging that this is probably going to be uncomfortable because you haven't been talking about this. And so naming that out right for people, oftentimes helps with that discomfort and I think the other part is the language that's used contextualizing it to the people that you are speaking to. Is there imagery and language that would help them to be able to better understand what we're talking about?

I think the part that you mention of mental health is a part of our physical health and finding ways to name that. One of the definitions of mental health of actually mental illness, is that it is a health condition that concerns our mental emotional, those elements of ourselves. So we talk a lot more about it just being a part of our experience and our being. Often times people begin to see "Okay, you know it's a part of who I am." I always love to show people the wellness wheel which shows all of these different dimensions of who we are a mental or emotional or physical or spiritual are relational aspects so that people see. Oh, yes. I am all of these things. And then we think the illogically to think about being the body of Christ. And knowing that we are all we all are contributing these different parts. We look at ourselves in the same way. There's so many next to us. And this is one part that we want to focus on to make sure that we are contributing to our wholeness.

THO: Amen. Amen. And we are indeed what a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. And we always say, we don't need new language around our identity. We just need to be the church that we say we are. We have been using a lot of language around imagining a new church for a new world. We have lots of opportunities to participate in that imagination. In one of the ways in which everyone can participate is the Easter offering, which is coming up on April 10th and 17th and it supports ministries like NBA, it supports ministries like the Office of General Minister and President is, we're all, you know, imagining together who we need to be, for this new world that we're living in. How can the whole church, along those lines Jocelyn, be

working together in covenant, to care for people who are hurting? And what other kinds of tools we have talked about tools and resources and the narrative that guides our work spiritual practices that we need to undergird that in your work. I see as touching on all of those things, right? Tools and resources, a new narrative of really about what mental wellness is and maybe we can end by talking about spiritual practices that can. Can support that kind of mental wellness or other. We have talked a little bit about the tools and resources. But what can we do together to make our community stronger apart from the sessions NBA's providing? How do you see the church moving to provide more than we try to live into this covenant?

JS: Yeah, I love that you arrived in and what can we do together? Because the reality is our mental health, and wellness, is its an individual thing and it's a communal thing, and we have to first check in with ourselves. I think about the scripture, you know, love one another as you love yourself, and we have to focus on navigating and reflecting on. How am I caring for me? Then taking care of myself and then at the same time helping other people taking care of one another. And, so I think, you know, you mentioned Sabbath earlier, and we have talked a lot about rest. I think thinking together, imagining how are we offering one another rest is a wonderful wellness practice and when you mean think about together, I also think the communal grief rituals as well. Are we having times regularly where we're naming, the experiencing the challenges we're facing? Are we allowing ourselves to lament because lament was such a huge part of the journey of the Israelites, and we read that all throughout the Bible. And the other thing would be too together, you know, when I think about the ministry of Jesus and Jesus being a Healer, not only did he heal people, but he also made people aware of what they could do within their healing. Whether that was your faith has made you well. Take up your mat and walk. You know, I think about the people who witnessed that, I think about the people who were there, who helped people to get to their healing, the friends who brought their friend to the roof. But to also think about who else in the community was helping them get to the top of the roof.

And so when we think about our work together as a church and mental health and wellness and how we support one another, it's pausing to see ourselves in these narratives and to think through what is it that I can do today? And today might be, I am gonna tell this person, "Hey, let us start our meeting 15 minutes later, because you probably need those 15 minutes to rest before." It could be accompanying someone to a support group, you know, these smaller ways that we are doing big work and how we're able to take care of each other.

THO: Amen, Jocelyn, that just blessed me right there. Ways that we can work together, inviting one another to take care, just naming the issue lamenting together and being sure that we're those friends that say "Hey Joselyn. Hey, Terri take some time take a few minutes and make it." I know that, you know, I lost my mother back in September and I have been especially Ali in touch, right with my own, need to deal with my own grief. Even as I am leading in many people, you know, member of our staff Bruce Barkhauer, just lost his mother last week. We all experienced loss and grief. And we all have to remember they were all living through this pandemic. We all have to just pay attention to ourselves so that we can be as whole as we can be for other people and pay attention to other people's grief. I was in a service the other day at

my home church, and my mother's name was called in memory, and I am sitting in the pulpit and I just had to take care. It was okay for me to pull out a tissue, right? And just take care. It's okay for me to turn off my camera or say I just need this time to relax. So I think it all the things that we go through in life on top of a pandemic. We have to just take care of one another. We are that movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, and we find that vision and imagining God's Limitless love. And if we can imagine that Grace that we need being visited and poured out for everyone else. I think we will be in a much healthier and stronger place physically and spiritually and mentally, so thank you, Joselyn, so much, you have blessed me with this conversation, and I am just so excited that you're with NBA. I look forward to the ministry, in your leadership, in that ministry, and to the future sessions, and just seeing you sharing across the life of the church, I so look forward to that.

Disciples, it's important that you remembered that the reason that we can do this work together is because we share in the work together. And one of the most important ways that we can share is through Disciples Mission fund and in particular, our special offerings. So as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, let us remember that. We are the Church of the Resurrection.

In order to imagine and move forward, you're giving as a congregation individuals to the Easter Offering helps ministries, like the National Benevolent Association to provide these services to our congregations and the communities, they serve. So, thank you for being with me today, Jocelyn, on Imagine with Me and I hope to see you in another session sometime soon around cyberspace or even in person.

And Disciples as we move through this Lenten season and March, which is Women's History Month, I pray that you too will take care. Take good care of yourself, reach out for those resources that might be a blessing to you. Remember what's available through NBA. There will be links to their services tied to our social media and remember Disciples, God, loves you. Oh, how God loves you and so do I. God bless.