

Editorial: Theology and mental health

Mental health is widely recognised as a major global health concern. In Scotland, the issue is particularly acute. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has described the current situation in 2026 as a ‘mental health emergency’.¹ Indeed, Scotland’s distinct historical narratives, patterns of religious affiliation, community structures, and socio-economic inequalities shape how mental health is understood, discussed, and responded to. The prevalence of intergenerational trauma, sectarianism, rural isolation, and the legacy of industrial decline all contribute to a uniquely Scottish context of mental health outcomes. These issues, alongside wider social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors, have created disproportionate barriers to support. These barriers are felt most acutely by ethnic minority communities, people in rural and island areas, LGBTQIA+ individuals, disabled people, and those living in economic deprivation.² While mental health referrals in Scotland continue to increase, persistent social stigma and cuts to government funding are contributing to worsening outcomes. The 2022 Scottish Mental Health Stigma Study³ revealed the extent of the prejudice faced by those living with mental health conditions, rooted in long-standing cultural attitudes and a lack of public understanding.

Our issue opens with two distinctly Scottish articles, which consider nature, landscape, grief, and musical traditions. First is Cody Crawshaw’s piece on anxiety and the positive impact of connecting with Scottish nature. Drawn from the results of her doctoral research on Christian women with anxiety, Cody’s work explores nature as the self-manifestation of God. We hear first-hand from participants in her study about how the

¹ The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland, “Awareness, Action, Accountability: Tackling Scotland’s Mental Health Emergency”, <https://www.rpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/devolved-nations/rpsych-in-scotland/2025/rpsychis--manifesto-for-the-2026-scottish-parliament-election---june-2025.pdf>.

² Scottish Government, “Scottish Health Survey 2024: Volume 1 – Main Report”, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2024-volume-1-main-report/pages/1--mental-health-and-wellbeing/>.

³ See Me Scotland, “Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study: Final Report”, <https://www.seemescotland.org/media/11118/see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf>.

Editorial

coasts, forests, and gardens of the Scottish landscape can act as an anxiolytic intervention in their anxiety treatment. Engaging with nature can bring comfort to those encountering mental health challenges, acting as a reminder of God's presence in creation. Margery Bray's article "From the Keening to the Chanter" highlights the theological and cultural lineage that connects women's keening traditions with the later *piobaireachd* ('piping') lament. Keening, from the Gaelic *caoineadh* (meaning 'to cry' or 'to weep'), is a vocal ritual performed at the wake or graveside in mourning of the dead. Keening and communal lament practices were suppressed by the Scottish church in the seventeenth century, however Margery, who has a background in trauma care, suggests that these Highland traditions were ahead of their time. Indeed, breath, rhythm, and communal witnessing practices are now recognised as essential aspects of embodied trauma work. Later in the issue, Alastair McIntosh reviews Angus Peter Campbell's novel, *Donald and His Seven Cows*, set on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. His essay complements the first two papers in this issue well, as it draws on similar themes of Scottish landscape and Gaelic language and culture to explore ideas of community and memory.

Two biblical offerings follow, one from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and one from the New Testament. Both present deeply pastoral readings of mental health, which will be valuable to faith communities. Anne Marie Foster's creative re-reading of Bathsheba's narrative in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings draws on feminist and womanist hermeneutics to explore themes of trauma, coercion, and survival. Insights from mental health discourse allow her to frame these biblical texts in a new light. Key to her argument is the importance of survivor-centred hermeneutics, especially for those seeking to support people navigating trauma and the ongoing effects of abuse. A second biblical re-reading comes from Jonathan Shamshad's article on Psalm 46, in which he explores anxiety in the context of 'super-modernity'. He considers the overstimulation and disconnection of contemporary life, and the ways in which this can contribute to poor mental health. By contrast, he suggests, Psalm 46 can offer a vision of stability through divine presence. Jonathan's concept of 'stillness' as a posture of trust in God presents a contrast to the chaos of our modern lives, and his theological framework for resilience has important pastoral implications.

I have already mentioned the importance of intersectional considerations when considering mental health in Scotland. These are brought to life by

Editorial

Axolile Qina, who reflects on the way that his South African Xhosa cultural heritage shaped his response to depression and PTSD. Within a Xhosa Christian frame of reference, mental illness is commonly interpreted as a spiritual problem which can be solved by appeasing God. For Axolile, tension arose between this idea and his lived experiences. His work is courageous and insightful and comes with a heartening personal message of hope. In a similar vein, siblings Mark Bowen and Kate Bowen-Evans reflect on their experiences of Christian faith, non-typical bodies and commitment to mental health. Mark brings psychological insight through his work as a Core Process Psychologist, while Kate is a PhD candidate in Biblical Studies. Their piece takes a conversational format. Together, they explore the inherent worth of people struggling with mental health difficulties through the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. They also offer a theologically grounded perspective on breath-work and its importance as a practical tool for emotional regulation. A final reflection in this issue is offered by Iain Telfer, Trustee and Chair of the Guntrip Trust. The Trust was founded in the 1980s by Murray Leishman, a Church of Scotland minister who later became a psychotherapist in response to evidence of clergy stress. Iain contemplates the difficult work that brought him into contact with the Guntrip Trust and considers the importance of psychoanalytic therapy and treatment for those providing pastoral care. The Trust continues to offer support and resources to ministers in Scotland today.

The issue is completed by a creative offering from Chris West. “Michaelmas Fragments” draws from his own experiences and takes the form of found poetry and narrative prose. Chris explores the complexity of being a survivor of suicidal crisis and an ordained Anglican priest, drawing the reader into contemplation of the tensions that arise in the liminal spaces between faith, vulnerability, and the struggle to remain alive. The edge of despair in his writing is complemented by uneasy fragments of survival and hope, reminding the reader of how powerful creative methods can be for communicating the ‘undone’ nature of human experience.

It is important to recognise that no single theological or biblical framework can fully account for or respond to the complexities of mental health. Yet the work presented here offers fresh perspectives and interpretive tools that will deepen understanding and engagement. Each contribution is unflinching in its engagement with the realities of mental health, refusing to rely on easy answers or shy away from the messiness of lived experience.

Editorial

Together, the collection of articles, reflections, and creative work that makes up this issue of *Theology in Scotland* constitutes an important offering to wider discourse around theology and mental health, while being rooted in the particularities of Scottish experience.

Katie Cross
Editor

---Upcoming event---

A Polyphonic Response: Reflections on the Work and Context of David Fergusson

Join us at New College, Edinburgh for a day event to celebrate the work of David Fergusson, marking his seventieth birthday and his retirement as Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

This is a day for grateful reflection but also of constructive thinking around current issues in Scotland and beyond, with contributions from a range of figures from the academy and the church.

Where: New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LX

When: Tuesday, September 8 • 10 AM – 4:30 PM

Tickets: <https://edin.ac/3RvcrXX>

The event is organised by Alison Jack (a.jack@ed.ac.uk) and Paul Nimmo (paul.nimmo@abdn.ac.uk), to whom any queries should be addressed.

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