

### **First Unitarian Church Promotes Suicide Prevention:**

On October 25, 2006, we welcomed Senator Gordon Smith to speak at our church about the tragic suicide of his only son, Garrett Lee Smith. Here, at First Unitarian Church of Portland, it is natural that we would be open in addressing concerns about mental health, suicide and the fair treatment of people with mental illness. Senator Smith's visit was part of a long tradition of honoring social justice work, going back about 140 years to our very first minister, Rev. Thomas Lamb Eliot. Our Rev. Eliot was close friends with the Unitarian social reformer Dorothea Dix. Many of you know that Dix traveled the United States in the pre-civil war period, documenting the horrific conditions in which people with mental illness were living. These conditions included people being housed in jails and almshouses, often shackled in chains, sometimes in cells without heat, or even being locked in cages or sheds on family farms. Her documentation, or "memorials," gave her a basis for asking state governments to fund hospitals for people with mental illness. In 1869, Dix visited Rev. Eliot at First Unitarian Church (just a few blocks from where we are now gathered). After she left, she wrote Rev. Thomas Lamb Eliot and asked him to serve as her representative in seeking a public insane asylum for the Washington Territory.

Even today we have some quiet reformers in our ranks. Many of you are familiar with the National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI and its many programs that support people with mental illness and their families. I'm proud to say that Oregon's very first teacher of what is now known as NAMI's *Family to Family* program, (in fact, the person who organized the first teacher training for this program in Oregon,) was our own Fern

Momyer, who accomplished this in part with funds granted by the Alliance of First Unitarian Church.

Thus, it was an honor to welcome to our church a man whose response to personal tragedy has been to transform that sorrow into joyful work, to turn personal loss into positive action for the good of all. When suicide occurs, it is difficult for most of us to talk about. Yet, Senator Smith is remarkable for his willingness to talk openly about suicide and suicide prevention with audiences that typically might not be receptive to hear it. Best practices for suicide prevention teach us that talking openly about suicide can help to prevent it, and Senator Smith is not afraid to start the conversation.

He is also persuasive. In 2004, the passage of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, provided \$9.7 million in suicide prevention grants nationwide, benefiting communities in Oregon and across the nation. As a health care leader, Senator Smith has worked to protect vital programs, such as Medicaid, from devastating funding cuts. In 2005, he led the fight to reinstate over \$20 billion in proposed Medicaid funding cuts from the Senate budget, urging his colleagues to support thoughtful program reforms instead of arbitrary budget reductions. This law – known as the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 – would have been a lot worse for Medicaid beneficiaries with mental illness had it not been for Senator Smith.

140 years ago, Dorothea Dix was arguably the single greatest advocate for reform of mental health care, and she was a single woman who could not even vote. How things have changed. This was why this church welcomed Senator Smith, an advocate of mental health care reform who represents us in the Congress of the United States. Below please find some links to some resources on mental health:

- For homeless or indigenous youth and young adults with mental illness: Outside In, [www.outsidein.org](http://www.outsidein.org)
- For families dealing with a mentally ill family member, NAMI-Oregon, [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).
- For suicide bereavement support, [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)
- Lay Ministry, First Unitarian Church of Portland, [www.firstunitarianportland.org](http://www.firstunitarianportland.org)
- For grieving children and families, The Dougy Center [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)