



WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

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RESEARCH RECENTLY PUBLISHED BY CINNAMON NETWORK SUGGESTS THAT THE CHURCH HAS A LOT TO OFFER WHEN IT COMES TO SUPPORTING THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES.

If more than 7.7% of the population were to catch flu - it would be classified as an epidemic (Outbreaks vs Epidemics, Brendan Koerner the Slate, 2003). If we work on those percentages, then mental illness is an epidemic in our midst. One in every six people has a mental health disorder; the suicide rate of UK students has increased by fifty-six per cent in the ten years to 2016 (Pinkney et al, 2018, cited in the TES); and mental health problems represent the largest single cause of disability in the UK costing an estimated £105 billion per annum (NHS England Five Year Forward Task Force, February 2016).

WHAT HAS ALL THIS GOT TO DO WITH A CHURCH?

In 2017, Katharine Welby-Roberts, daughter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, opened up about her own battle with depression. A few years earlier, the American pastor Rick Warren spoke about his son's suicide and urged the church to stand up and recognise 'the wolf in its midst.' In an interview, Rick said, 'It's amazing to me that any other organ in your body can break down and there's no shame and stigma to it, but if your brain breaks down, you're supposed to keep it a secret.'

Thankfully we've learnt a lot about the reality of mental health in the past few decades, but we still have a long way to go. Stigma and taboo continue to surround the topic and as a church we can't ignore it.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Church should be the one place where the lost, the broken and the hurting can be themselves without fear or judgement, but when we try and take a Biblical approach to mental health, things can get sticky.

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A report published by Christian Think Tank, Theos (Christianity and Mental Health: Theology, Activities, Potential, Ryan, 2017), suggests that one of the issues Christians face is the fact that words used in the ancient biblical texts are not akin to the terminology we currently use to describe mental illness. Language about demonic oppression and madness certainly aren't helpful when trying to shape a practical response to a very 21st Century need. However, there are a great number of passages that speak closely to the experience of depression; Psalm 88 is just one example: 'You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves' (Psalm 88:6-7).

SO, WHAT'S THE CHURCH GOING TO DO IN RESPONSE?

It has long been tempting for local churches to offer tea and sympathy, but many have struggled to know how to help in the face of debilitating mental illness. Perhaps it is not surprising; since mental illness is undoubtedly complex. The term covers everything from depression and anxiety to schizophrenia and psychosis.

In 2010, Cinnamon Network was set up in response to growing public sector cuts and the rising needs of communities. It recognised the fact that churches wanted to do something powerful, effective and sustainable about the needs they saw on their doorsteps. To help make it as easy as possible for churches to replicate effective models of action, Cinnamon established a menu of best practice, social action initiatives, known as Cinnamon Recognised Projects. Churches can take these tried and tested initiatives off the shelf and put them into action to

address key needs within their community - including the issue of mental illness.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE CHURCH-LED INITIATIVES?

In 2017, Cinnamon Network set about researching the Church's impact on health and care. The research was published in May 2018 and has identified that churches are well positioned to tackle the complex, long term health issues such as mental illness.

FOUR KEY BENEFITS OF CHURCH-LED INITIATIVES

- Holistic health care - Churches are not bound by the same restrictions as health services and can support a variety of needs.
- Giving the gift of time - Churches can take time to get to know people and understand their deep-set needs.
- Creating community - When individuals feel a sense of belonging and trust they are more motivated to make positive lifestyle changes.
- Value for money - In comparison to current health services, church-led initiatives are relatively inexpensive to set up and sustain.

HOLISTIC HEALTH CARE

There are inherent links between our physical, social, spiritual and emotional wellbeing, and a holistic approach to health has long been identified as one of the most effective approaches. Without the restrictions that many health services are bound by, church-led initiatives studied in the research helped to align both health and social care and, in the process, serve the needs of the whole person. For example, Sharon Morgans, who runs The Pain Exchange, explains, 'We use the physiotherapy to meet that particular need, but what it usually unveils is a whole hoard of other things.'

THE GIFT OF TIME

Addressing complex issues such as mental health takes time, but many of our health services are bound by targets and goals. Simply spending time with individuals, getting to know

their wider needs, listening to their deepest concerns and discussing their hopes and fears, not just their prevailing symptoms, are central to the care relationships delivered by churches. As Ruth McDonald, a Parish Nurse who works with GPs and other health services to care for individuals of any age within their community, says, 'We can spend time with the patient, and get to the bottom of issues and ongoing problems.'

CREATING COMMUNITY

The church-led projects studied in the research tackle a whole variety of issues, but they all bring people into relationships with each other. We know that God built us to live in community with one another for a good reason. Through the development of relationships, a sense of trust, belonging and hope is created. For those who have experienced isolation, depression and, in many cases, chronic pain, being valued as part of a group of people is extremely powerful in helping to sustain positive lifestyle changes.

VALUE FOR MONEY

If these benefits weren't enough - perhaps the rub comes when we start to talk about the numbers. It remains a challenge to quantify the financial benefit that church-led health initiatives can provide. However, in comparison to the costs currently being incurred by health services, setting up church-led social action initiatives remains relatively inexpensive. When these costs are aligned with potential benefits, the cost-value potential is huge.

PROJECT COSTS

- £650 is the average cost to set up a Cinnamon Recognised Project
- £280 a year is the approximate cost of maintaining a project
- 90% of Cinnamon Recognised Projects continue into a second year and beyond

HEALTH SERVICE COSTS

- £28,000 each year is the average cost of supporting a patient with Alzheimer's Disease in Europe
- £124 is the average cost of a single visit just to be seen at A&E

- £700 is the base cost of outpatient appointments for one patient with type 2 diabetes per annum
- (Source: Jönsson and Wimo, 2009, NHS Digital, Lean et al, 2017; costs as of September 2017.)

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE CHURCH AND MENTAL HEALTH?

The need is immense and it is precisely at such a time as this that the church can come into its own, by drawing on local knowledge, connections and expertise in order to ease the burden and allow healthcare professionals to channel their resources, time and energies most effectively. The church-led projects studied in Cinnamon's research have proved to be cost-effective, 21st century healthcare solutions that can help to address the nation's major health needs. We should be under no illusion that this is an easy topic to address, but as Christians we shouldn't shy away from the challenge. With the support of initiatives like Cinnamon Recognised Projects, the church has never been in a better place to respond.

Kate Sharma writes on a whole range of topics including health, development and the church and her work has appeared in the Guardian and Times newspapers among other publications. Kate is a passionate advocate for the work of Cinnamon Network and loves nothing more than telling stories that inspire action.

Cinnamon Network champions church-led social action, by building partnerships between churches and civic organisations. For more information about Cinnamon Recognised Projects and the work of the Cinnamon Network, visit: www.cinnamonnetwork.com

