

**Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales  
Department of Christian Responsibility & Citizenship**

**Mental Health Project Worker**

**Background to the Role**

Since 2006 a small working group within the Marriage and Family Life Project Office has been considering how best the spiritual and pastoral needs of families affected by mental illness can be better supported. This issue was raised during *Listening 2004: My Family My Church* and as a result a leaflet *What is Life Like if you or someone in your family has mental health problems?* was developed and published under the *Everybody's Welcome* strand of *Celebrating Family: Blessed, Broken, Living Love*.

The group that developed this leaflet felt that more structured support somehow had to be made available to parishes. Mental illness, like physical illness, covers a multitude of conditions of varying degrees of severity. Unlike most physical illness however, mental illness is rarely admitted to, perhaps because of the shame and stigma involved. Fear of doing or saying the wrong thing can prevent even the most well-meaning parishioners providing spiritual and social support. The Mental Health Support Working Group, with the blessing of the Department, set out to find out if anyone was already involved in the spiritual and pastoral care of families affected by mental illness and if so, which resources had been found to be helpful, with the aim of ultimately improving the experience of those affected in our parishes.

The MHSW group was facilitated by Roberta Canning, currently a part-time chaplain at Anglia-Ruskin University, who was able to volunteer 20 hours a month to acting as the contact point for a developing network and creating a twice-yearly newsletter. Between 2006 and 2008 the group was able to identify around 30 people with a personal or professional interest in pastoral mental-health care, though it had limited resources with which to follow up and extend lines of enquiry. In October 2007 a national awareness day took place in Wolverhampton using resources highlighted in the document *Promoting Mental Health: A Resource for Spiritual and Pastoral Care* published in 2004 by the Church of England. Similar events have since taken place in the dioceses of Cardiff, Hallam and Shrewsbury with a number of smaller grass-roots initiatives springing up as a result.

The group, its expertise and contacts were involved in developing materials for the Day for Life on Mental Health in 2008, as well as the Day For Life on Suicide in 2009. Funds raised as a result of the Day for Life collections have made possible the creation of this new part-time post but are also available to foster examples of good practice that can further the provision of appropriate pastoral care for those affected by mental illness.

Alongside the work of the MFL Project Office, Caritas-Social Action Network (CSAN) has released a DVD to support the spiritual and pastoral care of those affected by dementia. *"It's Still ME, Lord..."* was launched in October 2009 and serves as a training and awareness-raising resource for practitioners in health and social care settings, informal carers, clergy and Religious Orders, parish communities, diocesan and deanery advisers and Eucharistic Ministers. The DVD emphasises that an important part of recognising the dignity and rights of people with dementia and their carers is to ensure that their spiritual needs as well as the practice of their faith are acknowledged and met. As part of its dementia and spirituality project, CSAN will provide on-line resources and has organised a series of national training sessions on the subject. CSAN is the umbrella organisation of charities with a Catholic ethos providing social care within the UK. Among CSAN's activities are providing opportunities for networking, coordination and collaboration, theological reflection, conferences, training, study days and advocacy on behalf of its members in its relationship with CBCEW, Caritas Europa, Parliament and other church bodies.

In approving the creation of this post the Department had a number of priorities in mind:

1. The need for a central coordinating role to provide information and advice on mental health issues for the Catholic community, linking up projects and people to facilitate effective sharing of experiences and resources and reducing the stigma of mental illness
2. The need for criteria and processes through which to fairly and effectively distribute funds raised through the Day For Life, enabling inspirational and replicable mental health projects simultaneously increasing resources available for pastoral, social and spiritual care of those affected by mental ill-health. This might require the creation of separate strands of funding for school-based work or liturgical resources etc
3. The need for a research focus to evaluate and monitor funded projects.

In the course of conversation a variety of other recommendations were made:

1. The value of working with schools to improve the mental well-being of children. According to recent research 1 in 4 children have specific mental health needs.
2. The need to liaise with mental health chaplains and the Department's Healthcare Reference Group. 25% of those admitted to hospital have mental as well as physical health needs.
3. The desirability of linking ecumenically with broader faith, spirituality and mental health projects.

The post will be situated within the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship which currently has three priorities:

- Marriage and Family Life
- Care of Vulnerable and Marginalised People
- Life Issues

The post-holder will be formally line managed by Charles Wookey, Assistant General Secretary and Secretary to the Department and will benefit from the support and advice of a small reference group who will meet monthly in the first instance. Internal mentors and an external supervisor will also be provided.