

The Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health

# *Being Alongside*

Winter 2021/22

# Anti-social media

How even stars  
can't escape the  
malign effects of  
Facebook, Twitter,  
and Instagram

## **PLUS**

*The women who spoke up...  
about abuse at L'Arche*

*A Garden in Darkness...  
paintings and poems*

**Join us at the  
Being Alongside  
mental health  
conference on  
15<sup>th</sup> January**

**SAVE  
THE  
DATE!**



# Being Alongside Winter 2021/22

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## Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health

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We are a faith-inspired, voluntary association of individual subscribers and affiliated groups who recognise the importance of spiritual values and support in mental health.

We have a network of supporters throughout the United Kingdom. We welcome and encourage people whatever their faith or belief system.

We are primarily concerned to promote and encourage 'being alongside' people experiencing mental or emotional distress.

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### JUST KEEPING YOU POSTED

with developments at national committee level. Since April, when I took over as chair once again, we have been busy sorting out important if seemingly mundane stuff—re-arranging our banking arrangements from CCLA (Coif) and HSBC to Metrobank (having failed with applications to move to either NatWest or TSB), finalising data protection and safeguarding policies, consolidating our constitution, storing our history with London Metropolitan Archives, and preparing to register as a Foundation CIO (*see News, page 4*).

Projects in progress include the updating of our blue information leaflet which we hope will double up as a leaflet to go out electronically to most places of worship in the land, tidying up of our resource material available on the website and planning our conference at The Charterhouse in London on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022 (*see back page for details of speakers and how to book your place*).

In all this we are grateful for the expertise of our new administrator, Revd Lucy Roose and the input of past chairs, John Vallat, Suzanne Heneghan and Richard Allen. John has been acting as temporary treasurer but wishes to retire soon while still helping Lucy with accounting matters. Would any of you subscribers like to take on this job? Please let us know. Suzanne has led the information leaflet amendments, Richard has been involved with the archives and safeguarding. New committee members, Ben Wilson (our secretary), Stafford Cunningham and Geoff Shorter have also contributed substantially to ideas 'going forward'.

I am usually on holiday (!) but have tried to garner new subscribers and donations. There is a slip inserted in your magazine



**BA/APCMH chair  
Jamie Summers**

requesting payment of the subscription rate for 2022. Over previous years we haven't been efficient in sorting out regular income streams and funds have dwindled somewhat. Thank you for your continued support. I have vowed that my tenure as chairman will close with the same financial situation that I inherited in April and I will keep my word.

In closing, as we look ahead to a vibrant future for Being Alongside / APCMH I would like to express huge gratitude to three stalwarts of our association, Pam Freeman, Marlene Collins and Richard Allen, who recently retired from their roles as co-ordinator, administrator/treasurer, and chair, respectively. Their dedication and tireless efforts over the years are deeply appreciated. We hold them in our affections and wish them all the very best for the future.

## NEWS

# Charity structure to be modernised

### OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS

the trustees and committee of Being Alongside have continued to discuss how we can best update our

governing documents and reorganise the structure of the charity.

As Richard Trout notes in his appreciation of Richard Allen (*see page 8*), we have known for some time that our governing documents are outdated and internally inconsistent, and much effort during Richard Allen's tenure as chair was spent working on ways to resolve this.

The problems are practical as well as formal. Recently we encountered difficulties in opening a bank account offering decent customer service and internet banking; our current outdated governing documents may have proved an obstacle to banks accepting our application.

Meanwhile the way in which we are structured is more complex than it needs to be. We currently operate both as a registered charity and as a company limited by guarantee. This requires us to file audited accounts with two separate bodies, using up precious resources unnecessarily.

After careful discussion, the committee has decided to propose moving away from this dual structure and instead having a single charitable organisation.

The structure which the committee would like to move to is that of a



**CHARITY COMMISSION  
FOR ENGLAND AND WALES**

Foundation CIO—where CIO stands for charitable incorporated organisation—operating under an updated constitution.

It is important that Being Alongside continues to be a corporate body so that it has the legal capacity to do things in its own name, such as to employ paid staff, and being a Foundation CIO will enable this.

In order to approve the change of structure, an extraordinary general will be held via Zoom at 2pm on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> January 2022, at which the approximately 50 members of the current company will be asked to vote on a special resolution. A majority of 75% in favour of the committee's recommended change will be required if it is to go ahead.

Members will be contacted separately with more information about the EGM and about the thinking behind the proposal.

Ben Wilson, trustee and our honorary secretary, says: "We very much hope that members will approve these proposals, which we believe will simplify our administration and strengthen our governance, so that we can spend more of our efforts on delivering our charitable objectives."

# Farewell and thanks to Marlene

**We recently said goodbye to Marlene,** who for so many years had been both secretary and treasurer. What seems to be way back in the mists of time, Marlene came to our rescue when John Vallat became chair and was searching for someone to support him in the task of moving the Association forward.

Marlene took on both roles with thoroughness and reliability, but simply to say that does not do her justice. John remembered how immediately it felt as if "a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders". Quietly, reliably and unobtrusively Marlene not only maintained our records and meetings, but she also kept the committee abreast of their financial dealings and concerns. She also dealt with our communications and the phone helpline, going far

beyond what might have been expected of her with generosity and characteristic wisdom.

We are grateful for the sensitivity and humility with which she always carried out her work, not only within our association, but also at Southwark Cathedral. She has long been a member of their pastoral team, a valued helper in the cathedral's Robes Project for the homeless, and in the welcome given to the vulnerable and the troubled.

Marlene's lasting legacy will be the firm foundations and good order with which she hands over our affairs. But way beyond that, and despite her blushes (!) we need to express our gratitude for our faithful and wise friend, who we know will continue to give of herself.

## ...and hello to her replacement

**After an intensive recruitment process** earlier in the year, we were very pleased to welcome our new part-time administrator, Revd Lucy Roose, who has taken over the role which Marlene Collins discharged so efficiently for many years.

Lucy writes: "I have worked as an administrator and office manager for many years, my last role being with another small charity working with families of children with a terminal neuro-degenerative condition.

"I have spent the last three years training for ordination and was ordained into the Church of England as a deacon in early July. I will combine my work for Being Alongside with my part-time curacy in two villages in Hampshire.

"I have three children, two of whom have chronic health conditions which has given me a passion for ensuring mental health is as much a subject for discussion as physical health; that it is 'okay not to

be okay'; and that kindness, love and compassion towards one another is more important than anything.

"I am delighted to be able to follow my vocation in the Church at the same time as using my charity management skills to promote the importance of spiritual care for all those living with mental health challenges. I look forward to working with you and for you."



**Lucy Roose, our new administrator**

# Croydon APCMH holds it together

### **MOST OF OUR WELL-BEING GROUPS**

and the four drop-ins are not able to function at present, writes *Canon Andrew Wilson of Croydon APCMH*.

However.... Our creative writing group continues to meet on the phone (most of our members don't have online facilities). Each Tuesday our stalwart volunteers phone members with a theme and then later in the day phone them back to hear what they have managed to create. We hope to collect their offerings and publish another booklet of their work soon.



**Working in 'The Meadow' at St John's**

Speaking of online facilities and skills, several members of Croydon APCMH have joined a computer literacy course organised by our sister mental health support group 'The Hive' at my church, St John's Upper Norwood. Each week there is a free meal and once again a chance to join the community choir or share in working in our "Meadow" in the church grounds. We hope for a second computer course in the new year.

Every fortnight we continue our "Wander into Wellness", a woodland walk in a local nature reserve, with a

mindfulness aspect. This has proved very popular, as our members have very much missed making contact with their friends.

Each Friday my Spirituality Group has been meeting online throughout the pandemic. The advantage of the online meeting has been we have been able to keep contact with people who have been isolated, moved away, or live at a distance but have heard about us and made contact. One person travels all the way from Romford for our walk and is a

regular on our Friday screens! I am now attempting to go back to our base in St Mildred's for a joint online and face-to-face meeting, although people are hesitant to return.

We have lost our core funding as our borough has become bankrupt, and the mental health service and the voluntary sector groups have all suffered. We are now attempting to create a new Mental Health Alliance, and APCMH has now begun to work with a fundraiser with great experience to rebuild our financial resilience. We have just received some new Lottery funding and other donations. Our real concern now is trying to restart our drop-ins and groups safely. Our volunteer base needs refreshing, and many of our long term volunteers are hesitant about coming back at the moment. This is work in progress, and we are now advertising for a new post of part time volunteer organiser to complement the sterling work our part-time secretary Deborah has done through the pandemic.

# A tribute to Pam Freeman

**At the April AGM, after some 35 years of active involvement in our little charity,** Pam Freeman felt it was time to step down as co-ordinator and trustee, *writes Jamie Summers*. Already she is much missed.

I first met Pam at the September 1995 AGM of APCMI, as we were then known, and in the following November I attended a Guild of Health seminar at which the triumvirate of Pam, Jeremy Boutwood and John Vallat spoke inspiringly of their lives. (Pam was also a trustee of the Guild of Health, with which we later shared offices). It was then that I became entwined with the aims and ethos of APCMI. In 1996 Jeremy and Pam came to speak to us at a Sunday gathering of Hammersmith & Fulham MIND's Consumer Forum, for which I was the development worker, and I vividly recall Pam telling us how she found God in a field of wild flowers.

I joined the committee of the by now APCMH (mental health rather than illness) soon after, and joined Pam as an evening volunteer at the Norbury drop-in run by Mary Hillier (later Wright) for the Croydon branch. In the summer of 1996, a pivotal moment of my life, Pam, Jeremy and I listened to Jean Vanier speak at the Friends House on the Euston Road about his L'Arche setup. That autumn we held the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of APCMH at Southwark Cathedral and then held our AGM at All Saints Church in Battersea where our committee meets once again. Pam, with her APCMH hat on, joined me from Consumer Forum as founder members of the UK Federation for Smaller Mental Health Agencies started by Peter Thompson of the Matthew Trust.

Throughout her 35 years of caring for the marginalised both within her own and our charity families she has never faltered. Many would testify to her gentle support in personal matters let alone mental health dilemmas.

Thank you Pam for all you have done for Being Alongside / APCMH. May you flourish in your well-earned retirement.



# In appreciation of Richard Allen

**Richard Trout writes:** Long before he took on the role of chair of APCMH/Being Alongside in April 2018, Richard Allen, who sadly stood down from that role at this year's AGM on 24<sup>th</sup> April, had already made an enormous contribution to our organisation and all it has stood for.

Helen and I first met him in 2004 when he became the chair of APCMH Merton, where we were both volunteering as befrienders. The following year, at his invitation, we joined the committee, so got to know him better, not only as a wonderfully efficient administrator who set us on a more professional footing than it had been before, but also as a warm and attentive person who instilled the “pastoral care” into that branch of APCMH. This was nowhere more evident than in his leading of training courses for new volunteer befrienders, in which invaluable role he continued right through to 2011, four years after he stood down as branch chair.

Through all these eight years with Merton, Richard's full-time job was as a chaplain with the South West London & St George's NHS Mental Health Trust, based mainly at Springfield Hospital. It was there that I got to know him even better when, in 2007, I did a placement as part of my training as a Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary (SPA). And when it came time for me to choose a focus for my SPA pastoral ministry, it seemed an appropriate “joining of the dots” of my commitment both to the church which had sponsored my training, All Saints Battersea, and to the value of befriending as an aid to mental health, to try and set up a similar befriending scheme to Merton's in the neighbouring London Borough of Wandsworth, using that church as a base. Richard very generously agreed to support and assist “behind the scenes” as my mentor.

Thus came into being, after a period of planning and gestation, and with the support of Being Alongside/APCMH, of which it became an affiliate—Battersea Befriending Network. It was definitely a teamwork effort, for which thanks are due to (among others) to Helen, Pam Freeman, All Saints priest-in-charge Anand Asir and, first and foremost, our chair for its first five years, Phillipe Cotgreave de Rahman. But I can honestly say that it would not have got off the ground had it not been for Richard—not only for his continuing personal encouragement and support of me at times when things looked bleak and hopeless, but through his very practical contributions as committee member and his leading of the training of volunteer befrienders.

So, when Helen and I joined the national committee of Being Alongside in 2017, at a time when the committee was reviewing the organisation's aims and objectives and how it could try to express them in fresh initiatives—and the then chair, Gail Cotton, told us that she was only standing in for a year and asked us to consider who might be a suitable person to take things forward – my mind naturally turned to Richard...

Unbeknownst to me, Richard had by this time moved on to a much more responsible and demanding full-time job as overall manager of the Spiritual Care Service at the wide-ranging Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Trust. When I emailed him out of the blue, however, in early January 2018, to ask whether he might

be interested in considering the role, his answer, after an understandable pause for thought, was “a qualified yes”—his qualification being that he would need solid back-up from the rest of the committee. After an exploratory meeting with Gail and others, he confirmed his agreement to take it on, for a maximum of three years, and, at the AGM in April, to the delight of all, he was formally elected as chair.

But at the very first meeting of the new committee, after he had had a chance to get to grips with the paperwork—in particular the confusing two versions of the governing Articles of Association, dated respectively 2000 and 2001—it emerged that there had been serious breaches of the procedures laid down by those Articles, including his own appointment as chair, and that urgent action needed to be taken to rectify these. And when he pointed out that there were other serious issues of governance to be addressed, if we were properly to consider the future direction of the Association, I remember thinking with real pangs of guilt (for the first time, but not the last): “Oh no! what on earth have I let the poor man in for?”

**Helen Trout writes:** On the other hand, I wonder if the trustees and committee members knew what they, in turn, were letting themselves in for when they nominated Richard for chair! I think we all felt, at that point, that the association had become directionless, perhaps a bit tired, and needed someone to lead it who had the insight to see how it could rediscover or redirect its purpose.

But when the first thing Richard discovered was how out-of-date and apparently contradictory its governing documents were, and how in any event we had not been following their procedures correctly, he certainly presented us with a challenge: firstly, to understand what those documents said and how their inconsistencies could be reconciled; and then how our whole governance needed to be looked at afresh. It was by no means an easy task, but with great patience he guided and cajoled us through it.

That was only the start of his patient, inspirational leadership, as over the next two-and-a-half years he steered and supported us in catching the vision – and then grappling with the practicalities – of how the association could move forward. His organisational skills played a key part in this: breaking down the overall project into manageable areas of concern and action which different groups of trustees then looked at in detail. The resulting vision – in summary, to support local mental health and spiritual care initiatives, wherever they might be found, with advice, information and possible seed funding – was expressed eloquently by Richard at the 2020 AGM and enthusiastically endorsed.

I was myself privileged to work quite closely with Richard in my capacity as vice-chair and know what an incredible amount of hard and dedicated work he put in behind the scenes, often at no small cost to himself. I am also quite sure that without that dedication, and the inspiring lead he gave to us all, there is a real possibility that APCMH/Being Alongside would by now have closed down.

So thank you, Richard, for cajoling, supporting and encouraging us towards where we are today. We are now a stronger organisation, into which you helped to breathe new life. We hope you will stay in touch and wish you all the very best for your future.

## POETRY

### ***Food for Breakdown***

The breeze whistling through my hair:  
Not the weather but a frenetic tube not yet reached its destination.  
Chatter and crowds spill onto the pavement.  
Not a thought for each other,  
Just themselves rushing at a heart attack rate.

Invisible fumes and black cabs, red buses  
Pollute and jam the arteries of London.  
Tourists here today gone tomorrow  
Impressed with our history and decaying past  
Food for breakdown -

Mobile phones breeding at excessive rate -  
Yes it is convenient! But is it healthy and wise?  
Oh I love London town,  
Places to eat, people to meet, shows,  
The Sohos and the go go's

Travel to this land and devour  
while the poor  
Live out door to door.  
How did they ever get there at all?  
Down and out come and enjoy  
Food for breakdown.

***Karen***  
a member  
of APCMH  
Croydon

*A London scene  
by Marcus Linder,  
licence: CC-BY-NC*

# Anti-social media

Twitter, Instagram and Facebook claim to link and connect us, but too often result in isolation and depression. **Lowenna Waters** wonders whether we can push back

**BRITNEY SPEARS LEANS BACK, CLASPING HER BARE BREASTS IN HER HANDS** with chipped nail polish in her ornate, neo-classically inspired Los Angeles garden. In the background, the viewer can hear wind blowing through the trees, as her long blonde hair tumbles down her back. Her eyes are ringed with black kohl, as she tosses her head around like a prize pony. It's reminiscent of a Korean horror movie: the moment the lank-haired ghoul snaps to the forefront of the shot, shocking cinema audiences whose popcorn flies into their laps.

The video is just one of many posts that the troubled pop star shared to her Instagram account in the weeks and months before the eventual success of the Free Britney movement, the dedicated coalition of fans who so passionately supported her struggle to be removed from the conservatorship that was placed upon her since she had a widely publicised breakdown in 2007,

Fans were desperate for her to stop posting her erratic posts to her Instagram account, which seemed to get more and more bizarre as the days and weeks went on.

She was obviously in psychological pain: and the movement argued that these posts didn't help her and wouldn't help her freedom bid. These were, they said, just further examples of her instability. "We're trying to free you, boo!" one commented on another semi-naked picture. "We're worried about you!", "Give us a sign if you're ok!"

We're used to thinking of Instagram as a platform for perfectly curated, beautiful people with perfectly curated, beautiful lives. The tastefully decorated house, the beautiful children, the attractive and successful graphic-designer husband, the endless yoga sessions, lythe-tanned limbs, and glossy champagne-popping parties. Tick, tick, tick.

However, there's also a less widely publicised

*'Britney Spears - a life mosaic' by Charis Tsevis,  
licence: CC-BY-NC-ND*



*The more you swipe, comment, like and share, the less you're actually likely to call that friend and go for a coffee.*

dark side to these glossy squares of cocktails, foreign holidays and dinners out. There's a very strong link between a steep decline in mental health, and the use of social media, especially among Gen Zers (those born between 1997 and 2005—the post-millennial generation). But, it's also been shown to have had an impact on people from all generations, and walks of life. No one is immune.

In 2018, a British study tied social media use to decreased, disrupted and delayed sleep. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Social media has a reinforcing nature. Using it activates the brain's rewards system, by releasing dopamine, the brain's 'feel-good chemical'. The platforms are literally designed to be addictive, and are widely associated with anxiety, depression, and even physical illnesses.

The link between social media and depression has also now been widely established. It was designed to be a social tool. However, it often has the exact opposite on people's behaviour in the real world. The more you swipe, comment, like and share, the less you're actually likely to call that friend and go for a coffee. Genuine face-to-face interactions are strongly associated with a person's wellbeing. In addition to feeling left out, other users are prone to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, which stems from scrolling through pages and pages of other people's 'perfect lives' on social media platforms.

Another study revealed that Facebook use was linked to a greatly elevated sense of overall dissatisfaction in day-to-day life. Furthermore, it can lead to feelings of perceived social isolation, which is a strong link for psychological disorders, and even suicide. There's obviously a very strong relationship between the use of social media, and elevated emotions, mostly negative ones: these include jealousy, isolation, envy, and, as previously mentioned, depression.

And there are facts and figures to back all this up. In 2017, a group of psychologists published their findings of an investigation into Gen Z, mental health and social media use in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science* – which surveyed teenagers across socio-economic groups between 2010 and 2015. The number of teens feeling 'helpless and joyless' rose by 33%. Very, very sadly, the number of teen suicides also rose by a staggering 31%.

Then there's the physical repercussions. There's a direct link between an increased use of social media and a consideration of cosmetic procedures. A 2017 study by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported an increasing number of young people getting cosmetic procedures, rising from 17.2% in 2014 to 18.2% in 2017.

This link can also be seen with reality television programmes such as the

phenomenon that is Love Island. In 2019, contestant Mike Thalassitis's untimely death was ruled suicide by coroners, after he was found dead with a mixture of cocaine and alcohol in his system. In 2020, Sophie Gradon, who had appeared on the show, sadly ended her own life. In the following weeks, her partner, was also found dead. Then, in February 2020, Love Island host Caroline Flack also took her own life after a widely publicised trial in which she was accused of assault against her boyfriend.

So, what's to be done? While there's an argument for the creative power of the tool, there is, of course, a very, very dark side to it, too. Social media businesses are obviously some of the most powerful in the world, and their influence on things as far-reaching as election results to matrimony matches cannot be denied. While for some, such as the aforementioned Britney Spears, it might be their only mouthpiece and outlet, the damaging nature of the media platform cannot be denied.

*Facebook use was linked to a greatly elevated sense of overall dissatisfaction in day-to-day life*

The dark impact of social media was explored in the 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma*, which portrays a world in which tech platforms knowingly manipulate the weaknesses of human psychology, in order to gain our attention and, ultimately make us spend as much time on them as possible, therefore exposing us to reams and reams of targeted adverts.

Taking into account the already reduced social interactions that have become the norm in a post-Covid world, how do we tackle the link between social media and mental health issues, negative emotions and suicide rates? Self care is, as we all know, essential to maintaining mental stability. A 2018 study at the University of Pennsylvania suggested that self-monitoring can help change one's perception of social media. It looked at 143 undergraduates randomly assigned to two groups. The first group were asked to limit their social media use to 10 minutes per day, while the second group continued to use it as normal. The first group showed significant reductions in loneliness and depression during those times.

Setting limits on your social media usage on your mobile devices is one good way to combat over-use of the platforms, but there must be other ways. Perhaps it's time we rethink our entire relationship with social networks and online interactions, and as the thinker Slavoj Zizek reminds us, to also consider the false sense of freedom that we in western societies possess. Big Brother, or maybe Love Island, is watching you.



# A plea for openness and transparency

**This is an excerpt from “Reflections on suicide”, an essay by Simon Macnab inspired by a young man’s trek to Santiago de Compostela to raise funds for the charity James’ Place.**

I’ve tried to kill myself more times than I can count this year and have lived with the intense desire to die for months, due to intolerable levels of pain. There are some human conditions so terrible that having a revolver in hand is like winning the lottery.

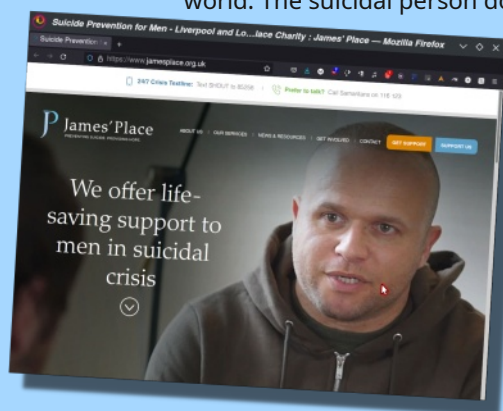
I believe that if we want to stop this terrible scourge where the number one cause of death among men under 45 is suicide, we need to normalise the desire to die in conversation; to remove the taboo and the shame around the subject which envelops the suicidal person in a terrible isolation spiral that leads to the final act.

The way to stop this is to make wanting to die and commit suicide as normal as going to the supermarket, openly shared across the breakfast table, amongst family and friends. It is just a feeling or a thought that passes through the mind and is as inconsequential as any other thought that passes cloud-like through our consciousness.

It is possible to nip the suicidal tendency in the bud if there is no shame in sharing that life is intolerable and I want to die. The epidemic of suicide is the reverse of the coin of society which has built a taboo around the subject of death.

The suicidal person gains control of the intolerable situation by gaining control of time. This is important because our deaths are generally unknown and unexpected, and we do not time our departure from this world. The suicidal person does control the time of their

departure, however, and gets tremendous power over others



**James' Place is a charity whose mission is to stop men dying by suicide. Working in Merseyside and London, it aims to make sure that help is available for men facing a suicidal crisis, and to support them to find hope for the future. [jamesplace.org.uk](http://jamesplace.org.uk)**

24/7 crisis textline: Text SHOUT to 85258  
Prefer to talk? Call Samaritans on 116 123

by so doing so. He or she can say whatever they like, but they know that at the appointed hour they'll be gone and won't be seen again the next day.

The suicidal person shares what I call the murderer's clock with the murderer. The only difference being the suicidal person is

murdering themselves as opposed to killing someone else. But that is a delusion because when we murder ourselves we also murder the relationship that we have with our loved ones and cause irreparable damage to the hearts of those who love us.

That is why the suicidal person who commits suicide is an angry person acting out irretrievably, and it is not unreasonable to be very angry with the one who commits suicide and abandons us to live in the world without them for the rest of our lives. The murderer who deprives the families of a loved one has the same impact on them. This is not to judge suicidal people or not to be compassionate; it is simply a measure of their desperation, that the suicidal person feels that there is no way out and that they need a total reboot by ending it all and abandoning the vehicle of their consciousness for the life raft of.....what?

I repeatedly and consistently lied to my sister that I wasn't going to try and kill myself while she was out doing the shopping or going for a walk with her partner, and my sister is the person I love the most in the world. My need was greater than my integrity. I have some partial understanding of the psychology of the suicidal person and the mechanism by which they spiral into isolation and from thoughts into deadly and irretrievable action.

I believe that this scourge will be ended, not only by bringing shameless openness and transparency to the subject—"Hey kids, anyone feeling suicidal today? Put up your hands", the teacher could say every day—but also by changing society's approach to the whole question of death and our time on Earth and that we have the right to leave it whenever we want.

In fact, every day that we live we choose to live; for example by not crashing the car into a tree or falling out of a high window. Being in a high building and not jumping out of the window is choosing to be alive, and to experience the love of our loved ones.

**After working in management, consulting and finance, Simon Macnab was drawn to writing. He is co-author with Dr Jean-Marc Mantel of *The Scent of Oneness*, a dialogue on non-dualism. He has also published *Here I stand*, a collection of poems. Both are available via [simonmacnab.com](http://simonmacnab.com)**

***It is possible to nip the suicidal tendency in the bud if there is no shame in sharing that life is intolerable***

# Reflections on *A Garden in Darkness*

by Canon Andrew Wilson

The first I heard of Michael and Ros' wonderful creativity, and the flood of images and ideas that pours from their pen and brush, was when our friend Alison, Ros' daughter, suggested that I might enjoy looking at the first edition of *A Garden in Darkness*, a series of poems and vignettes that contemplate the silent vigil of plants and creatures as Jesus struggled in Gethsemane.

I was searching for material for the small but faithful mental health 'Spirituality' group I lead each Friday in my role as chaplain to Croydon APCMH. Michael, with characteristic generosity, sent me the full images online, and we discovered "a never failing treasury". Their powerful words and pictures helped us to articulate, and share, our own struggles and longings, and left us with a thirst for more. Ros came to visit us, and we went to the London Centre for Spiritual Direction to see Michael's exhibition "The Hours", and we began to devour whatever came next!

And then, this year, in the sad wake of the pandemic, and our dear friend Alison's death, we were still struggling with Zoom to keep our fellowship intact. My thoughts turned to that first encounter with Michael and Ros' vision, and I thought we might revisit, in Michael and Ros' sure hands, that darkened territory of tears, Gethsemane, which by now had become familiar emotional and spiritual territory for us all. Now each poem and image seemed doubly relevant, uncovering our pain but also our endurance, anxiety but also hope.

As Easter drew near we looked at Ros' final poem "A fern rising in secret", captured in Michael's mindful art (*see opposite*), and the culmination of our time together. Once more it spoke to our depths, but then turned our faces forward with renewed confidence. Weeks before, Ros had asked if we could read it at Alison's requiem. "I didn't know when I wrote it all those years ago, that it would feel so expressive of my sense of Alison's death and rising to new life."

I am sure that this renewed collection will open up a rich store of meaning and hope for many others, as it has done for us, as we share together in our human struggles and victories.

**A Garden in Darkness** is a sequence of thirteen paintings by Michael Cook which were commissioned to be exhibited at the Chapter House at Southwell Minster during Lent 2011.

While the world sleeps, animals, plants, pools and rocks keep watch with a Christ-like figure who has withdrawn to a garden, offering solace, comfort, warning, and intimations of hope and renewal.

A Garden in Darkness is available in booklet form, with poems by Rosalind O'Melia giving voice to each aspect of the garden, via **hallowed-art.co.uk**

Michael's work, together with that of other regional artists, can be viewed at The Manger Gallery in Melbourne, Derbyshire, by appointment with Michael via [michaelrcook@btinternet.com](mailto:michaelrcook@btinternet.com) / 01332 862365



*A Fern Rising in Secret,  
by Michael Cook*

# The women who spoke out



Jean Vanier and his mentor  
Father Philippe Thomas

The shock of the revelations about manipulative and emotionally abusive behaviour by Jean Vanier, the charismatic founder of L'Arche, resounded worldwide in both religious and secular media in February 2020 when the organisation published the report of an independent enquiry. In the past few years *Being Alongside* has featured articles full of admiration for the work and person of Jean Vanier—admiration he certainly deserved for

his great achievements in the care of people with learning disabilities. But some readers have mentioned to us that they had not heard about Vanier's less admirable side until they read the short item in our Spring 2021 issue.

The L'Arche enquiry received credible and corroborating testimony, given “without hatred or desire for revenge”, from six women that Vanier had used his power over them to take advantage of them through different kinds of sexual behaviours. It is important to note that Vanier's behaviour was not peculiar to him, but part of a pattern. The enquiry investigated Vanier's relationship with Father Thomas Philippe, who had been his mentor since the 1950s and whom Vanier protected and later brought to L'Arche. It concluded that Vanier knew about Philippe's sexually inappropriate behaviour and shared his *modus operandi*. The church authorities had been alerted privately about Philippe's abuse of women as early as 1951, resulting in severe canonical sanction. But it wasn't until well into the current century that women who had kept silent for decades found the confidence to speak in public about their abuse at the hands of Philippe, eventually resulting in a canonical inquiry which listened to his victims and concluded that their allegations were substantiated. One of the first women to provide such testimony was Michèle-France Pesnau, who later featured in the widely acclaimed TV documentary *Religieuses Abusées, l'autre scandale de l'église*.

**In the following pages you can read the testimonies of Mary Donnelly and Cynthia Howard, who were also abused by Thomas Philippe at L'Arche. We are very grateful to them both for granting us permission to republish their testimonies here, and to the victim-support organisation AVREF on whose website ([avref.fr](http://avref.fr)) these and other women's testimonies were first published.**



Michèle-France Pesnau (right), who was abused by Thomas Philippe at L'Arche, telling her story in the 2019 documentary *Religieuses Abusées, l'autre scandale de l'église*



# Mary Donnelly's story

In 1973, when I was 27 years old and in search of a deeper experience of God, I went to live at L'Arche. I had a cousin who had lived at L'Arche for many years and who spoke highly of the contemplative spirituality of both Jean Vanier and Father Thomas Philippe.

During the two years I was at L'Arche, I sought spiritual direction from Father Thomas Philippe on a number of occasions. During spiritual direction I spoke with him about my concerns while sitting close to him with his arm around me. The time spent with him felt comforting, like a child held by a kind grandmother.

In 1975 I became fairly depressed. While living at L'Arche did connect me with a deeper sense of divine presence, it was also a very difficult life. There was a lack of intellectual stimulation and no outlet for my own creative expression. Such a lifestyle contributed to a sense of malaise that made me seek more deeply for a new life direction.

***“No”, I said to myself. “This can’t be what you think.”***

Looking for answers, I decided to undertake the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola with a young Jesuit priest. During this three-week retreat, I grew more and more distressed. I was not prepared for the intensity of the spiritual exercises. Between fasting and prolonged periods of prayer, I started having visionary experiences that threatened to overwhelm me. Scenes from my difficult childhood emerged as I meditated. Also, the day I had begun the retreat, a female assistant from Trosly committed suicide. This terrified me. Why wasn't God there to help her? What if God wasn't there for me either?

Along with my personal psychological anguish, I also projected many positive qualities onto the priest, as if he were my saviour. Unfortunately, he was unable to help me with the psychological aspects of my suffering.

I returned to Trosly after the retreat, feeling broken and despairing. I decided to see Père Thomas. As I was very vulnerable, I again felt comforted by him with his arm around mine as we talked. I believed he was a kind, old, saintly man. I shared with him my projections onto the young Jesuit, and how I yearned to have a beloved man in my life.

As I was sharing my story, I noticed that Thomas Philippe's left arm had gradually moved from my shoulder to my back, and his left hand was now on my left breast. I wasn't sure if this was what I thought it was. I told myself: “His hand must be there because my heart is hard, and he is trying to break up the stony feeling with his energy.”

Then I noticed that he had taken my right hand, which he had been holding warmly and kindly, and gently placed it in his lap, with his own right hand covering it. There was a gentle pushing down pressure. “No”, I said to myself. “This can't be what you think.”

## TESTIMONY

### *When I told him to get the hell out of there, his face transformed into that of a rejected teenager*

Finally, he turned to me and said: “Take Jesus in your arms” ... so I held him, thinking this very bizarre and unwelcome, but trying to understand these spiritual actions. I told myself that maybe he was showing me what it concretely feels like to hold Jesus, and he is being the representative for Jesus.

I left “spiritual direction” feeling very strange.

That night, I wasn’t feeling well and stayed in my room. I was alone in the dorm building. Père Thomas came to visit. When he came into the room, he sat down beside me on the bed. When he wanted to put his arm around me, I recoiled. A voice inside me said: “Dirty old man” ... It was like a light had come

on in my head. When I told him to get the hell out of there, his face transformed into that of a rejected teenager.

After this episode, I felt crazy. One of the supposedly holiest priests I’d ever met, the saintly priest behind L’Arche, had transformed into a dirty old man. It was like having God turn into the devil. There was no one to tell. No one would have believed me. I left L’Arche a few months later, barely able to function on my own.

When I got home to California, I collapsed. I couldn’t understand what had happened to me. I was unable to work, to drive a car. My mother took care of me, a 29-year-old young woman. I needed a lot of psychotherapeutic help, I was often overwhelmed by terrifying thoughts and feelings.

In my life today, I am a body-centered psychotherapist. After undergoing this “baptism by fire”, I strongly advocate the healing of psychological wounds as part of a spiritual practice. Père Thomas had a very developed spirituality but suffered from a serious and unhealed psychological disorder (compulsive sexual addiction). To heal sexual compulsion, there is specific information and psychological methodology.

**What Thomas Philippe did was completely opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is unhelpful to dismiss his actions as being the result of “sin” or labelling him a “sinner”. The origin of compulsion is often the result of trauma enacted on a young victim. Today, with good information about sexual compulsion disseminated throughout the religious world, we can find help and mercy for both predator and victim.**

# Cynthia Howard's story

**M**y first five or six years at L'Arche (in the '70s) were truly wonderful for me, in that they laid the foundations for much of what I have become. Especially, living at L'Arche brought the faith of my infant baptism to life.

Two women, whom I had met in Brittany, told me about L'Arche (especially about Father Thomas Philippe and Barbara, Jean Vanier's secretary) and encouraged me to go. They must have sensed that I was a little lost and hadn't found my way. (I had no faith, had never dealt with any disabled people, and I was also affected by the social-political turbulence of that period.)

Despite the violence and tension of my first L'Arche home, I was really happy there. I liked the team work, working hard with my hands, having simple lodgings. I had good house leaders, we had a great team spirit and I found lots of support and guidance for coping with life in the home, as well as encouragement of initiative.

I described myself at the time as an atheist, although I was more likely agnostic. But I certainly didn't come to L'Arche for the spiritual life. Despite a lack of interest in this dimension of L'Arche, I participated every evening in the prayer, for there I found peace after a day full of fatigue and tension.

After a first year where I was completely committed to life in the home, I felt Jesus tugging at my heart strings. I tried to ignore this, but it didn't work. In spring of '74 Father Thomas almost died in the hospital. After his convalescence, I ran into him one day in the garden. "I prayed for you while I was sick," he told me. A few weeks later, he invited me to come to see him at his office and bowled me over with his words: "Jesus loves you". As of then I began to seek He who loves me.

Life in the home continued to be essential, but I am grateful for Madame Vanier's friendship and guidance in my first steps of living faith (Jean Vanier's mother had come to live in Trosly), and then more and more frequently, daily mass in the L'Arche chapel. I also went to see Father Thomas regularly, and there learned about contemplative, silent prayer.

I asked to be confirmed after a year and a half at L'Arche. During all this time Père Thomas continued to be my spiritual director, and of course played an important role. I always sat close to him on his couch; he put his arm around my shoulder, but it was safe and comforting.

The early '70s saw the foundation of many new L'Arche communities around the world. "Assistants" who were going off to found in the Third World were particularly visible, even put on a pedestal. I was sensitive to the attention given to all these special people, especially by Jean Vanier.

A new phase began for me when I began to feel a call to live in celibacy for the Kingdom. Of course I shared this with Father Thomas, admitting that in choosing celibacy, giving up a partner would be more difficult than not having children. As I shared the emotional and sexual vulnerability that I felt, he changed his way

## TESTIMONY

of directing me spiritually. He told me that the Lord wanted to give me special mystical grace, and that I was to come for spiritual direction after 10.30 pm.

This was probably early 1979, and as of then he led me to his bed. Our meetings were always late at night. This “mystical prayer” became longer and longer, and ever more intimate. Lying on his bed, more and more undressed, we touched one another, kissed with our tongues, I rubbed his penis. I remember thinking, “This is spiritual, it should be happening differently...but how?” Nevertheless I continued going to see him at night: spiritual direction happened that way now.

***I remember thinking, “This is spiritual, it should be happening differently...but how?”***

This form of spiritual direction went on for a little over a year, until I went to visit my family and a friend in the States whom I had met at L’Arche. Since Father Thomas had tried to initiate the same sort of relationship with her, she of course guessed very quickly what was going on between us. Without hesitation she said “This isn’t from God. It isn’t a mystical grace”. After a first reaction of shock, I then felt relief and freedom. I came back to Trosly and never ever went to see him again.

I carried on at L’Arche for another 25-30 years, as if nothing had ever happened. I never knew how to talk about it. I buried this experience, of which I was ashamed, deep inside me. In the ‘80s an American priest, who had been informed by my friend of Father Thomas’s actions, asked me about it. I completely denied what she had told him. “She’s mistaken.” It has taken me more than 35 years, and much accompaniment, to get over feeling dirty and weak. Even today I can’t remember all that happened.

One of the reasons why I never said anything is that I didn’t know that what Père Thomas had done was immoral. (Back in the ‘80s). And even when I first heard of the accusations against him (in 2015), my first reaction was, firstly, I’m not going to expose myself and then, he’s been dead for a long time. And of course I hadn’t yet understood that he had many dozens of victims at L’Arche.

The silence of victims of spiritual abuse is often regarded with questioning, even suspicion. I hope to help you understand how awful it is to look at our story, and even more to speak of it. Yet today there are victims of Thomas Philippe who are wounded, fragile and alone with their pain. Just recently I heard of one woman who quivers with fear at the idea of being “found out”.

Of course I stayed in L’Arche all the many years after my wake-up in 1980. The last three years were difficult, so I went to see a psychologist regularly. At our last meeting, she said, “I don’t think the conflict you are feeling comes from your current situation. I think you have been working out an ancient conflict.” I have never forgotten her words, and now, over ten years later, wonder if this “ancient conflict” isn’t the sexual and spiritual abuse of Father Thomas. This question remains without an answer for the moment. Another person helped me to realise that Father Thomas groomed me for over five years before laying a hand on me, and that thought gives me icy shivers.

**Now that the Church so clearly condemns paedophilia, I remain in expectation of stronger and clearer guidelines concerning abuse of adults.**



## ***Recipe for a good life***

Follow this recipe for a good life.  
 It will help you through sorrow and strife.  
 Take a drop of concern, mix it with some caring.  
 Add it to some helpfulness and a lot of sharing.  
 Mix a lot of faith with a lot of hope,  
 And you will always be able to cope.  
 Stir in some generosity, give it to the needy,  
 And you will have no cause to be greedy.  
 Take a drop of kindness, add this too.  
 Always add this in everything you do.  
 Mix in some patience and also some calm.  
 This is healing, like a soothing balm.  
 Last but not least, add the best thing that there is.  
 We could never add too much of this.  
 Love is the best thing, in this recipe of living.  
 And this love is all for giving.  
 This recipe of life I hope you will follow.  
 So it will turn out right for you, and take away your sorrow.

***Bridget Pelling, 2004***  
*as recommended by Pam Freeman*

# Being Alongside conference 2022

**'Being Alongside the Anxious'**

**Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

**11am to 3pm**

**at The Charterhouse, London EC1**

Five minutes' walk from Farringdon tube 

**Speakers:**

**Philip Bacon**

An expert on the effects of mental health on families

**Martyn Percy**

Dean of Christ Church College, Oxford

**To book your free place call Jamie on 07730 464168  
or email [ajpsummers@gmail.com](mailto:ajpsummers@gmail.com)**

