

The Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health

Being Alongside

Winter 2022/23

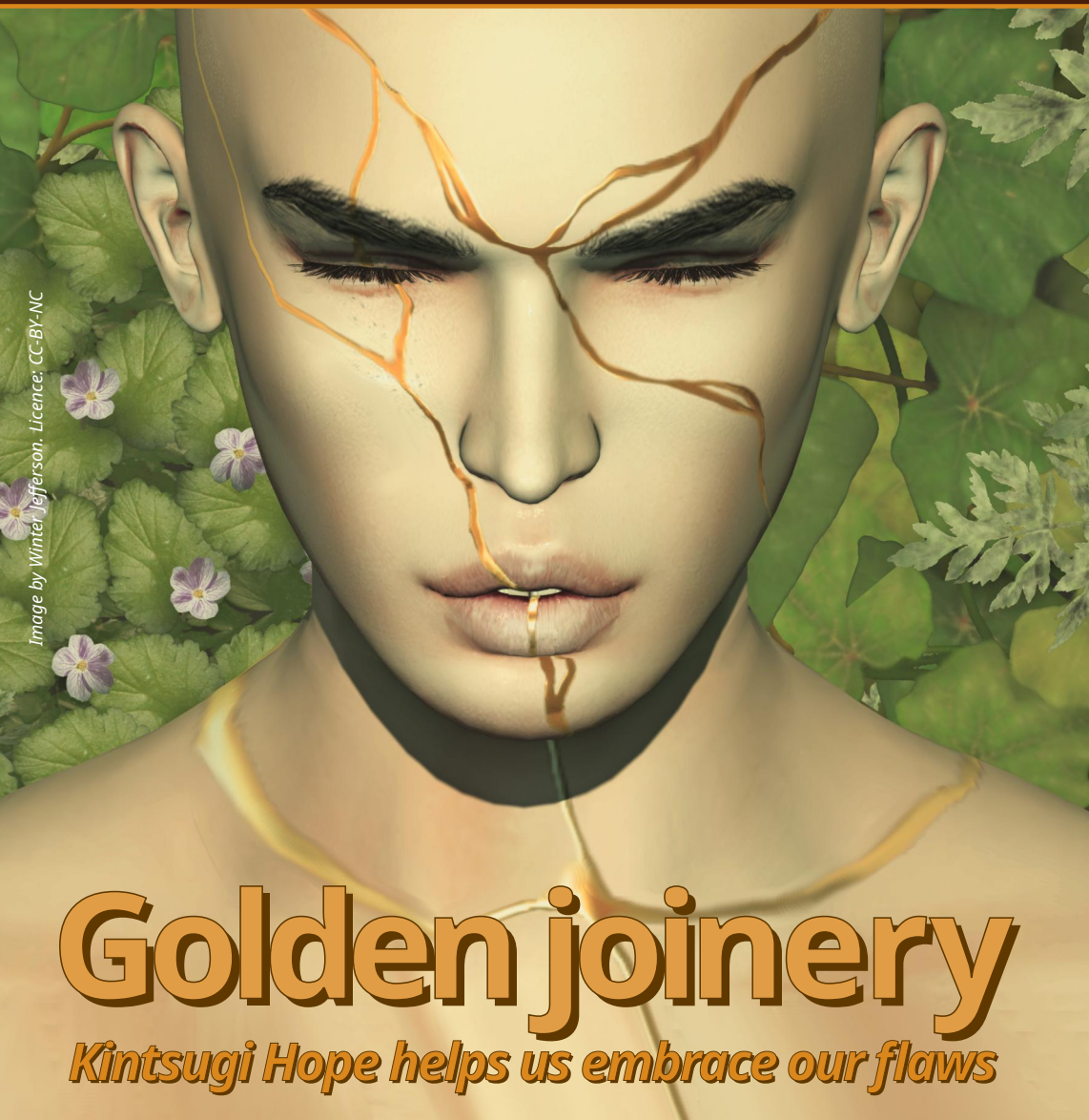


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Golden joinery

Kintsugi Hope helps us embrace our flaws

INSIDE: talks · tributes · testimony · inspiration

Being Alongside Winter 2022/23

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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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Our new Chair introduces himself and his vision for the charity


It is an honour to be writing as the new Chair of Being Alongside. I first became involved early in 2021, after seeing an advertisement seeking new committee members. If it were a political party, my appointment as Chair this summer would no doubt be labelled a “meteoric rise” – but of course, in our small charity serving as titular Chair is really about co-ordinating the joint efforts of our dedicated group of trustees—and perhaps a result of not being quick enough to think of an excuse not to serve!

I live and worship in South Croydon, having moved here with my wife in 2020. I am a civil servant specialising in external communications, and in my career so far have worked in various press office roles including at the Church of England's national offices and the UK Supreme Court. I hope that my experience in communications and marketing will be of service to the charity, as well as my knowledge of the national Churches and my first-hand

experience of caring for those with mental health difficulties.

I want to use this opportunity to briefly set out my thinking on the next steps for Being Alongside, which we are now well placed to take given our recent conversion to a more agile set-up in the form of a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. As a first step, the trustees will meet for an ‘away day’ at St Columba's House in Woking, to think about our future strategy and how best to deliver our charitable objectives.

Thankfully, awareness of mental health issues has increased substantially in recent years among the general population and faith groups. Of course, that's not to say stigma has gone away completely or that there is not more to be done to ensure those facing mental health difficulties are welcomed as valued members of worshipping communities; or to ensure that the healthcare sector fully embraces the importance of the spiritual dimension of care. But we do need to recognise—and



Our new chair
Ben Wilson

WELCOME



Ben Wilson with administrator Lucy Roose and former chair Jamie Summers

indeed celebrate—that things are very different than 20 years ago, and certainly from 35 years ago when the Lindon family established the organisation.

This means our own priorities as an organisation need to evolve. While I don't want to pre-empt the trustees' discussions, I think Being Alongside will serve best by encouraging locally organised support groups and services, sharing good practice and learning between such networks, rather than trying to run user-facing services directly from the national body. We need to understand better what dioceses and other regional faith bodies are already doing and what specialist input and support they would appreciate to in turn help local churches deliver frontline support. We also need to discern how we can best support the national network of mental health chaplains working in NHS settings.

But we won't be able to help fill these gaps without a sustainable model for securing the charity's future. At present, we have relatively healthy reserves, though it is salutary to note that the cost of

publishing this excellent magazine and the services of our wonderful administrator far outstrip our income from membership subscriptions (around £500 per year at present). So for those who are comfortable doing so, I would encourage you to set up a standing order using our new bank details (see Lucy's giving update on page 9), and to pass on copies of this magazine to others you know who might be interested in supporting our work.

More widely, our best strategy—especially when faced with a societal trend which sees people less keen to commit to memberships of organisations—is to show our continuing value in how we deliver our charitable objectives. By proving our worth in the needs we help address, I know we will attract the support we need to continue for many years into the future.

I am looking forward to working with my fellow trustees, and all who support our aims, to ensure this happens. I hope to meet you soon and if anything in this magazine sparks any ideas of how Being Alongside can best fulfil its mission, do drop me or Lucy a line.

Our year of talking and listening

Being Alongside promoted two day-long conferences in 2022, at which members and supporters gathered to hear inspirational speakers and meet together in person again after the isolation of the pandemic.

The first conference, which took place on 15th January, explored the relationship between anxiety, depression and spirituality.

The second, held on 21st May, delved into questions of diversity and inclusion in relation to faith and mental health.

We were honoured by the contribution of five inspirational speakers.

In January we welcomed Philip Bacon, Brother of The Charterhouse and former psychotherapist; John Cullen,

homelessness outreach worker and chaplain of Nazareth House, Hammersmith; and Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. Philip Bacon introduced us to different approaches to the “delicate and difficult” task of exploring spiritual wellbeing in a clinical setting, and recounted his experiences of encouraging patients to overcome a natural anxiety to discuss questions of faith. (*You can find a transcription of his talk on page 16. Ed.*) John Cullen talked about the power of listening attentively to those suffering from anxiety, and the imperative for all of religious faith to help those experiencing mental health difficulties see the potential of the future. Martyn Percy spoke of the lessons to be



CONFERENCES REPORT



Canon Ann Clark spoke of marginalisation and its impact on mental health

drawn from some of the Gospel stories about Jesus' healing miracles: His unconditional standing with the unloved and oppressed.

At the May conference we welcomed Canon Ann Clarke, Preacher at The Charterhouse; and Revd Joseph Fernandez, the Diocese of London's lead chaplain for Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller communities. Canon Clarke talked about the history of marginalisation of the LGBT community by the Church, and the impact of this stigma on mental health. Revd Fernandez outlined some of the experiences of Gypsy and Traveller people in the UK, their historic relationship with mainstream Churches, and the health disparities faced by these groups. The day concluded with a session in which attendees discussed racial justice, guided by the UK Minority Ethnic Mental Health Toolkit produced by the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England.

Both conferences were held in the beautiful, peaceful surroundings of The Charterhouse in central London. The trustees would like to express their gratitude to the team at The

Charterhouse for their hospitality in granting our use of such fantastic facilities for the day.

We recorded all of the talks, and they are available for you to listen to at your convenience on our website at **beingalongside.org.uk/news**

The conferences also gave us the chance for updates from our branches and national committee, notably passing on the news that the Charity Commission has approved our application to become a CIO, which will reduce administrative burdens and allow us to focus on delivering our core objectives. We also had the chance to pay tribute to Jamie Summers (see p7) and Canon Andrew Wilson (see p8); to welcome Being Alongside Chair Ben Wilson; and to appoint committee support members who will help the trustees in leading the work of the charity, alongside Treasurer John Vallat.

The national committee hopes to arrange similar events in future, and would welcome your ideas on topics that could be covered or speakers to invite. Please get in touch!



Revd Joseph Fernandez asked us to consider the experiences of Gypsy and Traveller people

Thank you Jamie

Ben Wilson marks his predecessor's contribution

Writing a tribute to Jamie's recent contribution to the work of Being Alongside is a challenge. Partly because there is far too much to cover, in terms of the dedication and passion that Jamie brings to his support for the charity; and partly because one suspects this is far from the end of the story.

Jamie was first co-opted onto the national committee at the end of 1995, joining formally in 1996. He served for three years before returning in 2014 for another three years, and once again in 2020. These periods would alone be enough to mark Jamie out as one of Being Alongside's most loyal office holders, but in between these times he remained an active supporter, representing the organisation at events and continuing to recruit supporters wherever he went.

I have only worked directly with Jamie for 18 months, but one only has to meet Jamie once to see his commitment to supporting those suffering from mental health problems. His deep well of compassion is born from personal experience—movingly and unflinchingly described in his book, *Slightly Bonkers Jamie* (Tandem publishing, 2020)—and his natural sense of justice. This drives Jamie's enthusiasm for promoting the charity's mission and has informed his continuing zeal to ensure we are making a difference where it matters. Jamie's commissioning skills have helped ensure this magazine has continued as a core part of the charity's ambassadorial work, and his natural skill at networking has attracted a number of invaluable contributions over the years.

Jamie recently oversaw our transition to become a charitable incorporated organisation. He also led with Suzanne Heneghan on producing our beautifully illustrated new promotional leaflet. And while he will not thank me for drawing attention to it, Jamie has also worked quietly to bolster our funds through intensive personal efforts to secure donations from friends and contacts, and we are very much in his debt for the position in which he has left the charity's financial accounts as a result.

The trustees are very grateful for Jamie's recent service as Chair, steering us through much of the difficult Covid-19 period with vision and aplomb. We know that this won't be the end of Jamie's relationship with the charity – not least through his continuing work as commissioning editor of this magazine. But at this juncture he deserves not just some reprieve from 'frontline duties', but also due credit for his immeasurable contribution to the charity over the last 27 years. Thank you Jamie, for your commitment and all you do to "be alongside" those who need it.



Jamie Summers

Thank you Andrew

Ben Wilson writes: At our recent AGM, Canon Andrew Wilson stepped down reluctantly from the national committee to concentrate his efforts on the running of Croydon APCMH. His decision was characteristic of someone who has been dedicated to both the purposes and principle of 'being alongside', both in his local setting and in serving the national body. Andrew was chaplain at Warlingham Park



Andrew Wilson

Hospital (a psychiatric hospital) from 1989 until its closure in 1998 when, as part of the Maudsley spiritual and pastoral care team, he took on a similar role at Bethlem Royal Hospital. Following his appointment at Warlingham Park, he also became involved in community mental health. Long-stay patients were being resettled into the community and Andrew recognised the need for ongoing support for them as well as for support for those already living outside the hospital setting. Before the end of 1989, Andrew became one of the main driving forces in Croydon APCMH.

Though Croydon has been his main focus, Andrew has also made a huge contribution at the national level. He was part of the planning and running of the first national volunteer training course. He has spoken at conferences and played an active role in discerning our future direction, particularly in the discussions led by Gail Cotton around five years ago. Perhaps most importantly, he has always been there with a listening ear and words of wisdom and support

for anyone who asked for it. Andrew's natural gifts have been offered generously by him for over 30 years in what continues to be a deeply significant contribution to our organisation, both locally and nationally. All who have had the privilege to meet Andrew will share in our thanks to him for all he has offered the national committee and all he continues to do for Croydon APCMH.

Andrew adds: *"The devastating effect of the pandemic together with the collapse of any funding from our local authority means that we are spending a great deal of energy in trying to re-establish, fund, and sustain our local APCMH activities; rebuilding our volunteer base, and planning a refreshed creative and well-being programme, and opening up at least two drop-ins once more. One local initiative has been to work with Citizens UK as we question the candidates for Mayor. I am part of the "Mental Health and Isolation" working party. I will of course continue to support the vital work we are all involved in. I will ensure that Croydon APCMH is ready to share in your plans for the future, but now I feel that my energies need to be focussed more locally. I wish you Godspeed for the future, and thank you for your companionship on the road."*

Our administrator Lucy Roose gives an important update on how you can support our work



May we take this opportunity to thank all our regular givers for their donations to the work of Being Alongside. They are hugely appreciated and help us to continue to support those facing mental health challenges.

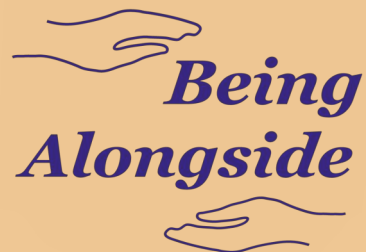
If you are a regular giver, please note that we have recently changed our bank account so you will need to amend the details with your bank for your Standing Order. Our new bank details are as follows:

Bank:	CAF Bank
Name of Account:	"Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health (APCMH)" or "Being Alongside"
Sort Code:	40-52-40
Account Number:	00035233

If you would like to become a regular giver, we would be delighted!

You can set up a Standing Order with your own bank using these details. Please then contact me to request a Gift Aid Declaration if you are a taxpayer as this allows us to receive an additional 25p from the government for each £1 you donate.

Lucy Roose, Charity Administrator
admin@beingalongside.org.uk
Tel: 020 3397 2497 and choose option 1



Memories of Brother Adrian?

Michael Meekums has been in touch to let us know that his uncle, **Brother Adrian Tate**, died in 2021. In the early years of the association Brother Adrian held the posts of administrator, secretary and treasurer of APCMI — tasks which our September 1993 newsletter says he coped with manfully, adding that “it has been due to his perseverance that we arrived at the last A.G.M. intact.” *(We know this thanks to the three decades’ worth of our newsletters and magazines which have been scanned and published on our website. Ed.)*

He was also active in the Hastings and Rother branch of MIND, and in his local church, Christ Church St Leonard’s in East Sussex.

We give thanks for Brother Adrian’s dedication to our association, and for his life.

Do you have memories of Adrian that you would like to share? Please let us know.

Christ in glory—the east window of Christ Church St Leonard’s, where Brother Adrian Tate worked and worshipped. Photo by Jules and Jenny, licence: CC-BY-2.0

In the first of a series looking at other organisations with similar aims to ours, Trevor Parsons finds out about **Kintsugi Hope**, a charity seeding wellbeing groups throughout the UK



KINTSUGI HOPE WAS FOUNDED BY DIANE AND PATRICK REGAN IN THE FALLOUT OF A SERIES OF EVENTS THAT TOOK THEM TO THE BRINK PHYSICALLY, MENTALLY, EMOTIONALLY AND SPIRITUALLY.

Patrick's background was in youth work. As a youth worker in 1996, in response to a stabbing in a school playground, Patrick was invited by the head teacher to come into the school, work with their students and teachers, and help with difficult behavioural issues. From these beginnings, Patrick built up a charity called XLP (the eXcel Project) which operates in inner-London boroughs, improving the opportunities of 4,000 young people each year through education, mentoring, employability, community youth work, sports and the arts.

With such a record of achievement, and a background of successful Christian leadership more broadly, Patrick felt as if he should be able to manage even when, around 2008, bad things kept happening—when their children faced serious health problems; when Diane had a miscarriage; when his dad got cancer; when Patrick faced a series of excruciating operations. He had always been a fixer, someone who made things happen. But instead, he questioned his faith, suffering with anxiety and depression. Diane and Patrick felt alone in their struggle.

In this moment of vulnerability, Patrick went public. Ever the passionate communicator, he launched a website and started to write about how he felt. Speaking on the Youthscape podcast, he recalled: "Before I went into hospital I wrote this blog called *When Faith Gets Shaken*, in which I was totally honest and real. I think people really appreciated seeing a Christian being so honest and I think honesty breeds more honesty. And I've seen it really connect with people, people of faith and no faith actually. From that I met the most incredible and inspirational people."



WHO ELSE?

His blog grew into a book, also called *When Faith Gets Shaken*, and in 2015 he toured to country talking to churches about his experiences. Reflecting on the testing times he had been through and was still going through, especially in moments where it felt as if God had deserted him, Patrick admitted to the congregation of Ebenezer Church Bristol that “in the end I just had to remember that God is with us, whether we feel it or not. And the key is this, that God’s silence doesn’t mean God’s absence.”

In 2017 his youth charity XLP had reached its 21st birthday, and Patrick says he felt God saying that it was time for him to let go of it. “I resisted that,” he told Youthscape, “because founders don’t want to let go.”

But Patrick did, and that release from his past—combined with what he had learned through his experience of brokenness and helplessness, and the sharing of that with others—provided the impetus to found a new charity called **Kintsugi Hope**.

Kintsugi (“golden joinery”) is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. As a philosophy, it treats breakage and

repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.

“They mix gold in the glue and make a feature of the cracks”

“If we break a bowl,” Patrick explained, “we tend to get the superglue out and try to mend it and hide the cracks. But in Kintsugi they mix gold in the glue and make a feature

of the cracks. Arguably that makes it more beautiful than it was to begin with. It certainly makes it unique. And I think the whole thing was that this tells us that our scars are not there to be hidden. Our scars are evidence that healing has taken place.”

WELLBEING GROUPS

Kintsugi Hope’s central offering is a multi-week course exploring topics around mental and emotional health. Led by volunteer leaders trained by Kintsugi Hope, the course invites interested people to gather in local groups—“wellbeing groups” as Kintsugi Hope refers to them—in schools, prisons, workplaces, and most often in churches.

What might set this apart from some of Being Alongside’s local initiatives, such as our classic drop-in model, is the more directed nature of Kintsugi Hope’s wellbeing groups. While the course exists in shorter, more concentrated versions for youth and students, the adult course is delivered over a full 12 weeks with a different theme each week: Honesty, Anxiety, Depression, Shame, Anger, Disappointment and Loss,



Perfectionism, Forgiveness, Self-acceptance, Healthy Relationships, Resilience, and Review.

Of the underlying approach, Patrick says: "I guess it's about sharing in your common humanity. Instead of rushing into our communities and proclaiming that Jesus is the answer—which he *is* but...!—it's saying this is what has happened to me. I'm broken, you're broken, let's share and go on a journey together."



MENTAL HEALTH FRIENDLY CHURCHES

Another Kintsugi Hope initiative that has caught people's imagination over the past year is its Mental Health Friendly Church project. In the summer of 2020, Patrick and Diane gathered online with other Christian leaders from across the country to talk about the culture shift that might be needed within our churches and communities in the way we view mental health.

They partnered with Christian think tank Theos to conduct qualitative research with church leaders and a quantitative study of 1,000 regular churchgoers. The findings were published in early 2022, and it's worth reading the executive summary on the Kintsugi Hope website. They found that 91% of church leaders interviewed had received no training at all on mental health; and that 56% of interviewees said their church rarely or never spoke about mental health. But they also pointed to findings by the National Churches Trust which estimates that UK churches' current activities on mental health support cost £26.9 million a year, and would cost the government anything from £20 million to £116 million to replace.

The main practical outcome so far is that Kintsugi Hope is offering one-day training for small group leaders, pastoral workers, lay leaders and anyone involved in caring or support roles in their church, with aims including understanding our emotions and exploring a robust theology of mental health; understanding the mental health continuum; exploring how the church can eradicate stigma; and encouraging compassion and a gentle presence in our churches and communities.

Patrick Regan is currently touring around the country with an evening of live music and talks exploring themes from his new book *Bouncing Forwards* including resilience, mental wellbeing and thriving through life's challenges.

With such energetic leadership, it's easy to see why Kintsugi Hope has grown so fast and had such an effect already.

Do visit their website at kintsugihope.com to find out more and to get involved. A great way to get a flavour of their work is through listening to the Kintsugi Hope podcast. Recommended.



What is mental illness like to Everyman, asks **Michael Rothwell**?

How does mental illness feel? Does it make itself aware to the person suffering or to the outsider looking afar to describe it with cold objectivity?

I've had a mental health problem, or issue, but more correctly, illness, since August 1989 when I was first diagnosed. It was the worst of all worlds as the label quite often spelt rejection in the form of no job offers, no postgraduate opportunities; and very little voluntary work. Paranoid schizophrenia is a terrible diagnosis and makes the unaware scared of an individual. And would you give a job to someone with a label like that?

For 32 years I've depended on welfare benefits. I've taken medication for the duration aside from three months during 1993. It was a painful disaster and nearly cost me my liberty. I was sectioned in a secure unit at a London hospital. Nothing else mattered at the time other than a need for mental peace or spiritual peace. A soul in isolation or a soul damaged beyond repair? I have a faith but that swings from total immersion to nightmares of reality and dysfunction.

It's no fun being seen like a person from a Hitchcock film—stabbing with knives wasn't a career option. I once had a great social worker who found me housing in Balham, London, and later was murdered via a knife attack from the new people of the NHS, the customer or the user. I won't forget Jenny Morrison. The ultimate price in the public service. I recently, during the age of austerity, lost my community psychiatric nurse—a service I was once told would always be open to me. It isn't now, and I will probably never return to the old days of a CPN managing my community needs.

The closest description or narrative to paranoid schizophrenia as a story or characterisation is Don Quixote by de Cervantes (1547-1616). It's a tremendous revelation of how illness operates, how it functions and how it faces the various forms of reality. That 'reality' could be seen as being 'normal'; a normal reality is something everybody would agree to, a consensus of perception. Don Quixote dispels that connection and surges forth in excitement and illness. The play Woyzeck is an early case of a dramatised modern psychosis. The character at the centre is suffering without medication and ends life by murdering his wife for the allegation of adultery. Georg Büchner (1813-1837) is a very perceptive playwright. His prose piece Lenz is worth a read too.

The dark side of mental illness is when an individual might believe another Shoah has begun and will soon have to take a 'shower of death'. It is when a dead composer might have conversations with Mozart, as in the novel Mozart And The Wolf Gang by Anthony Burgess (1917-1993). Also a conversation between Mozart and a man with mental illness. Ideas grip then dissipate, thoughts surge, swell and crash. The mind explodes itself into an element which has fused.

My illness is incurable. Medication maintains my ability to stay out of hospital (thousands of psychiatric beds have been lost due to successive government reforms.) Demand is exceptionally high and some cases need urgent attention but sometimes that urgency is met by a person having to wait 18 months or so. There's a rush to get well but an inability to succeed in finding solutions as quickly as desired.

I've worked in forensic psychiatry helping patients to write a newsletter and help in teaching some basics of English. (I have since qualified in teaching English to speakers of other languages). The mentally ill rapist or murderer has a lot to think about; even so having the knowledge that they've committed a crime, but not by themselves. Which is why reality is always important to the mentally ill. It is worth remembering that wellness is both individual and societal. I've had significant bouts of thought disorder which throw all stability into confusion and labyrinthine thought processes. In my first breakdown I re-lived some films I'd watched; and heard family calling my name. I followed misrepresented signifiers of nature and environment; confusing birds as route makers when walking the open roads of Essex.

Does medication work? To me, yes, on the whole, it's effective; one consultant psychiatrist prescribed an anti-depressant with a neuroleptic anti-psychotic and didn't read the British National Formulary as in this it states such a

combination can cause 'death'. I've only been mis-prescribed one other time and that was when the wrong medication was given to me when I was a patient on a ward. Medication has had a terrible effect on my metabolism though. When younger I would burn off great amounts due to a high metabolism. Medication has reversed this and now, it puts weight on my body and I try to exercise—meeting WHO weekly targets—but still it's very difficult to burn off extra fats.

Some ramifications spell out social difficulty and intellectual distance. It's difficult to feel safe in the wider environment. I am not always able to walk somewhere without another person helping me. New places worry me whenever I'm by myself. The straightjacket of medication also loosens that traditional straightjacket in the sense that with more effort social norms and social mores can be met, can be achieved. Illness isn't fun. Medication takes away the comfort of a balanced mind. It adds to the being in a way that helps, but, during the bad days a person with mental illness can be catatonic. As well as increasing bodily weight, it causes sexual dysfunction, affects cognitive skills, sometimes causes physical spasms, creates spells of delusion and becomes lost in a mental network, itself dysfunctional.

But without adequate medication I wouldn't be able to function in society and would probably have to live in the equivalent of a Victorian asylum, for life. I can read books, though misreading occurs—as a classic example I confuse 'field' for 'friend'. I can observe perhaps just to keep still and sometimes lose information when processing it. Mental illness is no fun. Medication provides social and physical freedoms. Mental freedom is the big prize. My illness is for life.

***“Mental freedom
is the big prize”***

CONFERENCE TALK

Philip Bacon spoke at our January conference about the “delicate and difficult” task of exploring spiritual wellbeing in a clinical setting

My name is Philip Bacon. I am a brother of Charterhouse, and a member of the Benedictine order, and allowed to speak as much as I like! I'm not a community member of the Benedictines—never have been—but rather I am a lay member. I came to Charterhouse to go into semi-retirement and then full retirement nine years ago. It's a wonderful place.

The relationship between mental health and spiritual wellbeing is a subject which is very close to my heart because for many years I worked as a psychotherapist, always in psychiatric hospitals rather than as a private practitioner. The one I spent most of the time in was The Priory in Roehampton. I don't wish to cast aspersions because they gave me a job and were good to me for eight or nine years, but the thing about The Priory was that they had 12 resident psychiatrists, which I think is probably 11 too many! Two or three of them I got on with extremely well, and they understood where I was coming from when I was trying to get them to understand the importance of spiritual wellbeing as well as mental and physical. The others would reply with a prescription, and I tended to find that it was difficult to get across to them, probably because of their training. And so I'm delighted to find that an organisation like Being Alongside exists, although I wish I had known about it when I was working in that arena.



Philip Bacon speaking at our January conference

The difficulty that any of us can experience when introducing anything that has a religious flavour into mental health training or treatment can be illustrated by a Peanuts cartoon. Charlie Brown's friend Linus comes up to his sister Lucy, who is notoriously quite bad tempered, and asks her: "Do you pray?" Lucy replies: "That's kind of a personal question, isn't it? Are you trying to start an argument?" And Linus says to himself: "Charlie Brown was right. Religion is a very touchy subject."

If you go to work in a place like The Priory, or any of the psychiatric hospitals I worked in, and you present yourself as a member of a religious order, a committed Christian, and you say to them: "Of course, I leave that at the door when I go in and talk to the patients", most of the people you then talk to don't believe you. So I got into the habit of not telling people. It seemed easier that way. And then sometimes they would find out. They would find out that I was a member of the Benedictine order, that I did go to church, even at one stage that I was a lay member of chapter at Canterbury. So you can't get much more involved than that. And the reactions of the patients were very interesting. Because some of them would be cross that I hadn't told them, because they wanted to engage at that level. Most of them would be indifferent, and maybe ask a few questions. And some of them would be cross that I hadn't told them because they didn't want to engage at that level, and they felt that they were in danger of being somehow suborned subliminally without even realising what was happening. Interestingly, in people who aren't involved in religion—and I don't think it makes much difference which religion in this respect—there is often a reaction that: "You are going to try to convert me against my will." And actually you can't convert anyone against their will, and that is what I would say to them.

One of the hospitals I worked in asked me to set up a spiritual counselling group for patients. But they wanted everyone to be included, so once a week our therapy group just became the spiritual counselling group. Not surprisingly some people would sit there trying to block it as much as possible. People are entitled to do that, but it raises an interesting question about why they are so frightened of it. I suspect it is to do with the subject that we are here to talk about, which is anxiety and depression, and its relationship to your spiritual wellbeing.

Every bookshop and library has a "body, mind and spirit" section. But what does that spirit bit actually mean? We know about body. You break a leg, you know what's happened to you. There's a diagnosis, a treatment and a prognosis. We know more today about the mind than we ever have, though there are still large areas we don't know about. But we have an idea as to how it functions and what can be done when it's not functioning as it should. But when it comes to spirit, we go from the objective diagnosis to the subjective interpretation. There's no objective way of diagnosing when someone is troubled in spirit. It depends what they mean by it, and so the argument about being person-related, person-centred in your therapy

CONFERENCE TALK

“The wisest people I’ve found working in mental health are the ones who are prepared to say: ‘I don’t know.’”

becomes all important. If you’re not centred on them, there is no way that you can bridge the gap with them in terms of any kind of spiritual counselling, because either they’re not going to know what you are talking about or they’re going to be thoroughly opposed to what you’re talking about.

I remember one person who started off in this spiritual counselling group being extremely opposed, almost aggressive. He told me he was a scientist and therefore didn’t believe in the hereafter, only what he could see

and prove and that I wasn’t going to convince him. I insisted that I wasn’t there to convert him, so he relaxed a little. But he was still keeping an eye on me to see if at some point I or some of the other patients would try to bring it in. One day we started talking about astronomy. It so happens that I have a brother who is an astronomer and astrophysicist. He talks about it in wonderful ways, and he describes himself as a scientist, but we always get to a point where we leave science behind. We had a conversation once where he explained to me about black holes, which are difficult enough to understand, and then dark matter, which is even harder to understand. And then things that he said which are phenomena which we can’t explain. And I asked what they call those. And he said: “Oh, we call them singularities.” So I said: “OK. Well the only singularity I know about is God.” And he laughed and said: “Well I suppose that’s the point at which we join our philosophies together.” The answer is that we don’t know. The wisest people I’ve found working in mental health are the ones who are prepared to say: “I don’t know.”

It’s so difficult and so painful when a patient is ill and they ask how long is it going to take to get better. And you have to say: “I don’t know. If it were a broken leg I could tell you six weeks. With mental health I can’t. It’s going to be up to you and us working together, and it’s going to take as long as it takes.” It depends very often on what spiritual equipment that person has, or is prepared to have, even if that might not necessarily mean any kind of belief system.

I really do believe that spirit is totally linked to body and mind. If you are anxious, you notice things happen to your body. The anxiety can come from your mind. Let’s face it, we’ve got a lot to be anxious about right now. We’ve got climate change, Covid, terrorism, you name it. We’ve got lots of things that are outside our control, which really is the definition of what makes something create anxiety. If I can control it, I’m much less likely to be anxious about it. But when I know that it’s outside my control, then my

anxiety levels go up, and when those levels go up, things happen to my body. Breathlessness, panic attacks if things are extreme. But even if it's not extreme, then that feeling of disquiet that you have to live with, which for some people seems to be worse in the morning. And if it gets bad, what happens? It create more anxiety in the mind. So body and mind have this close link. Sometimes it's really hard to know, is this person suffering anxiety because they're not well in their body, or is it because their mind is creating the problem in the body. Which way round is it? And it might be that it's both at the same time. And then where does the spirit come in?

Well if you think of the spirit as your value system, setting aside any actual belief system for a moment, this value system is asking: "Do I do the things that feel right for me as a person, those things I was brought up to believe are right, the ways that society endorses or doesn't endorse? Do I bring myself into conflict with others, and indeed into conflict with myself? Am I constantly bashing against my own value system, and then causing myself anxiety and/or depression as a result of that?" Because believe me, that will happen, if you find yourself in conflict with so much of what you believe fundamentally is right.

I worked a lot with people with addiction problems, and that is an example of this. In addition, you find yourself forced to do things that you wouldn't otherwise have done, to behave in ways which are not only unpleasant for others but also for yourself. And yet you can't stop yourself from doing it. So that is the cycle that then creates in the mind a huge amount of anxiety and/or depression, and in the body the same. And it is to do with your spiritual wellbeing. If you add to that the principles that you might have as a member of a church, and I've seen plenty of examples of people who've acted against the way they've been brought up in their church and against the beliefs that they have, their core beliefs, and of course the conflict then is enormous, for them and for others.

So it does tend to come down to: "What is my overall relationship to myself—body, mind and spirit—and how can I change it and improve it?" So those psychiatrists who really got that at The Priory were wonderful to work with, because they would help the patients to open up to their spiritual values, whereas the patients otherwise think: "I am just here to get some pills which will make me get better." But not address those things that are driving them into the mental illness in the first place. And we had some really good examples of that, even where initially people were sceptical, or wondering whether, again, you were just trying somehow to convert them. And I found that the best therapy often came out of the simple stance.

***“Am I
constantly
bashing
against my
own value
system?”***

CONFERENCE TALK



***“I got a postcard
from this patient.
And it said: ‘Thank
you for the tea. It
really helped.’ ”***

I remember one patient who I was asked to go and see in the hospital by the psychiatrist who said: “He doesn’t want to talk to me, and he probably won’t want to talk to you either. So go and see him!” And so I went and knocked on the door. It was an individual room—remember, this is a very posh place. He said: “Come in.” And then: “What do you want?” So I thought: “Well that’s a good start.” So I explained who I was, and I said: “Well I understand that you’re here because you’re not well.” “Yes well I’m going. I’m going, probably tomorrow.” So I said: “OK well, in a way that’s a shame, because you haven’t been here very long, and maybe we could have helped you a bit more.” “No you can’t.” “Right.” “Is there anything you want at all?” “No. Please go away.”

So I said: “OK. Um, I’m a bit parched. Before I go, I’m going to have a cup of tea. Would you like one?” “Oh OK,” he said. So I went and made tea and came back with our mugs, and we sat down and we chatted. Not about his illness. We talked about his work, and various other things. And we just had a pleasant chat. And at the end of it I just said: “Well, it was really nice to meet you, and I wish you well for the future.”

That patient I then heard no more about. It wasn’t for me to see him. I only saw people in the hospital. And the psychiatrist updated me occasionally, and told me he wasn’t doing too badly. One year, I believe, to the day after I’d seen him I got a postcard from this patient. And it said: “Thank you for the tea. It really helped.”

Now that isn’t in any of the books. You don’t get trained to do that. If anything you get told not to engage too closely. Don’t get involved. Well that wasn’t about getting involved. That was about getting someone who was angry with the world, angry with anybody in the hospital who came along and said they were going to help, and therefore what he needed at that moment was an act of kindness which might have been just to say: “OK, I’ll leave you alone then”, though that might have been a bit negative. So it was a positive act of kindness which frankly didn’t occur to me that often. It just felt right at that moment, because he wasn’t giving me any legroom at all,

CONFERENCE TALK

and it turned out it was the right thing to do. I didn't know that until I got the postcard, but clearly it was.

It seems that when we engage in what you might call the spiritual level, for want of a better word for it, then we engage with the person at the core. You can engage with them physically and help them physically, and we had to do that a lot, with physical suffering often brought about by the mental suffering. You can engage with them at a mental level, and help them to learn mindfulness, which we used to call meditation. And you can help them with relaxation, and occupational therapy. All kinds of things like that do help. But I don't believe that those things engage at the core.

The way you engage at the core was described to me by my tutor when I was first trained. He was a really scary guy who had been brought up in the back streets of Belfast and swore like a trooper, and he didn't care who was in the room, and if it offended them that was their problem and not his. But he had some wisdom. He told us that when you are engaging with someone who is in a particularly dark place, you have three choices.

Choice number one is to step into the dark place with them and be there with them. Choice number two is to stay outside their dark place and talk to them from outside. Neither of those is going to work, because if you do choice number one you will get swallowed up by their dark place, because you are only human, and you will find it really difficult to help them. If you take choice number two, they will feel that you are not connecting with them at all. So choice number three is what you have to do, which is one foot in the dark place and one foot outside. That may sound simplistic. But when we were engaging with some people who were in very dark places, I found it vital—for their wellbeing spiritually as well as mine—that this image stayed firm in my mind as a therapist. I think people appreciated the fact that we could engage with them at that level of their dark place at that moment, but we could also be strong for them.

One day I asked that same tutor for guidance with a particular patient. There was transference and counter-transference going on, and I didn't know what her feelings were, although I suspected they were verging on the inappropriate. My tutor replied with another image. "Be a rock," he said. "Rocks don't move. All those feelings she's projecting, let her chuck them at the rock, and the rock won't move or change. You are who you are. Stop trying to adapt to the person's difficulties. You won't, and you won't help them if you try to."

That's a very different image from "one foot in and one foot out", but I think both of them are valid when we engage in this hugely difficult and delicate area of spiritual wellbeing. I don't see that we're ever very successful. We need to be respectful of the people we work with, and we need to tread delicately. As delicately as angels.

***"We need
to tread
delicately.
As delicately
as angels."***

INSPIRATION

Some notes by John Cullen
which he used to inspire his talk
to our conference last January...

Homeless people walk a path of faith that works for them
outside the boundaries of family and church.

Whatever name one calls God,
Jesus, Allah, Higher Power, Buddha, the Divine, Creator,
there is a presence of mystery that connects all people.

Homeless people embody an extensive oral history.
You meet people of many nationalities and cultures.
They represent religions, denominations and spiritual traditions.

Sacred listening is about receiving the unique story of each person.
It is about meeting someone who perceives to be the 'other'.
Yet Jesus invites us to realise that there is no 'Other.'
'We are already one, yet we imagine we are not.'

When we hear the word 'faith',
we think of prayer, theology, liturgy and orthodoxy.
Faith is also about story, encounter, hope and biography.
Faith is embodied in people's faces, feelings and failures.
Faith is about one's geography, landscape and horizon.

Sacred listening welcomes the stranger into friendship,
to bless people in reverence, humility, wonder and joy.

'Keep us attentive to the needs of all,
that, sharing their grief and pain,
their joy and hope,
we may faithfully bring them
the good news of salvation
and go forward with them
along the way of your Kingdom.'

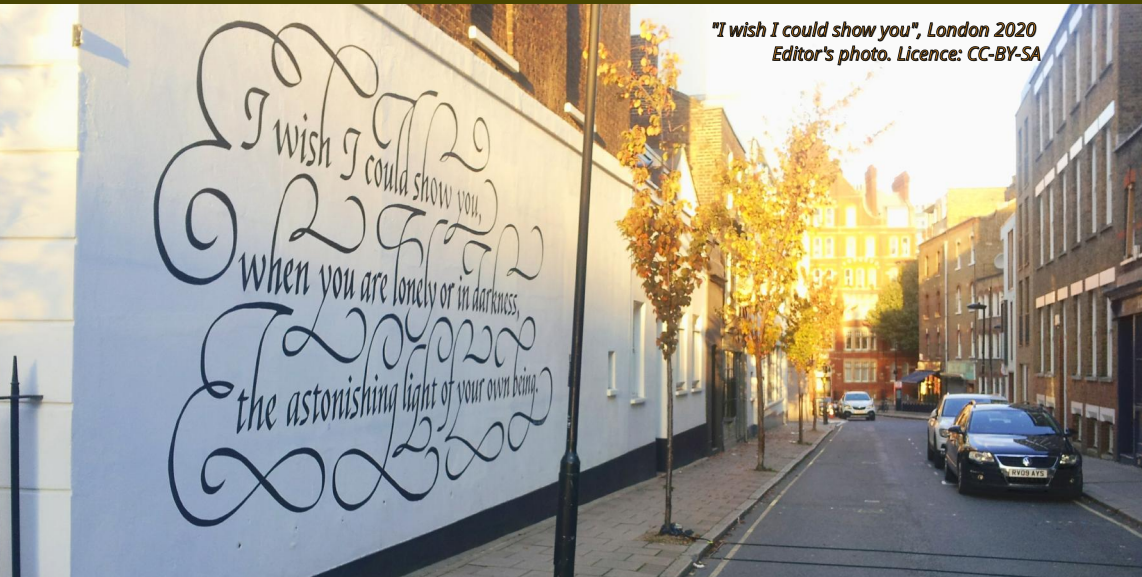
Eucharistic Prayer For Various Needs 111

*And the people stayed home,
and read books, and listened, and rested, and
exercised, and made art, and played games, and
learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened
more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some
danced. Some met their shadows. And the people
began to think differently.*

*And the people healed. And, in the absence of people
living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless
ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined
together again, they grieved their losses, and made new
choices and dreamed new images, and created new
ways to live and heal the earth fully,
as they had been healed.*

Poem by Kitty O'meara, retired teacher and chaplain. A favourite of Gail Cotton.



**"I wish I could show you", London 2020
Editor's photo. Licence: CC-BY-SA**

Ἔχομεν δὲ τὸν θησαυρὸν τοῦτον
ἐν ὀστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν,
ἵνα ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως
ᾗ τοῦ Θεοῦ, καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἡμῶν.



2 Corinthians 4:7