



Opening Minds & Mental Health Awareness Guides (MHAGs)

Opening Minds is the mental health strategy group for the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. It was set up in 2011 in response to clergy concerns for the care of those with mental health problems, following cuts in health and social care provision.

An open meeting was organised and from this a group of clergy, those who have lived experience, carers and mental health professionals came together. (People of course may belong to more than one category). The group began with a year-long listening exercise. Members held workshops at Deanery Synod meetings, spoke with service users of the local mental health trust and with the mental health sub-group of the Carers' Federation. We were always welcomed and encouraged. At synod meetings a member of Opening Minds would share their personal experience of mental ill health. Raising awareness about mental health issues enabled synod members to share their own stories, sometimes for the first time, which was profoundly moving. Many are surprised to hear that at least a third of us will have a mental health problem at some point in our lives.

The three themes can be summed up as awareness, support and inclusion. Three key requests emerged; to improve mental health awareness amongst the congregations, for clergy to have training on mental illness and for information on how to access help in a crisis. A training day for church leaders was organised by the local mental health trust and a leaflet on help in a crisis is to be circulated.

Our church communities often reflect the views still present in society, that mental illness is somehow shameful and a sign of weakness. We heard stories of Christians telling fellow churchgoers that mental illness was a sign of sin, which needed confession healed if they had more faith or that they needed deliverance ministry. Clergy recounted similar experiences and lack of support from colleagues. Not surprisingly there is a reluctance to admit to having a mental health problem. A survey of people with mental ill health reported that for two thirds the attitude of others caused at least as much difficulty as the symptoms. So Opening Minds felt that changing beliefs causing discrimination and stigma was as important as providing direct support. Mental and physical ill health should be regarded in the same way (and indeed the two often co-exist).

Support for those with mental ill health, their friends, families and carers remains important. The help may include practical assistance, listening and showing concern and prayer.

Those with mental health problems have much to contribute to their communities. Feeling valued can help in the journey of recovery too. Whilst Opening Minds started out from a concern to help those with mental health problems we discerned that some of the help is giving people the opportunity to contribute to the live of the church community.

Mental Health Awareness Guides

The task of raising mental health awareness across the Diocese could not be undertaken by Opening Minds as it needed to be based within the local church. The suggestion of a mental health awareness guide (MHAG) linked to each parish was supported by the senior clergy of the Diocese. The project has attracted national interest and the support of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Information about the project was shared at a Diocesan Conference, Deanery synods and a Diocesan newsletter. We now have over 30 and the majority attended a training morning in June 2014. The focus was to work together to identify our core values, with the help of a facilitator from the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The final core values derived were:

- People with mental health issues feel accepted and included.
- We are equally responsive to the needs of those with mental and physical health issues.
- Family and friends of people with mental ill health feel understood and find comfort.
- Mental wellbeing is promoted.
- Anyone with questions about mental health issues can be given help to find accurate information, support and guidance.

The MHAGs have to have the support of their Parochial Church Council and clergy as they can only be effective through engaging with the church leadership. The plan is for the MHAGs to discuss with the PCC how they can promote these core values within their church community and to devise an action plan. The aim is that they will provide an annual report to the PCC. They are responsible to the PCC but Opening Minds oversees the project and offers training and support. They have contact with each other through an email network and meetings will be held on a six monthly basis.

There is a document, produced by Opening Minds identifying the role and responsibilities of a MHAG. This makes clear that the MHAG does not have responsibility for the care of people with mental ill health; this rests with the whole church and some churches have pastoral care and ministry teams to address particular needs.

It is difficult to evaluate such a project. We have asked for Opening Minds to receive a copy of the action plans and any qualitative evidence of changes arising from this. Opening Minds benefits from a close working relationship with the local mental health trust, (especially the Spiritual and Pastoral Care Team and Service User Involvement Centres), the mental health sub-group of the Carers Council and the Royal College of Psychiatrists.