The Archbishop of Canterbuy was today due to be in Dublin at the Church of Ireland's MindMatters conference on mental health. The conference is exploring how the church and faith can help those coping with anxiety, depression and poor mental health. Archbishop Justin was unable to attend the conference as he is making a pastoral visit to the Anglican church in Jerusalem **amidst the Israel-Hamas war.**

The Archbishop delivered his speech via video link from Jerusalem this morning, addressing delegates from across Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Read the full text of his keynote speech as prepared:

Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this conference.

A few years ago, I realised I was feeling different. I had experienced bouts of what I might now recognise as depression before. I had had some counselling around Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because I used to work frequently in conflict zones. And sometimes I felt absolutely awful, even though everything was, objectively, fine. But these feelings always seemed to pass, and I did not feel the need to talk to anybody or do anything about it.

This, though, was different. I felt utterly hopeless.

It was my daughter who helped me – she has been incredibly open about her own experiences with mental health and her experiences of depression and suicidal ideation. And she helped me to see that there was nothing to be ashamed of, and getting help was the right thing to do. So, I began taking antidepressants – which I still take – and talking to someone. It restores me from total emptiness to mere grumpiness – which is my normal state of being. I am, in Winne the Pooh terms, naturally an Eeyore. I was never going to be a Tigger, but my medication means I can happily Eeyore around.

I 'announced' the fact that I was suffering with depression on BBC Radio 4's Thought For The Day. Most people think just telling their families over dinner is enough, but I thought I would go all out. It was the same day we were hosting a mental health conference at Lambeth Palace in London. And it got me thinking about how the Church has historically dealt with mental health issues – and the answer, we all know, is not necessarily very well. From the absurd suggestion that mental illness is a sign of lack of faith or the wrath of God, to the idea that if we just prayed hard enough it would go away. Often the church has moralised mental health issues and stigmatised those who are suffering, rather than offering them the gentle compassion and understanding that Christ offers them.

Once I had said publicly that I was experiencing depression, I noticed something a bit like what scientists call the 'frequency illusion'. You know when you learn a new word, and then you hear that word everywhere? Everywhere, people were telling me about their own experiences with mental health issues. People had always struggled with them, but now they felt able to talk about them with me more. And we know that mental

health issues are so prevalent, amongst both clergy and amongst the laity. A 2022 study of mental health disorders[1] in the republic of Ireland found that 42.5% of people met the criteria for a mental health disorder. 11.1% had a lifetime history of attempted suicide. More than one in ten people. According to data from the Central Statistics Office, which The Samaritans published in 2022, there were 11 deaths by suicide per hundred thousand individuals per year in the Republic of Ireland. For men, it was 17.6 per one hundred thousand.[2]

I'm not a doctor, but it appears that some mental health issues are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. And others are caused, or exacerbated, by our contexts. Poverty, poor physical health, isolation – all of these, unsurprisingly, contribute to mental health issues. But what we're seeing is perhaps surprising. Because although we are living in the most prosperous period in human history, and humans are materially better off than they ever have been in the past, we have – particularly among young people – much higher levels of mental illness around the prosperous world. It's endemic, its systemic and its long term. Why?

We must acknowledge that there is better research, monitoring, and treatment around mental ill health in the Global North. Richer populations have help more readily accessible and are now encouraged to seek support where they need it. We need to factor that into our understanding of mental health in the Global North, as well as recognise that poverty, war, and instability faced particularly in the Global South contributes significantly to poor mental health.

In the Global North, however, I think there has also been a philosophical turn inwards, towards the self, which began with Descartes and has brought us to a place of radical individual autonomy and atomisation, despite technological advances that have made communication easier than ever. And this breakdown in community life means that there is no scaffolding to hold us up or offer us stability when things inevitably go wrong, or we face tricky periods. The breakdown in family and household life, where families are so often – not always, but often – a place of nurture, a place where we are supported with and learn how to deal with the setbacks and pitfalls that are part of being human. And there's generational trauma too. This island of Ireland knows all about that, whether its because of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, or trauma from The Famine. The famine may have happened a long time ago, but there are studies now which show us how the legacy of trauma can be passed down the generations.

Dr John Coates, a former bond trader, has written a book called 'The Hour Between Dog and Wolf', in which he looks at the biology and neuroscience behind our behaviour. He concludes that the three biggest drivers of stress are novelty, uncertainty, and uncontrollability.

And when you think about it, it makes sense that we are evolutionarily designed to have physiological and psychological responses in the face of new and unpredictable events. These responses keep us safe. Our ancestors faced issues of life and death daily until recently – from our hunter-gatherer predecessors for whom every day must have been a matter of survival, to the prevalence of illness before the advent of modern medicine.

But these days, many of us – particularly in the Global North – are not constantly faced with threats to our basic survival. And yet, as I have said, it is in the Global North that we are seeing higher levels of stress reported than ever before.

We are encountering novelty, uncertainty, and uncontrollability in new ways. 2024 will be an election year in the United States, and one with particularly high stakes. Russia's war in Ukraine is ongoing, with no sign of ending. We have just seen the beginning of a new, devastating war with Israel and Hamas in the Middle East. We are still emerging from the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II signalled the end of an era that most of us had known all our lives. The UK might also have an election soon. There is the cost-of-living crisis. Globally speaking the impact of the climate crisis has many of us fearing for the future.

The threats and dangers we must live with are hugely different. They are less acute, but they procure the same biological response that makes us feel as though we are on the edge. Such extended periods of high stress are extremely demanding on our physical and mental health, so it is no wonder we are seeing people suffering from burnout, chronic stress, and exhaustion, as well as more serious mental health issues.

And we're also living with the difficulty of adapting to new cultures, to changing times, and without some of the older certainties of life. The world is in many ways a quite different place to ten, twenty, fifty years ago, with the advent of technology, globalisation, and multiculturalism. The expectations and norms for how we might live our lives, lifelong employment with one employer for example, don't seem to apply in the same way in the modern world. In many ways we are seeing improvements but change and unfamiliarity often unsettles us.

And that's as true in the Church as it is in any other sector. The Mind Matters survey found that 46% of clergy think the church is not doing enough to support their mental health. Clergy are present with people during the most stressful and painful periods of their lives. They are also often on the frontlines in responding to parishioners who are experiencing mental health issues, so they need to recognize the signs and symptoms, and signpost people to appropriate support. They are alongside their parishioners during loss and bereavement, they hear people's deepest anxieties and fears, they live with the most vulnerable and ostracised in society. The emotional burden is heavy – it is the greatest privilege of my life, but it takes its toll without adequate support and self-care.

And, of course, clergy face other issues. After centuries of stability and respect, clergy find themselves in a place in the West where the basic assumptions about the world have been jettisoned. The values for which they stand are no longer trusted. They are constantly under attack for the perceived or actual sins of the church. And, of course, there is the ultimate insecurity of the future of the church, including here in Ireland.

So, what's the answer?

Firstly, we must reduce the stigma of mental health issues. It's gotten better, there's no doubt about that, but it still exists. We start with our willingness to talk about it, to share our experiences. Transparency and openness help people learn that mental health problems are an illness,

not a sin. It's not contagious. You can't get it when you shake hands and share the peace on Sundays.

What sharing does is counter the isolation and individualism I was talking about earlier. The times we are living in have revealed to us that the myth of our own autonomous control that technological and scientific development has given rise to is just that – a myth. From financial markets to viruses, everything we do and everything we are is interconnected. To be a human being is to be in relationship with other human beings. And so, the strongest defence when we face mental health issues is found in the communities around us, the families, friends and colleagues that support us.

When we truly listen to those around us, without judgement or preconceptions, we can create space and safety for others to share. Stepping into this openness and vulnerability has two outcomes. Firstly, we come to learn that we are not alone. There is nothing we are struggling with that other people have not faced. And secondly, out of that shared understanding, we can support one another. There is no resilience in isolation. We are, biologically, evolutionarily, and necessarily creatures of community.

In churches, one of the ways we find that community is in small groups that meet and share. I meet with a group on the 2nd Sunday of every month. We pray together. And I know I can say anything in the safety and support of that group. I can say that I'm absolutely at the end of my tether, and I don't know what to do about such-and-such a problem. And almost as soon as I've said it, it doesn't seem quite as bad. We really trust each other. That sort of community is so, so important.

There is, of course, the increasing burden of compliance. This is shared with many other professions and is absolutely appropriate but can place a lot of stress on clergy. It is so important that clergy are supported and offered appropriate supervision, particularly when we are dealing with mental health or extreme pastoral situations. All other professional sectors will have adequate support in these situations, where another qualified person can offer advice. We must introduce supervision, either through the structures of the church or externally. [space for ABC to talk about his own experience of supervision].

But, of course, faith can also be a great support in times of mental health difficulty. I've heard of sharing groups being set up particularly to talk about living with mental illness. There are some excellent theological books about the bible and mental health being published, not least one by my former chaplain, Isabelle Hamley, who has co-authored a book called 'The Bible and Mental Health'. There is the support of loving communities that we've discussed. And, more than anything, there is the promise of a God who is always faithful, always loving and always hopeful.

I interviewed Gabriel Byrne recently for a series I do on BBC Radio 4, where I talk to people about what motivates them, their inner lives, how their beliefs – whatever they may be, because they are not all Christians – influence them. Gabriel Byrne is remarkable – although I know I don't

need to tell you that about one of your most brilliant compatriots. He grew up in Ireland in the 1950s, he was educated by Irish Christian brothers and then went to a Catholic seminary at just 11 years old to train for the priesthood (before deciding to become an actor instead). He talked to me so bravely about his experiences with depression and alcoholism. And the sexual abuse he experienced as a child by a priest. We spoke about going to churches just to absorb the atmosphere; he described them as a 'thin space' , a place where he had found comfort. He said he used to hear older people say 'Oh, I'm just dropping into the chapel to have a few words with Himself' – this idea that God is accessible, He is close, we can talk to him about our problems.

He talked about the Church as being the House of The People. If the Church was the House of the People, it could be that space where people are welcomed and comforted. It would mean we are a new family – one where we can insulate each other somewhat against life's knock backs and pains. A church which is a space for people with mental health issues, where people can be sure that God has not abandoned them and the church will not abandon them.

If you look at the Psalms, we see that anguish and hopelessness has always been part of the human condition, and one we can take to God. Look at Psalm 88:

'You have put me in the lowest pit,

in the darkest depths.

Your wrath lies heavily on me;

you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

You have taken from me my closest friends

and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape;

my eyes are dim with grief.'

That, to me, is an expression of deep depression from the Psalmist, someone who is crying out to God for help, even as he cries out against God for his suffering. God knows all. God can bear the weight of all our pain and all our doubt. Even in that darkest of places, God listens and reaches out to us. It is difficult, sometimes, when we might feel so unlovable, to recognise that we are loved beyond measure by a God who is faithful. And yet, that is the truth. And so I pray for you, and for the Church of Ireland, a people who are, as St Patrick said 'the people of the Lord, and they are

called children of God.'

Thank you.

More information about Mind Matters is available here: Mind Matters COI – The Church Of Ireland Mental Health Promotion Initiative

(anglican.org)

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