



THE PULSE

A publication of the Northern Ireland Healthcare Chaplains' Association

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Pause for Thought | AGM | A Silent, Empty House | A High and Holy Calling | My Journey

Upcoming Training 2023

Journal Club - *“Conversation as a Bridging Tool in End-of-Life Spiritual Care”*

Rev John Wonnacott

Monday 11th September
7pm-8pm

Zoom Training - *The Bible, Voices and Mental Health - Practical Help for Healthcare Chaplains*

Rev Prof Christopher Cooke

Monday 2nd October
10.30am - 12.30pm

Training Residential - *The future of Healthcare Chaplaincy in Northern Ireland: Thriving as Individuals and as a Profession (Part 2)*

Rev Dr Ewan Kelly

Wednesday 11th October &
Thursday 12th October
9.30am - 5.00pm & 9.30am -
4.00pm

Drumalis Retreat and
Conference Centre



The AGM - contribution from Rev. Derek Johnston, BHSCT Lead Chaplain and NIHCA President

As an organisation, we met for our AGM on Wednesday 31st May at the T3 Conference Facilities, House of Vic Ryn, Lisburn. Our President had this to say, “It was good to meet up for our AGM on 31st May. Thanks to those who attended and to those who planned and facilitated the event. The presentation on Encompass reminds us that the world of healthcare is continuing to change and develop. Whilst we may find some of those developments difficult, nevertheless, Chaplaincy must also learn to develop or else we will not be able to play our full part in the multidisciplinary team seeking to provide holistic care. I encourage all chaplains to take note of the training dates that Michael has arranged for 2023/24 and endeavour to attend. Please also encourage colleagues to participate. As the NIHCA Executive we are keen to hear from chaplains about any issues that may be impacting you or any learning you can share that might help others. I hope you can have some restful and refreshing time over the summer and we look forward to further sharing, learning and support in the year ahead.”

The introduction of Encompass/EPIC will have a huge impact on how we work as chaplains. Each Trust has a nominated person or persons who sit on the Encompass Spiritual Care Working Group. If you have

NIHCA Executive Committee

Summary minutes from Executive meetings are available on the website. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday 18th September.

Congratulations

Congratulations to Jackie Whyte on completing his PG Cert, and to Michael Shields, Rev Nigel Murphy, Fr Anish John and Fr David Aksenczukon on the completion of a unit of CPE. Congratulations also to all who were part of the process of gaining international accreditation for the CPE Centre in the Ulster Hospital. Special thanks and congratulations to Sr Mary Jo Corcoran and Rev Don Gamble.

any questions, please do get in touch with your Lead Chaplain or Chaplaincy Manager to find out who the relevant person is.

Other key takeaways from the AGM include:

- Heather McCracken has completed her term as Secretary. We are very grateful to Heather for her contribution and dedication. Carolyn Patterson has taken on the role. We wish her every blessing.
- The addition of two new membership categories.
- The proposal of commissioning a piece of research.
- The development of publicity material.
- Grants remain available for those undertaking chaplaincy related courses.

Pause for Thought - “Steam” - Rev. John Wonnacott

“Steam” she said pointing to her eyes welling up mid conversation. As she wiped her eyes she explained that for her the tears allowed the pressure that she was feeling inside to be released. Shedding the tears was clearly very therapeutic for her. Everyone can shed tears. President Biden did on his recent visit here. When in Knock, Mayo, he met Fr Frank O’Grady and Biden wept. Why? Fr O’Grady had previously been a chaplain in the States working in the hospital where President Biden’s son Beau was being cared for. Just before Beau died Fr O’Grady ministered to him. This totally unexpected encounter with the priest who had been with Beau eight years previous moved President Biden to tears. I am reminded of the privilege of providing a safe space for others to show a variety of emotions such as joy, sadness, frustration and grief as tears.

Tears fell
 Long held
 Released,
 Breaching the carefully built dam,
 Pent up
 Frayed
 Helpless.
 Marking a new chapter
 Tears shuddering and wrung out of a worn out broken heart
 Tears of realisation of the future
 Tears that found a way out when there was no obvious way forward
 Salty sobbing
 Anguished gushing
 Then release
 The numbness gone
 Spurred into life
 A new dawn

Even more precious is the reminder that God is not immune to our feelings nor was His Son immune to emotion – “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Our tears are so precious that they are collected in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). I am grateful too that in heaven our “tears will be wiped away” (Rev 21:4) So when the ‘steam’ appears in our eyes or the eyes of those whom we minister to I invite you to thank God for being the God of Tears.

My Journey into Chaplaincy - Rev. Jim Fleming, SAH

Now, I would love to say I had a divine call (maybe I did!) into Chaplaincy work; the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit, a prophetic picture or even an audible voice. Well I suppose I did have an audible voice, it came from my Bishop in the early days of 2022 asking me to think about applying for the vacant Church of Ireland Chaplain positions in Craigavon and Lurgan Hospitals. I knew that Myrtle had stepped down but I had no idea the posts had been advertised, until the Bishop contacted me. So, really not knowing what to do, I applied and prayed that if it was God's will He would open the correct doors. I was greatly helped with very good advice and direction from a couple of valued colleagues, who are Chaplains. I managed to get an interview and was offered the position in Lurgan Hospital, probably because no one else had applied for that one! I started the role on 1 June 2022 and it has been lovely getting alongside patients to offer support and pastoral care. Then, in the early days of this year, I received a call, out of the blue, from a Hospital Chaplain friend, who advised me that the Southern Area Hospice in Newry were advertising for a Chaplain. That's very interesting I thought, as we chatted about the situation, and on subsequent calls he offered some very wise advice. So, my application was submitted and I managed to get an interview. Amazingly, the next day I was offered the post which I started on 13 March. This role is a huge privilege and responsibility, working alongside the palliative care patients, their bereaved families and loved ones. All thanks to God for His direction (using audible voices to get my attention!) and to those who have helped and advised along the journey.



A Silent, Empty House: Bereavement and Chaplaincy - Michael Shields, Chaplain, Mater Infirmorum Hospital

My ten years' bereavement support work with N.I. Hospice enabled me to become part of the Belfast Trust Bereavement Team during the COVID pandemic.

The Belfast Trust Bereavement Support Group, set up by Heather Russell M.B.E. operates from the vacant Psychiatry building at the Mater Hospital and I was accepted on to their team of volunteers. I contact the deceased patient's next of kin by phone. This is the time when the grief is still raw. The hustle and bustle of the funeral has gone. There's just the lonely silence and emptiness where a soulmate, relative or friend once was. Our youngest grandson (living in Portugal) was diagnosed with retina blastoma at nine months of age. My wife, who was retired, spent many weeks at a time with the family, helping out. Thankfully, my Grandson is now in his teens, preparing for university.

However, it was often difficult for me to adjust to the silent, empty house, making me realise how heart-breaking it must be in that situation permanently through bereavement. It's surprising, but very rewarding that this "cold call" from a stranger on a withheld number, is accepted with such sincere appreciation and willingness to share heartfelt feelings and grief.

It's not primarily a religious exercise, as many of the bereaved don't appear to practise specific religions, but should they raise the subject, I mention that I'm a hospital chaplain. This often leads to meaningful and comforting chats about the inspiration and encouragement from our belief in Christ.

We can refer the bereaved to many bereavement support services, including, I might add, to the team's Chaplain, Michael McMillan. I'm thankful that I have the ability to give that tiny bit of temporary comfort to people in their long journey of grief.

Whether it's anxiety or fear through illness in a hospital bed or following a bereavement, I hope that my chaplaincy skills deliver comfort, assurance and the peace of Christ to those in need, as we are assured in **John 14:- "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."**

Supporting & equipping chaplains

Chaplaincy - 'a High and Holy calling' - Rev. John Gilkinson, Presbyterian Chaplain, BCH

Since June 2019 I have been working as Presbyterian Chaplain in Belfast City Hospital. Having spent over 20 years in pastoral ministry within a local Church setting I found chaplaincy opened another world for missional opportunities outside the Church. I now find myself being a minister 'of' the church while not 'in' the church. I count myself privileged and blessed to be able to work alongside other chaplains seeking to provide spiritual and religious care to those of diverse traditions.

Alongside the obvious clinical and medical symptoms present in patients admitted to hospital there can be numerous 'spiritual distresses' (to use a CPE term) present, including anxiety, panic, hopelessness, financial worries, and uncertainty, alongside the big questions of life - purpose, destiny, identity, etc. Working as part of the multidisciplinary team I understand my role as chaplain is to provide spiritual, pastoral and religious care that seeks to identify and address such spiritual distresses. Unfortunately, the role of chaplaincy hasn't always been understood by the wider church and has often been relegated to a second-class status. We need to assert that chaplaincy is a 'high and holy' calling. We serve on the front lines of ministry, in secular organisations ministering to those with different religious convictions, seeking to bring a compassionate presence to those confronting pain, anguish, or despair and perhaps for the first time asking their deepest questions about God.

Ours is what may be termed a 'ministry of accompaniment' where we come along side patients and their families seeking to journey with them through what can be for many difficult and trying experiences. Increasing especially since COVID our ministry is also accompanying staff on their journey who constantly feel the pressures of working in very stressful and demanding environments.

Recently I encountered a patient who had come into hospital for some tests. I had visited her the day she arrived. As we chatted she indicated she was a Christian and would value prayer as she waited for the test results. I called a few days later when she told me that the results were "not good." I sought to reassure her that God would be with her in whatever lay ahead. After we prayed together she said she felt more at peace and thanked me for coming. As I left she said: "the news is not good - but God is good." Such encounters are encouraging and remind me that at its core chaplaincy is about being 'a spiritual care provider in the midst of an anxious system.'

Of course not all share the faith of the lady above. For others sickness and sorrow can leave them dazed and disoriented, and more often disconnected and distant from God. I've come to understand that in the strange providence of God sickness can be the mechanism that either draws people to God or pushes them away. As chaplains we have the privilege of sensitively coming alongside patients, families and staff wherever they may be on their journey and journeying with them.

I've also come to appreciate that that religious faith does not automatically provide solace in times of crisis. To quote Timothy Keller: "a belief in God and an afterlife does not become spontaneously comforting and existentially strengthening." On a personal note I remember in November 2020 those scary hours as I waited to go to theatre for major heart surgery. What a comfort it was to have members of the chaplaincy team come alongside and pray with me.

While we may have no agenda other than providing a 'comforting presence' - ultimate comfort comes when folk are drawn to the hope they find in the God who in the person of his Son experienced suffering himself and has promised to one day wipe every tear from their eyes. What a high and holy calling we have.

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