

COMPASSION, COMMUNITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Cormack Russell on Asset-Based Community Development.

He used the arresting and powerful image of Humpty Dumpty in the well-known rhyme.

Traditionally, we look at the rhyme from the point of view of the kings' horses and men. Humpty is seen as needy, marginalised, in need of help. But this isn't true: Humpty is vulnerable in not having his gifts acknowledged. Enthrallment to professional services is represented by the well-meaning but misguided kings' horses and men. Reliance on professional services can cause someone not to find their gifts. Gifts must flow or they become toxic.

Society is split into those who help and those with needs. We create a narrative of empire: I'm the provider, you're the receiver – this results in people being harmed. But we should all journey together to discover gifts which will benefit the community.

Cormack Russell gave the example of Starfire, an organisation [the king's horses] in which people with disabilities [Humpty] were seen as consumers of a service, aggregated together, warehoused.

Then – a transformation took place: the label of intellectually disabled was lifted, those with disabilities were asked, “Where would you like to go?” instead of being herded into a mini-bus and driven about. Previously, they couldn't choose their own lives.

This transformation took courage. Starfire decommissioned their service and re-imagined their building, building a second story to be used as a community resource.

It was acknowledged that those previously seen as mentally disabled had gifts that could be used and had been obscured by a diminishing label. They've now got power over their lives.

When asked what they wanted, it turned out that what they wanted was the same as everyone else.

Cormack Russell said there has traditionally been an overemphasis on delivering services and programmes as against deep listening, discovering what's already there in a community. We need to ask how we can become better neighbours; we should be animators of communities. We're all interdependent. The asset that matters is social capital.

Compassion, Hospitality, and Mental Health: Empowering Congregations to Address Social Need.
This was a workshop lead by a community mental health chaplain.

The NHS is broke, so there is now no money, resulting in patients being sent home from hospital and finding themselves isolated and disconnected. The chaplain has no office now. All chaplains are employed by the NHS, and every hospital has chaplain cover. Government guidance says anyone receiving hospital care should have spiritual care.

Chaplains are training volunteers: if you are interested, you should ask your local chaplain.

The chaplain who ran the workshop runs a Drop-In Centre in Edinburgh city centre every Tuesday from 10.30 – 12. People can just turn up for a chat – or not – there's no pressure to talk. The Drop-In Centre is an unthreatening and welcoming environment – there are glass doors so that people can loiter outside, have a look, before they take the plunge and go in.

The Centre is open to anyone and there are no forms to fill in, so people who are under the radar feel comfortable and can be helped. A huge mix of people in terms of age, gender, sexuality and race attend the centre. Everyone tries not to make assumptions about anyone, it's about being part of a community. You can share who you are without fear. For some it's their church, an anchor on a Tuesday. If someone isn't working, it's somewhere to go and make friends. The Centre offers friendship and understanding, it's inclusive and LGBT friendly. It can take weeks before someone is ready to share. Medication and weight are enormous issues in the mental health community. There is no need to explain if you feel rubbish.

Drop-In Center client Steven spoke movingly about what the Centre means to him: he has been retired

for 8 years because of his mental health, there are no questions, he can talk or not. "I can be myself," he said. "It's comforting."

A warning is issued: Be careful what you share – it can affect others, and people remember."

A demonstration of the effectiveness of the Centre are the friendship groups that have formed, resulting, for example, in 2 holidays in Iona.

The chaplain brought along a large and particularly arresting collage. Clients were invited to bring along a mug that meant something to them – or indeed not to bring a mug if they didn't want to. They were invited to say why the mug was significant in their lives, e.g. it could have belonged to their grandmother. Their hands holding the mug were photographed with a few words alongside.

The Tuesday Drop-In Centre isn't unique: coffee, cake, and conversation are offered once a month on Tuesday afternoon and Thursday evening. In addition, the Augustinian United Church in the centre of Edinburgh is used by lots of organisations. Pews have been removed and replaced by chairs so people don't feel afraid. As with the Drop-In Centre, people go there who wouldn't go to a hospital.

The chaplain emphasised the importance of doing these things regularly. Breaks should be avoided.