WEEK 5: PROTECTING THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

This week, we will reflect on how we can protect those who are most vulnerable to being exploited by criminal activity such as County Lines.

*He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,*  
*to proclaim freedom for the captives*  
*and release from darkness for the prisoners,*

Isaiah 61: 1

Each section of this course includes a short animation telling the story of an individual who has been impacted by County Lines. These films could be upsetting. Choices should be offered so participants can watch them or take a short break instead. Sources of emotional support should be signposted in case they trigger any distress – more details on this is available in the Introduction of the full course pack.

DAVE’S STORY

Watch the animation of Dave’s story and discuss:

What extra measures do we have to put in place to protect the most vulnerable in our communities?

THE PASSAGE: ISAIAH 61: 1-3

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,*  
*because the Lord has anointed me*  
*to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,*  
*to proclaim freedom for the captives*  
*and release from darkness for the prisoners,[a]*

*2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour*  
*and the day of vengeance of our God,*  
*to comfort all who mourn,*

*3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—*  
*to bestow on them a crown of beauty*  
*instead of ashes,*

*the oil of joy*  
*instead of mourning,*  
*and a garment of praise*  
*instead of a spirit of despair.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness,*  
*a planting of the Lord*  
*for the display of his splendour.*

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Reflections and prayer from Rt Revd Dr Alastair Redfern
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REFLECTION AND PRAYER

Mental health is about well-being. The mind not overburdened with pressures and darkness but illuminated by hope and trustworthy friendships. As our lives become more focused upon the private space of our small screens (phones), so we become more vulnerable to being isolated, and only relating to others through messages and posts, rather than face-to-face.

Reliable relationships need space for being together, for speaking and listening, for hoping and exploring good things together. Then the mind can be nourished by a spirit which creates good news and good possibilities: a world of joy and praise.

We need to give time and energy to being with those who need help to experience love and trust first-hand. Then together we will know the Lord’s favour and be blessed.

PRAYER

Almighty God, save us from the loneliness of despair and darkness, and grant us the joy of friendship and trust with those amongst whom you would have us flourish, so that your will may be done, and your kingdom come. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

PRACTICAL ACTION:

See the practical action sheet and discuss the three areas where individuals and the Church can be more protective of those with mental health disorders and learning disabilities.
The diagrams below represent the risks that people with mental health disorders or learning disabilities may face, along with some practical ideas for protecting them from exploitation.

**WEEK 5: PRACTICAL ACTION**

1. Good relationships with individuals who care about them and look out for them regularly.
2. Good personal awareness of how they can be at risk of exploitation & manipulation. They know who to contact if they are concerned.
3. Strong sense of belonging to a group of people who are safe, affirming and loving.

**3 KEY ELEMENTS OF PROTECTION**
WEEK 5: PRACTICAL ACTION

Look at the three areas below and consider how you as individuals and/or as a church can reduce the risk of people with mental health issues or learning disabilities being exploited by County Lines drug traffickers.

**Sense of belonging**
Ensure the church community is a place of welcome and belonging where people with MHD can feel safe to be who they are and affirmed for their qualities.

**Key relationships**
Try to ensure strong links with key people who they can trust and confide in about their fears and anxieties. These key people should look out for potential threats and situations which may make them particularly vulnerable.

**Raising awareness**
Consider raising awareness in your community about how people can keep themselves safe. Do liaise with your safeguarding lead about ways of doing this safely.
WEEK 5: BACKGROUND READING – PROTECTING THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Research has shown us that one quarter of all people in the UK are affected by a mental health disorder or illness. Deprivation causes physical health problems which greatly increase the risk of mental illness, particularly depression. In turn this leads to destructive practices such as alcohol and substance abuse.

Mental health disorders (MHD) are characterised by a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others. They can affect a person's ability to function in normal life and can make people suffering from MHD targets for exploitation.

They can include depression, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia and other psychoses, dementia, intellectual disabilities and developmental disorders including autism.

It is thought that stigma associated with MH is the single biggest barrier to proper service delivery.

According to the Oxford dictionary, stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Three out of four people with a mental illness report that they have experienced stigma. When a person is labelled by their illness they are seen as part of a stereotyped group. Negative attitudes create prejudice which leads to negative actions and discrimination. Such discrimination can be felt from, family, friends, work colleagues and the wider community. This can make a person vulnerable to exploitation by people falsely offering friendship and a sense of belonging.

Stigma affects the way people behave. People who suffer stigma are more likely to hide certain behaviours and actions rather than get help for them. One example of this is smoking or drinking in secrecy. People with a mental health disease are among the least likely of any group with a long-term health condition or disability to:

- find work
- be in a steady, long-term relationship
- live in decent housing
- be socially included into mainstream society.

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WEEK 5: BACKGROUND READING – PROTECTING THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

All these things increase vulnerability to County Lines traffickers who will falsely offer work, extend a hand of friendship and maybe even take over the house of the person suffering with the mental health disorder.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Churches have a significant contribution to make to the care and support of people with mental health issues. This is because, firstly, the Church has a strong biblical mandate to befriend and speak out for the vulnerable and marginalised. This is a key motivation for being involved and gives an opportunity for Christians to express their faith in action.

Secondly, the Church is made up of dynamic, loyal and committed volunteers with a vast range of skills who can be engaged in both projects and simple acts of kindness.

Thirdly, most churches have buildings and places of hospitality as well as members, willing and open to share hospitality in their own homes. Below are some areas where churches can contribute to addressing issues of stigma and isolation.

1. Raising awareness: Churches can play a key role in reducing the stigma of mental health issues by raising awareness amongst their own church members and encouraging a strong, inclusive and supportive culture. This should include welcoming people to services and other events and as well as demonstrating acceptance and love practically through individual acts of kindness and hospitality where appropriate.

2. Signposting support: Where churches and their congregations can identify specific cases of mental health, they can be involved in signposting individuals to centres of specific professional support.

3. Running wellbeing and care projects: Where churches and/or groups of their congregations have a passion and a concern for a specific target group they may want to consider a simple appropriate initiative that will improve a sense of wellbeing and refreshment, such as art, music, baking and dance.

4. Advocacy lobbying: Where churches and their congregations have a good understanding of the local mental health needs, they can play a role in lobbying, ensuring local authorities services and provisions are sufficient and effective.