



**MENTAL HEALTH FRIENDLY  
CHURCH RESEARCH:  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# INTRODUCTION

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Dear friends,

Thank you so much for being a part of the Mental Health Friendly Church Project. We began with a question raised at an event we ran online in 2020: "It's great that Kintsugi Hope is facilitating safe and supportive spaces - but what happens when the church isn't a safe and supportive space?"

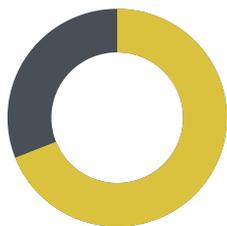
This question, against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic, was one which couldn't be ignored.

The way the pandemic has changed the landscape of our world and the church meant that we needed a fresh look at the reality of attitudes towards mental health within the UK church before we could look more closely at what a mental health friendly church might look like.

Throughout scripture we see that before change can come and renewal can begin, we have to face the facts. Nehemiah wept for months as he surveyed his landscape - but fear not - our landscape isn't nearly as bleak as the one he surveyed.



It's estimated that 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health issue each year; but research since the pandemic has also shown that more than two-thirds of adults in the UK (69%) report feeling somewhat or very worried about the effect COVID-19 has had or is having on their life.



**69% worry about the effect of the pandemic on wellbeing.**

The proportion of people reporting they were coping well has fallen slowly and steadily, from 73% in April 2020 to 62% in June/July 2021. Those with a pre-existing mental health condition were less likely than UK adults generally to be coping well.

# INTRODUCTION

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**Those with pre-existing mental health conditions were less likely to be able to cope well during the pandemic.**

The good news, however, was that our churches are already active in supporting mental health, with the National Churches Trust estimating that UK churches' activities on mental health support cost £26.9 million a year, and would cost the government anything from £20 million to £116 million to replace.

**UK churches activity on mental health support costs £26.9 million per year.**



With this in mind, we worked alongside think tank Theos which seeks to understand faith and enrich society, to survey both church leaders and church goers about their understanding, experiences and attitudes towards mental health.

We hope that the following report will be an encouragement and a challenge; but more importantly we hope that it can be part of a sea change in the way we the church respond to mental and emotional health.

With every blessing,

*Patrick Regan*

Patrick Regan OBE  
Co-Founder and CEO of Kintsugi Hope

# LANGUAGE MATTERS

Our research with Theos demonstrated a number of key issues, in particular a need for clarity around the language of mental health and so we have adopted the framework of the Mental Health Continuum, which helpfully highlights the range of mental wellbeing and mental illness; including how those with mental illness can have high levels of mental wellbeing; and acknowledging that mental illness is not the only reason someone might experience low levels of mental wellbeing.



## WHAT DID THE RESEARCH TELL US?

It was an interesting and important starting point that 43% of respondents said they had experienced a mental health issue at some point in their lives which is well over the national figures. This isn't reflective of the whole church population - and it perhaps reflects the fact that those living with a mental health issue were more likely to want to participate in a survey about mental wellbeing and the church.

Perhaps the most encouraging insight of the report was that:



**UK Christians overwhelmingly agreeing that churches can help people experiencing mental health issues.**

In scripture we may not read the phrases 'mental wellbeing' or 'mental illness' - but we do see a vision for mental wellbeing through the Hebrew word 'shalom' which is described by theologian John Wilkinson as:

*"wholeness, completeness and wellbeing... It does, however have several secondary meanings encompassing health, security, friendship, prosperity, justice, righteousness and salvation."*

# WHAT DID THE RESEARCH TELL US?

Being 'mental health friendly' isn't an added extra for the church - it's at the heart of what it means to be God's people - so it's unsurprising that we found that the church should do more to make individuals with mental health issues feel welcomed and included - because God's shalom leaves no-one out!

There is a deep challenge found in our research as only



**felt supported by their church in regards to their mental health**

Perhaps this is because we aren't comfortable with expressing our painful emotions and struggles in churches? Have we become so seeker-sensitive that we've closed the door on emotions we think might scare people away?

As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

*"Churches should be the most honest place in town, not necessarily the happiest place in town."*

## **The Challenge of Neutral Responses**

One of the trickiest parts of doing this research was the number of neutral responses we got to questions about how supportive the church has been during mental health issues; there were a high proportion of respondents who said they 'neither agreed nor disagreed'. This seemed to reflect one of two things - either that people were reluctant to share their experience either way, but also that perhaps we've failed to name our position on mental health within our churches and this has left room for uncertainty, stigma and misunderstanding to flourish.

**Encouragement: UK Christians overwhelmingly agreeing that churches can help people experiencing mental health issues.**



**Challenge: Only 35% of those who had experienced a mental health issue agreed their church had been supportive**

# STIGMA

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One of the key things we wanted to understand with this research was the experiences of stigma surrounding mental health issues and how that might impact the way in which the church cares for those struggling.



**74% of respondents agreed that mental health issues are stigmatised in society**

Almost all of the church leaders interviewed believed mental health issues are still stigmatised within the UK church.

But the church leaders we interviewed also recognised that there has been a significant improvement over the past decade in terms of the levels of stigma both within the church and wider society. The message here is that we've come a long way - but there is still a way to go to tackle the stigma of mental illness.

## **Negative Lay Theologies**

Marcia Webb, who conducted in depth research in America on the theology of mental health issues has developed some really helpful language around the impact of stigma within the church with what she calls 'lay theologies'. These, she explains are things that aren't necessarily named or taught from the pulpit, but that 'develop from a community of Christians who share a particular understanding of mental health in which individuals are more likely to view mental health as a spiritual problem.'

These include:

- Lack of faith
- Selfishness
- Personal sin
- Demons

Despite the existence of these 'negative lay theologies'; we did find it encouraging that 66% agreed that their mental health issue "has changed nothing in my relationship with my church. This is a testament to our church leaders love and care; even when they have felt ill-equipped or, as one interviewee put it "winging it"

One of the key issues highlighted during the interviews with church leaders was that 91% of church leaders received no training about mental health during their their theological training. This seems to have a direct link with 56% of the sample stating that their church "speak[s] about mental health and mental health issues rarely or never. Our leaders need support and training on mental health issues - and that will help give them the confidence to speak about mental health within our churches.



**91% of church leaders received no training about mental health during theological education.**

# WHERE NEXT? RECOMMENDATIONS

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There is so much to explore from this research; but in the first instance we have three key recommendations.

## Training

The first is around training. We found the lack of training available to church leaders around mental health and mental illness to be a real concern - and it has perhaps contributed to those negative lay theologies. Whilst programmes such as Mental Health First Aid are really useful for giving a basic understanding; we urgently need to see training for our leaders that both provides practical steps and robust theological reflection on the whole continuum of mental health.

## Name Our Position

Secondly, we feel a real burden that we, as the church need to name our position on mental health. We need to use consistent language (like that of the mental health continuum) and we need to hear sermons preached on mental health; from the despair expressed by Elijah on Mount Horeb to an engagement with lament from the Psalms which allow us to bring all of our emotions before God.

## Gentle Presence

And finally we want to cultivating a ministry of gentle presence for those who are struggling. This was a phrase that came about in the research during the interviews with church leaders. This phrase captures the fact that one of the most important ways a church community can come to care for individuals with mental health issues is to first view the person not as a problem, but as a whole individual.

We hope that this research is a helpful part of the puzzle in enabling the church to truly become 'mental health friendly'; and over the coming months we want to be working alongside our partners to tease out the practical implications and resources that will enable real and lasting change for leaders, the church and our communities.

We are so grateful to have you on this journey with us.

Rachael Newham

Mental Health Friendly Church Project Manager



**Training**



**Name Our Position**



**Gentle Presence**