

The importance of taking care of oneself

Being a new CRCW minister is an exciting opportunity, going to a new project is a bit like having a blank piece of paper with the outline of doodles from your project plan. You can colour and fill as you go, asking for direction from church folk, community partners and others. Being new also invites advice from other ministers, CRCWs and anyone who feels like chipping in. And some of this has been about avoiding the notorious ministry burnout where the weight of expectation sits heavily, either from others or from yourself.

So I've spent some of this past year reading books about boundaries, stress, managing the workload of a new call and a new way of life. I suppose they are specialist self help books for ministers and clergy and there some interesting ideas. I now know that I can retrain my brain over time to relinquish negative thoughts and reprogram with positive ideas. I can take time to breathe, reflect and enjoy rather than just rush around. And that being busy is not always good. The old adage 'if you want something done, ask a busy person,' isn't always helpful. And busy doesn't necessarily mean productive.

Edward, our vicar at Copleston went to a mindfulness retreat for clergy last year and found it very helpful. When he came back, relaxed and refreshed it looked like he had found a new way for himself... but it didn't stop there. He went on courses to train as a mindfulness coach and partnering with another qualified coach we know, the centre now offers regular mindfulness courses and drop in sessions. It is at a very affordable price, as are all our mental health therapeutic services, and clients are very happy to tell us of their continued practice and how it has, in some cases, changed their lives.

We also offer counselling sessions and art therapy at affordable rates, to offer a range of services for those who need a place to talk about or manage their mental health concerns. Each service consults the other to try and provide the best shape of therapeutic help. It is not a case of assuming that one size fits all, more a case of assessing where people are at that moment. And each group builds relationships, confidence and community in its own way.

Having a hand in your own mental health concerns seems to give people back something they were missing or had not yet found. Mindfulness has done that in our situation. But actually our services are not just for those in a supposed 'crisis'. They are for those who want to take care of themselves, just as we wouldn't ignore a cold or a broken leg. Regular maintenance of our mental well-being is just as necessary as a lemsip! After all, it could just be a matter of an hour between being fine and being vulnerable - and God knows that we

are vulnerable all the time. God's there telling us to look after each other, but also to look after ourselves too. And God can help us along the way. As it says in scripture, in Leviticus and the Gospels, "love your neighbour as yourself." Isn't that a command to also love yourself, not just in our physical health but in our mental health too? Can we love our neighbour if we haven't any idea how to take care of ourselves too?

At Copleston we promote looking after yourself regardless of how your day is today. We welcome all who ask for our services and those who share their stories with us. But let's move away from the idea of the 'other' being the one who needs help. Let's normalise conversation about mental health, promote self care and be mindful how we walk on the earth. Be thoughtful in our interactions with others. And not consider that Christians have all they need in God, we are all broken. We need a multi agency approach where church can help but is not the only route.

After all, doesn't God ask us to "Be still and know that I am God"? Our mindfulness courses have taught people to think less, focus on themselves more, empty their minds when the world asks us to be busy all the time. Hopefully we are offering the local community a different way of thinking about mental health, more about everyday health rather than stigmatizing those who appear unwell. And offering a safe space in the heart of the community, to come just 'be' and sometimes to share their journeys and their concerns for us all to learn from. So I am still learning how to look after myself - it is probably a lifetime endeavor that we should all be on. But I am in the right place to ask for direction, or space or conversation with others and the local community.