



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops' annual Social Justice Statement focuses on mental health

Media Release

August 3, 2020

The Catholic bishops of Australia have released the Social Justice Statement 2020-21, on the critical subject of mental health, in the lead-up to Social Justice Sunday on August 30.

The, ***To Live Life to the Full: Mental health in Australia today***, encourages faith communities, governments and individuals to make mental health a priority.

Bishop Terry Brady, Bishop Delegate for Social Justice on the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, has called on all Catholics to take up the message and challenges of the Statement.

"This is a timely message in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is affecting many members of our parishes, schools and communities," Bishop Brady said.

"The personal feelings of anxiety and despair we all share at this time provide an opportunity to become more aware and active in fostering the mental health of all. Understanding mental health will help us to be aware of those who most need our support."

The Statement encourages parishes and local communities to be places of welcome and inclusion, overcoming the barriers and stigma often faced by people experiencing mental ill-health. It demands the commitment of governments and policy-makers to prevent so many people falling through the cracks of the mental health system.

It also calls for the nation's commitment to address those policies that exacerbate the already precarious circumstances of First Australians and refugees and asylum-seekers.

"Our society tends to push away or draw away from those who confront us with our frailties and limitations. This is not the way of Jesus," Bishop Brady said.

"Let us follow him in drawing near to those who are experiencing mental ill-health and acknowledge that they are members of the Body of Christ – 'they' are part of 'us'. Only then can we say 'we are all in this together'. Only then can we 'live life to the full'."

In addition to the written statement, which is free to download, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's Office for Social Justice has also produced an audio recording of the statement. Prayer cards are available to download and liturgical resources will be available for parishes to mark Social Justice Sunday on August 30.

"I commend this Statement to every parish, school and Church network and invite you to promote it as widely as possible," Bishop Brady said.

The 2020-2021 Social Justice Statement, ***To Live Life to the Full: Mental health in Australia today***, can be downloaded from the Office for Social Justice website: http://bit.ly/SocialJustice_2020

FOREWORD

C OVID-19 pandemic is a threat in many ways – physical, social, political and economic. But it's also putting pressure on the mental health of many people in ways both seen and unseen. Those who are at high risk, and those who love them, may be especially anxious.

The loss of jobs and income from businesses, together with underemployment and insecure work, place enormous pressure on people trying to provide for themselves and their families. Isolation has also been very difficult for many – and dangerous for those who are in situations of family strife and domestic violence. These can be stressful times for people in decision-making positions. It's not easy to balance care for public health and safety and the need for social connection, economic activity and other essential communal activities – including public worship. Many of us will experience a mental health problem at some point through our lives – and this may well be the time.

In this Social Justice Statement, *To Live Life to the Full: Mental Health in Australia Today*, the Catholic Bishops of Australia encourage faith communities, governments and each one of us, to make mental health a priority.

We want to say clearly that mental ill-health is not a moral failure, the result of a lack of faith, or of weak will. Jesus himself was labelled mad (Mark 3:21; John 10:19) and, like us, he suffered psychological distress (Luke 22:44; Matt 26:37; Mark 14:33; John 12:27). People experiencing mental ill-health are not some 'other' people, they are 'us'. People in our families, faith communities, workplaces and society are suffering mental ill-health – and they can be of any age or socio-economic background. Whoever and whatever they

are, they need our understanding and support.

We commend the mental health support provided by volunteers and staff of Catholic organisations, hospitals, schools, and community health services, and we encourage you to reach out to them if you or your loved ones need support.

We know too that that there are gaps in the mental health system that need to be addressed. Social determinants including poverty, living conditions, and personal security are significant contributors to mental ill-health. They place people who are already vulnerable or disadvantaged at greater risk of ill-health and of falling through gaps in the system.

During this time of pandemic, we have often heard it said that "we are all in this together". The quality of our care for the people who are the most vulnerable or disadvantaged will be the test of whether or not this is true. A commitment to the common good means attending to the good of all of us, without exception. It means paying special attention to those who are most often overlooked, sidelined or excluded.

It is surely time for us to make mental health a real priority, so that all people may know the fullness of life which Jesus offers (John 10:10).



+ Mark Coleridge

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The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference thanks those involved in the drafting of the Social Justice Statement for 2020–2021 including John Ferguson, Dr Sandie Cornish, Patricia Mowbray OAM, Sr Myree Harris RSJ OAM, Dr Paul Fanning, Dr Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, Fr Justin Glyn SJ and Carmel McKeough with the assistance of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council and the Brisbane Archdiocese Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.

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Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is the permanent assembly of the bishops of our nation and the body through which they act together in carrying out the Church's mission at a national level. The ACBC website at www.catholic.org.au gives a full list of Bishops Conference commissions as well as statements and other items of news and interest.

TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL

MENTAL HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

What does your mental health mean to you?

It can mean different things to different people and our views about it can change as we progress through life. The World Health Organisation defines mental health as:

... a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.¹

Mental health is not simply the absence of illnesses, but having the capacity and opportunity to thrive – that is, to participate in the fullness of life to which Jesus invites us (Jn 10:10). We are a unity of body, mind and spirit. The abundant life to which we are invited engages our whole selves, physically, psychologically and spiritually. It touches all aspects of our life together in community – social, economic and cultural – because God created us out of love and for loving relationships.

We are social beings. We need the bonds of family, friends and the broader community to celebrate the joys and hopes of life. These bonds help us to face

the usual challenges of life, but they are even more important in times of anxiety or despair.

We need the economic means to meet the costs of living, to develop our potential through opportunities to study, to pursue our personal callings through our work, and to plan for the future. A just economy ensures we can contribute to and share in the benefits of our society's common wealth.

Through culture we make sense of the world and hold up shared values such as a 'fair go' and lending a helping hand to others in difficult times. A healthy and sustainable culture breaks through the material entrapments of consumerism and limitations of self-interest.

As creatures made in the image and likeness of God we stand before the mystery of The Transcendent. We feel deeply connected to something, and indeed Someone, beyond ourselves. These bonds of loving relationship to one another, to all of creation, and to the Creator of all that is, help us to experience meaning in life, even in its sufferings and limitations.

These are key ingredients for good health in body, mind and spirit. They point to the quality of personal and social relationships that promote the fullness of life for all.



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