



# CNI

## **FAITH FOCUS - Inviting the black dog into the room**

**In recent years there has been an explosion in ministry specifically to men, writes Jonny Watson of Contemporary Christianity.**

Breakfasts, outings and weekends away for men are now commonplace on the menu of many churches. Alongside this phenomenon statistics show a growing mental health crisis amongst men in this region. Northern Ireland has repeatedly had the highest suicide rate in the UK and men make up over 75% of this statistic. In this age of uncertainty with a rise in global terrorism, economic instability and insatiable demands of the workplace, many men are under increased and sustained pressure, resulting in isolation, addiction and depression. The shadow of the Troubles also looms large with countless men in our communities living with the crippling symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Statutory mental health services are

failing to supply the demand for their services. In November 2016 it was reported that not one of Northern Ireland's five health trusts met the waiting time targets for people experiencing severe mental health difficulties.

Famously, Winston Churchill referred to his depression as "the black dog". Given this dark canine's high prevalence rate, I believe that if churches are serious about engaging with men on a transformational and soulful level, they must welcome the black dog into the room. We kid ourselves if we believe that the men around our church and faith communities are exempt from mental health difficulties. Everyday countless men, before stepping into the public arena, put on a mask and act out differently to how they really feel inside. Although the scriptures don't explicitly use the word depression the symptoms are clearly evident. Throughout the Old Testament we find numerous great biblical characters struggling with feelings which include rejection, fear, weariness, discouragement and even suicidal ideation. In many of the Psalms David writes of his anguish, loneliness, guilt and sense of weakness.

The black dog is wily and shy. He needs gently coaxed into the room or he will hide away. Unfortunately numerous men have shared with

me very negative experiences of 'men's ministries'. Personally, I have attended events where machismo, endurance and strength have clearly been esteemed over the values of honesty, authenticity and vulnerability. Often names and descriptors of groups have militaristic, tough or endurance overtones. Activities often have an over-emphasis on sport, physicality, achieving and winning. Sadly, I have heard subtle denigration of women and gay people through oppressive language, name-calling and so-called humour. Rather than build on the good and emotionally honest work done by the men's movement in the 1980's, what I fear is taking place in many churches is a throwback to the Victorian muscular Christian movement, which will ostracise any attempt at emotional honesty.

Appropriate self disclosure within groups often aids personal growth. When men share their stories with each other an atmosphere of trust intimacy grows. God is undeniably also present with the men. By revealing to God what is on his mind and in his heart a man grows in intimacy with God. Michael Smith describes what is actually taking place is no more than heartfelt prayer.<sup>1</sup>

The mental well-being of men in this country is at crisis point. On a daily basis men are falling through the safety net. As faith communities we must be at the forefront of responding to this. In my work as a spiritual director and educator many men tell me that what they are craving is a safe space where they can articulate their feelings and frustrations to God and one another. To be given an opportunity to ask the questions that truly vex, worry and keep them awake at night without fear of judgement, ridicule or shame. They want to drop the usual roles they play in front of their family and colleagues and stand bare before God<sup>2</sup>. They want to find a group of men they don't have to rival with; but men they can share with, gain support from, learn alongside and find Christ incarnate within. Don't we owe it to them to give them this?

Jonny Watson

*Jonny is a spiritual director based in Belfast. He facilitates groups in male spirituality and is passionate about the need to create environments where men can share, support and learn from each other. To find out more visit [www.jonnywatson.org](http://www.jonnywatson.org)*