

PARISHES CAN HELP

The IBDI (Irish Bishops' Drugs Initiative) began over ten years ago and now, in 2009, fifty-three parishes are involved and active.

Religious communities have played an enormous part in responses to drug and alcohol problems. Many of the residential treatment centres – Cuan Mhuire, Rutland Centre, Aiséirí, Hope House and many others – were founded by members of religious congregations. The treatment services have been provided largely by lay people who share the vision and ethos of the founders. At Merchants Quay in Dublin, for instance, the Franciscans set up a service that also welcomes those who are still using drugs, because that is what they believe their founder, St Francis, would have done – and because they believe that is what Jesus might do if he visited Ireland today.

Parishes can play a part in preventing drug and alcohol problems. Parishes also have an important role in supporting families that are in danger of being dragged down by a family member who is misusing drugs or alcohol. The parish can be a source of strength for these families, enabling both the drug user and the other family members to get help.

This is where two tracks come together: Church and State, spiritual and material. The State can provide many healing services through the HSE, but as a Christian community we can – and should – reach out to people with problems and support them, relate to them, engage with them, motivate them and encourage them to avail of the services that can help.

How can the parish do this?

We often overlook the fact that many parishes are already making constructive responses. For instance:

- A parish that makes a room available for AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings or NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings is reaching out to those with problems.
- A parish whose schools take the SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) programme seriously is already engaged in the prevention of substance misuse.

- If the parish displays posters with a phone number or a website address where the family of a drug user can get help, this parish is already reaching out to those affected by substance misuse.
- If the Confirmation preparation programme includes a meeting for parents to reflect on their own use of alcohol, this is helping to make our community a better environment for our children.

Drug problems affect the whole person: body, mind and spirit. The parish can bring together the relevant helpers, from the Health Services to the Parish Team, to provide realistic, useful and meaningful supports that address the needs of body, mind and spirit.

One person can start the ball rolling; two is twice as good. A lot can be achieved by a small network of parishioners who are committed to educating themselves about prevention and initiating one or two activities. This booklet provides guidelines to help a small network become a significant resource in the parish and community.

Why Parishes? – Why Should Parishes Be Concerned About Drugs And Alcohol?

The parish is a Christian community. Like a family, a Christian community cannot turn its back on its own members who have problems – or should we say ‘especially’ – even if those problems arise from drugs or alcohol. The Christian community will also try to prevent such problems from arising in the first place.

Addiction is a particularly worrying possibility arising from drug and alcohol use. If and when a person becomes addicted, it is painful for that person and for those close to them. The person with the addiction finds it very difficult to break the habit, so they feel powerless and their life often becomes increasingly unmanageable. Both the powerlessness and the unmanageability are felt by their family and friends too, when they find that their efforts to help are rejected and their own lives are disrupted by the addiction.

It is tempting for a community to adopt an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality and condemn the people with addiction, but the Christian community will recognise that they reflect our own weaknesses and will not reject them. When people move from addiction into recovery they can become an inspiration to the rest, as they grow in self-acceptance and become willing to learn from others.

Spirituality is really helpful to people in recovery from addiction. They often say they have been in a spiritual desert while their addiction was at its worst, and in recovery they are greatly strengthened by rediscovering that they are not alone.

The Aim of this Handbook

The aim of this Handbook is to provide a parish with guidelines for good practice, which will enable the parish to participate constructively in the IBDI. The IBDI staff will endeavour to support parishes with training or with ideas about where to source training from other agencies. However, if the demand increases, it may be impossible for the IBDI staff to attend to every request, in which case we hope that this Handbook will prove useful.