

Arms Wide Open: SANCTUARY for Catholics Supports a Faith Community's Mental Health



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Diane Moriarty

Pastoral Associate, St. Mary Church, Uxbridge, MA

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the St. Mary community in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, rose to the occasion. A team of 35 parishioners made phone calls, reaching out to each of its 1200 families to ask how people were doing and if they needed anything. Next, the parish ran 10 “care sessions” via video conferencing for anywhere from two to 15 parishioners. The meetings incorporated prayer, breakout discussion groups, and short videos on spiritual, emotional, and physical wellness from the [St. Luke Institute](#).

The team of St. Mary’s care sessions included pastoral associate Diane Moriarty and four members who worked in the mental health field. Subscribed to FORMED for several years, the parish heavily uses its programs. One week, four of the five discovered SANCTUARY for Catholics, an eight-session program designed to start faith-based community discussions about mental health and illness.

When the team next met, “we all started talking at once,” Moriarty said. “We couldn’t wait to share SANCTUARY with each other.”

SANCTUARY is not counseling or a support group. Intended for those who might be living with mental health challenges or those who love them, the 20- to 25-minute videos delve into topics such as the stigma surrounding mental illness and how to accompany someone who is in recovery. They feature stories of Catholics who are living with mental health challenges, along with the insights of archbishops, theologians, and psychologists. Leader’s guides and participant guides help structure the program for parish use.

The parish team sponsored the eight-week SANCTUARY program in the summer of 2021. Advertising via the parish Flocknote and bulletin, the local press, and the Diocese of Worcester’s weekly bulletin *Diocesan Dispatch*, the team garnered 26 sign-ups.

Team members traded off leading sessions, so that participants got to know everyone. The presenter led the opening prayer, introduced the session, made sure that the group



“I can’t thank the Augustine Institute enough for helping the Catholic community discuss mental health.”



Marybeth Hay

Parishioner
St. Mary Church, Uxbridge, MA

stayed on track with the timed agenda, and helped determine which of the questions in the participant guides should be answered in small groups, rather than in the large group.

According to Moriarty, the 22 regular participants were not afraid to talk amongst themselves.

“I wish we could have given them another hour to keep talking,” Moriarty said.

She noticed participants who “stepped outside their comfort zones” to accompany a nonparticipant who was on a journey to mental wellness.

“They kept coming and wanted to learn more,” Moriarty said. “There was an undercurrent of ‘what’s next?’”

Inspired by SANCTUARY, the team, little by little, is adding to its list of what it wants to accomplish, Moriarty said. That team has put together a list of local mental health resources and is sponsoring a mental health first-aid training for the parish’s staff and ministry heads. Some members of other parishes who participated in SANCTUARY want to offer the program for their own parishioners, while the team itself has grown by two members.

“I don’t think we could have asked for a better program,” Moriarty said. “SANCTUARY has been so well received.”

She praised SANCTUARY for the connection it highlights between the Catholic faith and mental wellness, for its suitability for many different audiences, for the quality of the exercises, and for its beautiful prayers from the saints. Mental health professionals, she said, gain a new perspective on how to help someone who has faith and to hold onto hope.

“It’s extremely well done,” Moriarty said. “The accompanying materials are excellent, and it couldn’t be any easier to lead.”

“Our pastor has been very supportive of this mental health initiative,” Moriarty added. “The more the community can rise up to help one another, the less it’s all on the pastor to minister to the community.”

Marybeth Hay, who has suffered from anxiety and depression, participated in the SANCTUARY program.

“I absolutely, positively love it,” Hay said. “It takes away the feeling of ‘I’m so alone.’”

She praised the program for teaching her how to be “a holy listener.”

“I can’t cure someone or relieve the stress or burden, but I can be a holy listener,” Hay said. “I can be a companion as they suffer; I can be as Christ to them.”

Moriarty would advise members of other parishes to trust that they are qualified to offer SANCTUARY.

“The parish is here to help people on their faith journey,” Moriarty said. “Anything we can do to help their relationship with Christ is a good thing.”

“Trust the Holy Spirit, and you will be led,” Moriarty said.

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