



e, has backed experts' calls for churches to promote gardening for

Lambeth Palace today hosted a conference exploring the links between mental health and gardening, which saw a fresh call for churches to use their green space to offer ‘therapeutic gardening’.

Green Health Live 2, which brought together chaplains, public health experts and healthcare professionals, showcased innovative work being done by parishes to provide therapeutic gardening spaces – and encouraged more churches to work with local mental health charities and medical professionals to do the same.

Last year a survey of clergy showed that mental health issues were at the top of the list of problems they were faced within their parishes. Research makes clear that gardening can help to relieve the effects of depression, loneliness and a range of mental health issues, but many people, particularly in towns and cities, do not have gardens of their own. Churches often have space where a garden can be created to offer basic gardening experience, access to nature and companionship.

The conference, organised by the Church of England’s Environmental Working Group, was opened by Professor Jim McManus, who is President of the Guild of Health and St Raphael, Director of Public Health for Hertfordshire and Vice-President of the Association of Directors of Public Health. Other speakers included the Bishop of Carlisle, James Newcome, the Church of England’s lead bishop on healthcare issues; Professor Harriet Gross of the University of Lincoln and author of *The Psychology of Gardening*; and former politician and now prison chaplain the Revd Jonathan Aitken.

The Bishop of Carlisle, James Newcome, said: “Churches are places where people can find healing and community, so it is no surprise – but it is absolutely wonderful – that growing numbers of parishes are providing spaces for therapeutic gardens. We know that gardening is a powerful form of therapy, and when done with others it tackles loneliness and social isolation. It’s my hope that churches will embrace this opportunity to make a valuable and vital contribution to supporting mental health in our communities.”

Professor Jim McManus said: “The evidence that gardening has physical and mental health benefits – from relaxation and destressing to coping with anxiety – and physical strength benefits is unquestionable. Churches have enormous potential to help people build resilience and cope with problems through gardening, reaching out to people who may find no other venue for support. This is a huge untapped asset for the public’s health, and by championing this, Green Health Live is leading the way through practical examples and providing scientific and theological rationale.”

Professor Harriet Gross said: “Gardening is good for mental health; it reduces stress and can raise your mood. Gardens also allow reflection or thinking of nothing. Convincing evidence shows the benefits of being purposeful outdoors in nature, which is engaging but mentally undemanding. Creating gardens with others in shared spaces, like churches, brings personal and social benefits too, as Green Health Live will

show. These gardens provide a safe place to go and to take part in activities, where people feel valued as individuals.”

The Revd Jonathan Aitken said: “Therapeutic gardening has a valuable role to play in the rehabilitation of offenders and as a calming and caring influence on prison communities. I know this from personal experience. During my prison sentence 20 years ago I did regular work in the prison flowerbeds and in its market gardens. We prisoners were pleased to have something useful to do which beautified and benefitted our surroundings. I noticed that working in the garden was particularly helpful to those prisoners suffering from mental health problems. The work



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