

**ONTARIO PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF  
THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF CANADA  
EDUCATION & HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ORAL REPORT**

**CONVENTION, July, 2015**

Madam President:

The responsibilities of the Education & Health Standing Committee encompass many areas that impact on our daily lives ... Catholic education, Literacy and Continuing Education, Scholarships and Bursaries, Wellness and Sickness/disease, Environment and Genetics. Each area has its own issues and challenges, each illustrating the complex nature of the concept of Social Justice.

Social Justice begins with the teachings of Jesus, and his commitment to basic fairness and a life of dignity for the poorest of the poor. Social Justice means moving towards a society where all hungry are fed, all sick are cared for, the environment is treasured, and we treat each other with love and compassion. Not an easy goal, for sure, but certainly one worth striving for.

Social Justice provides the foundation for a healthy community, and only as we recognize the value and dignity of each person can we build a healthy community. It is a slow and often painful process of learning and growing ... developing attitudes of respect for one another.

The lives of people with mental health conditions are often plagued by stigma as well as discrimination. Stigma is a negative stereotype -- how those affected are judged by others. Discrimination is unfair treatment due to a person's identity... things such as race, citizenship, religion to list only a few. Unfortunately, having a mental illness also leads to discrimination.

There are significant consequences to these negative public attitudes. Stereotypes about mental health conditions have led to some individuals being denied adequate housing, health insurance and jobs due to their history of mental illness. Often the stigma attached to mental health conditions is so pervasive that people who suspect they might have a mental health condition are unwilling to seek help for fear of what others may think.

No one would ever say that someone with a broken arm or a broken leg is less than a whole person, but people say that or imply that all the time about people with mental illness.

The aim of Resolution ON.13.01 'Reduce the Stigma Attached to Mental Illness' was to address this critical social injustice, and has been the major focus and highlight of the Education & Health Standing Committee over the past two years.

Councils across the province have embraced this Resolution, and have been involved in actions aimed at reducing the stigma attached to mental illness in many ways. Meetings and conventions have featured guest speakers who addressed the topic. Members educated themselves by researching issues related to mental illness via the internet.

Many supported and participated in Bell Let's Talk Day and other community and corporate initiatives, sometimes individually, often as a group. We have also begun to question our own reactions and attitudes, to work at being more compassionate, understanding, loving and supportive of those who suffer from mental illness. And our changed attitudes are influencing those around us ... families, friends and more.

As Education & Health Chairperson, I have endeavoured to share information on mental health issues with members through reports, directives, Trillium News articles, and our provincial On Line Newsletter.

A Prayer for Those Living With Mental Illness which I wrote was shared not only with members in Ontario, but was circulated by our national Education & Health Chairperson, and can be found on our provincial website.

Our efforts, combined with those of Bell Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada and Partners for Mental Health have led to some improvement in attitudes towards those suffering with mental illness, but there are still many situations where individuals with mental illness suffer the '*double diagnosis of symptoms and stigma*'. While progress is being made, there is still a long way to go.

In many ways, we have reached a crossroads when it comes to reducing the stigma attached to mental illness. We can be content with the progress made so far, or we can build on the momentum that has been created. What would Jesus do?

Unless the stigma that is attached to people with mental illness is overturned, their rights will continue to be marginalized, invalidated, violated and/or ignored. Are we prepared to settle for less than true Social Justice for those who suffer from this devastating illness?

As I mentioned in one of my directives, the theme chosen by national president Barbara Dowding certainly lends itself and speaks encouragingly to our continued focus on *Reducing the Stigma Attached to Mental Illness*.

Our *hearts* have been filled with mercy and compassion for those afflicted with this devastating illness.

Our *voices* are united in the challenge to speak truthfully about this disease, to make people aware of its negative effects on so many of our friends and family, and to bring about change in the way it is diagnosed and treated.

I truly understand a comment made by actress Glenn Close .... "*The mentally ill frighten and embarrass us. And so we marginalize the people who most need our acceptance. What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candor, more unashamed conversation.*"

Our *mission*, through joyful service and in many cases personal encounter, has attempted to fill that need. Hopefully, we will continue to do so.

This concludes my oral report.