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Bishops pray June 13, 2024, at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Spring Plenary Assembly in Louisville, Ky. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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The launch of a mental health initiative by the U.S. bishops last year has "received a lot of traction," according to one of its leaders.

Bishop Robert E. Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota — who leads the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth — updated his fellow bishops on the National Catholic Mental Health Campaign during a June 13 session of the USCCB's 2024 Spring Plenary Assembly.

The gathering — part of the bishops' annual fall and spring general assemblies convened to conduct business and to discuss various canonical and civil issues — is being held June 12-14 in Louisville, Kentucky, with public sessions being livestreamed June 13 and 14 via the USCCB website.

The USCCB's mental health campaign was launched in October 2023 under Barron and Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, who chairs the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Several organizations partnered with Gudziak and Barron in developing the campaign — among them Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, the National Catholic Network de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana, the National Institute for Ministry with Young Adults, and the Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers.

In their introductory message for the effort, the two prelates said their goals were threefold: to raise greater awareness of the issue, to remove the sense of stigma for those suffering from mental illness, and "to advocate a clear message to all: everyone who needs help should get help."

Gudziak (who was unable to attend the USCCB spring assembly due to an overseas funeral) recently told OSV News that "awareness is growing, and we see ever more the dangers and the burdens of mental health issues."

Close to 60 million U.S. adults, or one in five, experienced mental illness in 2021, with more than 14 million of them reporting a serious condition, and well over 19 million battling both substance abuse and mental illness concurrently, according to

the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The nation's youth have been particularly hard hit: In 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued an advisory on the issue, citing data that showed in 2019, one in three high school students and half of female students reported feelings of persistent sadness or hopelessness, a 40% spike since 2009.

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Speaking to OSV News in late May, Gudziak said, "There's still a lot of stigma and fear about dealing with mental health in a holistic and professional way."

During his report at the USCCB spring assembly, Barron said that over the past several months, campaign organizers have "held roundtable discussions around two populations impacted by mental health — namely, young adults and our own clergy."

Those conversations have provided "a foundation from which to build, and have more roundtables to come," he said.

A recording of one such roundtable, held on March 19, is available on the USCCB website, and Barron said that forthcoming sessions would also be posted online.

At the same time, "discussion, while fruitful ... would only scratch the surface" of the crisis, he said.

The campaign has "truly elicited much fervor among the faithful," said Barron. "We know we're on to something here."

He invited the bishops present to focus their breakout discussions about the campaign on three points: existing programs and ministries in their dioceses that respond to mental health concerns, strategies the church can employ to alleviate the stigma associated with mental health challenges, and ways in which "the church's prophetic voice is advocating for persons and families impacted by mental health."

Joining Barron in his update were Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, and Brian Corbin, CCUSA executive vice president for member

services.

Robinson said that most of the 15 million individuals served by CCUSA over the past year had "endured some form of trauma," which can make a person "more vulnerable to experiencing a mental health crisis or developing post-traumatic stress disorder."

She cited several statistics from the 2022 KFF/CNN Mental Health in America survey, which found that 28% of the nation's families reported having a member who required in-person treatment for mental health distress, with 21% having a family member receiving emergency medical treatment for a drug overdose, 16% losing a family member to suicide, and 16% having a family member experience homelessness due to mental illness.

Robinson said that becoming a "trauma-aware church" entails being aware of and sensitive to trauma's impact" on families, while helping parishioners "recognize their experience of, and response to, trauma" and providing "restorative spiritual and professional resources" in a variety of ways.

Corbin described some of those resources, including CCUSA's Whole Hearted, a parish-based trauma-awareness aid that integrates spirituality and religious practices with behavioral health, and CCUSA's Hope, a pilot program to develop a mental health chatbot.

Also highlighted during the session was the experience of Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, who, in his May 2024 pastoral letter, "A Future with Hope," shared his own struggles with depression and anxiety, and how an integrated, Catholic approach to mental health enabled him to return to ministry after a leave of absence.

"Our dream is to have all Catholics across the country praying, talking about, learning and advocating for spiritual and mental well-being in our dioceses," said Barron.

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)