The Sacred Art of Living and Dying

This autumn, Our Lady’s Hospice & Care Services in Harold’s Cross in Dublin, will once again welcome award-winning theologian, lecturer and author, Professor Richard Groves and ‘The Sacred Art of Living & Dying’ programme. The programme enables individuals to enhance their spiritual development and transform suffering in themselves and in those in their care. In this article, Patricia Hallahan, Director of Education, Training and Research at Our Lady’s Hospice & Care Services, talks about the programme.

In 2009 – 2010, we provided the Sacred Art of Living and Dying Programme for over 160 participants, including many of our own hospice staff and volunteers. Last year, nearly 50 people completed the follow-on 2-year Anam Cara Apprenticeship Programme which enabled them to further enhance their own spiritual development and develop the skills to become ‘midwives’ or anamcara for those who are reaching the end of life.

The programme founder and director is Professor Richard Groves who in 1997, with his late wife, Mary, founded the Sacred Art of Living Centre. Richard was a hospital chaplain for over thirty years, and has graduate degrees in theology, ethics, world religions and law. He is the author, along with Henriette Klauser, of *The American Book of Living and Dying*, which is in its third printing in English, with a Japanese edition and a Spanish translation pending. Richard worked closely with Irish poet and philosopher, John O’Donohoe (author of *Anam Cara* and *Benedictus*) and since 1997, the Sacred Art of Living and Dying programme has been completed by over 20,000 people in Europe, America and Asia.
Richard, whose work on the enhancement of end-of-life care has been praised by Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement and Mother Teresa amongst others, says his teachings are not just for those who are grieving. ‘This sacred work is applicable in all situations of life involving life-changing transitions’.

Following a positive evaluation of the first Sacred Art of Living and Dying programme completed in Our Lady’s Hospice & Care Services in 2010, we made some adjustments to the programme and decided to repeat it here this year so that more people could benefit from this opportunity and so that we could train our own staff and other Irish facilitators to be able to deliver the programme in future.

The two-year Sacred Art of Living and Dying programme is delivered in four 6-month units. It addresses the 4 key dimensions of spiritual health and pain which are Meaning, Forgiveness, Hope and Core Relationships. Participants are provided with the tools to explore these dimensions and readings and exercises help them to recognize, diagnose and assist in the transformation of spiritual pain in themselves and in those for whom they provide care.

‘Participants get a lot out of this programme,’ Richard tells us, ‘sometimes we try to snuff out pain with psychotherapy and drugs but by leaning into our pain we can get through it rather than trying to get around it’. Professor Philip Larkin of UCD, who has completed the programme, said ‘this programme provides an
exceptional opportunity for the personal and professional spiritual reawakening that is so needed in our contemporary society’.

Faith communities can benefit from the programme by training staff and volunteers particularly those caring for older people or those visiting the sick and dying members of the parish. Personal spiritual transformation and the ability to help those they serve to recognize and heal their own spiritual pain are the positive outcomes of this programme.

The work of The Sacred Art of Living & Dying programme has been found to be transformational not only for participants but also for the health and other organizations who employ them. ‘Staff members are so appreciative of the opportunity to improve the way they care,’ Richard tells us, ‘and organizations are starting to recognize that this gratitude translates into a reduction in staff burn-out, decreased staff turnover and increased employee satisfaction – which is obviously of immediate benefit to patients.’

There may be some spaces still available on the upcoming Sacred Art of Living and Dying programme, commencing in November which involves four 2-day (Fri-Sat) sessions in our centre in Harold’s Cross, followed by small group work in participants’ own location, wherever that may be. Last time we had groups from around the country and even some who travelled from other countries. For more information about the course visit www.olh.ie or contact us at education@olh.ie or 01 406 8806.