

SERVE leadership programme to be launched in September

Connor Youth Council will be launching the SERVE leadership programme, developed by Tim Burns, Diocesan Youth Officer for Down & Dromore, in September.

The course will be led by the Rev Philip Benson and Connor Youth Officer Christina Baillie.

It helps young people aged 15-19 to explore leadership, and equips them to lead in their local parish context.

Christina said: "We believe it will enthuse young people to develop in their leadership capacity, and then challenge them to glorify God by serving in their church family."

Further details at www.connor.angican.org.

Connor Takes the Castle 2019

Applications are open for the annual Connor youth diocesan discipleship weekend from September 6-8.

Diocesan Youth Officer Christina Baillie said: "Connor Youth Council would love to see youth leaders bring groups of young people from parishes across the diocese to join them for a fully planned weekend, taking place in Castlewellan Castle. The weekend is for all young people aged 11-18 to attend with their leaders.

"There will be sessions led by The Big House; worship; small group time as well as big activities including Soft Arrow Combat and Salt Factory Sports for the Saturday afternoon slot."

Get set for Streetreach!

Streetreach 2019 will partner with Mossley Parish to facilitate a local missional experience for the young people of the diocese.

The team will work alongside parish members to run a kids' club, outreach to families, practical work and a community event.

A commissioning service for Streetreach took place in the Church of the Holy Spirit, Mossley, on June 16. The team was commissioned by Archdeacon George Davison.



A place to ask the right questions

Affirm, a new project to support young people going through difficulty, is making an impact on young lives across Connor Diocese.

Affirm was launched by Connor Youth Officer Christina Baillie last October. The project makes use of local expertise through different established organisations, specifically The Big House.

Training sessions for youth groups have taken place in Ballymena, Lambeg and St Stephen and St Luke's parishes, and several teenage girls took part in 'Made for More,' a girls' residential weekend organised by The Big House and held at Whitepark Bay Youth Hostel in April.

Together with The Big House, Christina is currently working on a resource which will be launched at the Connor Takes the Castle weekend in September.

Project Director of The Big House, Mark Kernohan, said: "We have a vision of having a place where young people can come and feel safe, but until we get a house, we have been going out to churches and speaking to young people about difficult issues, and exploring what a safe place looks like within the church.

"We talk about how they manage their difficulties, and about healthy coping mechanisms."

Mark said one of the hardest places for young people to face difficulty is in church.

"We find there is a perception among young people that you should not have any problems if you have Jesus. Young people are afraid to say that they are struggling when they are told that if they read the Bible more often they will be able to cope."

He said social media, where people tend to profile all the good things in their lives, added to young people's problems. "They are left to think that their own life is rubbish," he said. "It is still early in terms of research into the impact of social media, but it is already clear the influence it has. Social Media presents a façade, not real life."

Christina said social media can also have its benefits. "If a young person is facing difficulties they are connected with others 24/7, and can send a cry for help to a friend even in the middle of the night," she said. "Social media can be helpful in terms of getting support, but the negative is that it can also be used for bullying."

The Big House offers counselling services on a one-to-one basis to young people at clinics normally held on the north coast. Young people who attend are referred to the project, generally by their parents.

The residential retreats, like that held in April, are purposely kept small, with 14

young people being supported by 12 staff and volunteers. "The residential offers the experience to get away somewhere beautiful where they can find Jesus in difficulty," Mark said.

"We offer a place for everybody, the young person may be accompanied by a friend or youth leader."

Christina said it was her own experiences that inspired her to seek the resources to launch Affirm. "For me personally, part of it was being a teenager and feeling overwhelmed and not sure how this related to church and faith. Then, as a young adult, seeing my peers still struggling with it," she said.

"We have not fixed ourselves yet and we probably haven't even found good ways of coping. I worry about the next generation. I worry that they will continue to struggle and in 10 years' time will not be equipped to deal with issues and particularly how this relates to faith.

"I have had conversations with clergy and youth leaders about these issues, and see that they are prevalent in our churches."

Mark said: "Most church youth leaders will say their kids are okay, but we talk with them and find they are not - they are afraid to tell their leaders how they feel.

"The church has some amazing people there for young people, but we need to be equipped and ahead of the game and I fear we are lagging."

The Big House has six part-time staff and works primarily with churches, although the organisation has also had conversations

with Scripture Union groups and helps resource other youth organisations.

All its resources are faith based. The new resource, to be launched at the Connor youth weekend in September, will focus on healthy coping. "We will be putting forward 20 different healthy coping mechanisms, and in our explanation of each of these there is a theological or biblical basis of how we can engage in that coping mechanism as Christians," Christina said.

She wants youth groups in the diocese to use the resource to help young people talk about their difficulties. "For me, a purpose of this project is to support clergy, leaders and youth workers, telling them there is an excellent organisation in Northern Ireland to support you. The next step is that our leaders are able to facilitate safe spaces with young people coming forward to talk about difficulties, not something they try to avoid. It should be part of our teaching and part of our structure."

Mark added: "It is not hard for young people to open up once we ask them the right questions. This new resource encourages people to open up in a safe and healthy way."

There will be a special 'listening space' provided at the Connor Takes the Castle weekend where young people can talk to someone confidentially if they wish.

The youth weekend marks the beginning of the second year of the Affirm project, which has been funded for two years by the Church of Ireland Priorities Fund.

To learn more about The Big House, visit www.thebighouse.org.uk.



I learnt God is with me - no matter what

When I was 14, my youth leader suggested a Big House camp to me. Our youth leader said the camp would be fun and a chance to hear more about who God says we are, writes a **young person**.

When we arrived, the team helped us settle and get to know the other girls. Everyone was new to camp, so it wasn't that hard to make friends.

I really enjoyed all the games on the beach, the music and the crafts. But what stood out for me the most was the way the team talked about God. I learnt that God loves me and is with me, no matter what is happening in my life, and He says incredible things about who He has made me to be (loved, forgiven, cherished).

I really enjoyed spending time in the prayer room, and learning new ways about how to relax and talk to God about absolutely anything. One of my other favourite things about camp was having the chance to chat to someone in The Listening Space about my exam worries. She helped me come up with helpful things to do when I feel stressed, and these really helped me during my GCSEs.

I was helped to give the right support

I contacted Big House when I wasn't sure how to best support a young person who was struggling with her mental health and finding some situations at home difficult, writes a **youth leader**.

She had signed up for a residential programme with the youth group, and I had some uncertainties about whether I could offer the right level of care for her.

Big House walked through my concerns. They gave me practical advice on how to approach the weekend with the young person and the best way to ensure we put the right support in place with her. They suggested things I hadn't thought of, and also reassured me of what I could do.

During the training they provided us as leaders, I learned about healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms. I was able to walk through these with the young person as we prepared for the residential, and when we were away. I was able to encourage her to keep using the healthy coping strategies at different times when she was finding things difficult.

Thanks to Big House, I had more confidence in my role to support her.