

Members' Questionnaire

The survey 2012.

A report from the Executive Committee

The members of **Christians on Ageing** were invited to give their views on what the organisation is doing and what it could do in the future through a questionnaire sent out with *plus* magazine in September 2012. Eighty three replies had been received by the end of October – that's over a third of the membership. In terms of responses to similar questionnaires this is a fantastic result. It has given a great boost to the Executive Committee as it continues the task of turning **Christians on Ageing** more obviously into a *resource to the Churches*.

Who are we?

One of the questions asked members to record their denomination or Church affiliation. This was the result:

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|--------------------|----|-------|
| Anglican | 40 | 41.2% |
| Baptist | 6 | 6.2% |
| Congregational | 1 | 1.0% |
| Methodist | 16 | 16.5% |
| Quaker | 3 | 3.1% |
| Roman Catholic | 12 | 12.4% |
| Salvation Army | 1 | 1.0% |
| Scottish Episcopal | 1 | 1.0% |
| Unitarian | 1 | 1.0% |
| United Reformed | 10 | 10.3% |
| Not declared | 7 | 7.2% |

The Committee will probably try to glean more information about affiliation from members as this will be important in future discussions with Church leaders. There may also be a need to publicise **Christians on Ageing** more specifically within some of the Churches in order to achieve a better balance of membership.

The answers to the question about age did not come as too much of a surprise:

| | | |
|----------|----|-------|
| Under 60 | 9 | 10.2% |
| 60 -70 | 21 | 21.6% |
| 70 – 80 | 37 | 38.1% |
| Over 80 | 29 | 29.9% |

Whilst it is to be expected that an organisation like ours will have a majority of members who are 'older' old, there is always a need to attract 'younger' older people if the organisation is to have a viable future. Additionally, if **Christians on Ageing** aims to have an influence on those who decide things on behalf of older people, it should be attracting the interest of what might be called 'practitioners in ageing' – for example, care-workers, ministers, chaplains, medical staff, etc. We need to explore more actively how we can reach and include these in our membership.

Section 9 of the questionnaire asked about the reasons for becoming a member of **Christians on Ageing**. Many of the responses are quite specific to an individual and will, therefore, be useful to the Executive Committee in building an understanding of people's motivation for joining; many indicate an initial interest stoked by professional involvement with older people or organisations working with them; several liked the idea of being part of something which added to the work of non-religious charities; many first met **Christians on Ageing** through *plus* and, tellingly, many mentioned the late Mannes Tidmarsh and Paula Francomb as persuasive advocates both for older people and for **Christians on Ageing**.

Belonging and believing

Inevitably people reflect on their faith as they get older. For some, this is a matter of their personal prayer and spiritual life; for some there is a concern that this is not as strong as it should be, or they have doubts about aspects of it. A number of respondents (20% of the total) refer to doubt about their faith – some feel they lack sufficient trust in God at this last lap, some worry that their concept of God is inadequate, and some find their faith challenged by alternative scientific or social views of the world. There were also those who worried about how to remain faithful to the church as their physical strength declined, or they got caught up in new family responsibilities such as baby-sitting for grandchildren, or thoughts about their faith journeys led on to issues of death and the hereafter.

No matter the denomination, members wrote freely about their own life of faith (in answers to more than one section) and it was clear that there is a sense of disappointment about the current state of the Churches, a worry that whilst there is much engagement with social issues there is a lack of emphasis on what feeds faith: prayer, the search for holiness, and making relevant the gospel message. Our members want the Churches to help them to pray, despite the busy pace of life; they want to know how they can do more to witness to the gospel even when physically or mentally less able. At the same time, there is recognition that developments in society and science offer challenges to the authority of the Churches and the individual's reliance on traditional models of belief. There is no doubt about the continuing faith of members in the essence of being Christian: the person of Jesus, redeemer and teacher, and much hope that this life of faith will not be in vain. Several responses referred to the dwindling of the circle of friends and the inevitability of being more and more alone as life continues and death draws near. There is a significant call for the Churches to think through how to offer the insights of theological reflection to people who have had most of their journey in faith but who still need feeding in mind and spirit. The responses in section 3 of the questionnaire, particularly, display a degree of contentment but no complacency.

Location, location

There is no doubt whatsoever about where the action is: the local Church. When asked in the questionnaire (section 4) whether or not members' Churches acknowledge and address issues and questions of importance to older people, the majority of responses deal solely with the local Churches. If the experience of **Christians on Ageing** members is common, there is an enormous variety of activity and care, even if of a fairly traditional kind: lunch clubs, outings, visits at

home, transport, loop systems, large-print booklets, etc. Some have pointed out that older people are still very much part of the Church and, in many cases, are active participants in running things; in many places 'all age worship' is just what it says, including provision for older people. There is also, interestingly, some reporting of opportunities for worship, discussion and specialised spiritual care which belies some of the comments made about the Churches' interest in the deeper matters of faith and the spirit. This might indicate that respondents' comments about the latter referred to their perception of the Churches beyond their locality – which is precisely the level at which **Christians on Ageing** needs to operate, and therefore this distinction may be important as we seek ways to be a resource to the Churches. It is hard, also, not to draw the conclusion that – even where there are interesting and valuable activities for older people – there is still an emphasis on supporting younger people whilst older people are largely left to their own devices, taken for granted, somewhat patronised and rarely asked to contribute as equals.

Section 6 of the questionnaire dealt with special ministry or projects involving older people. The responses are included here because, again, people reported on what they experience at the local level. There's an awful lot happening ranging from special pastors working with groups and individuals, to study programmes and support sessions for those with special needs and a great deal of activity centred around care homes and their residents. It is striking how so many respondents indicate that something worthwhile is happening in their locality, suggesting that there is a willingness by Churches at local level to engage with older people's needs and interests. The range of activities mixes the more traditionally spiritual with the practical: worship and fellowship, bereavement counselling, keep-fit, holiday at home clubs, to mention a few in the mix. What is less certain is the quality of all this activity: some seems to reflect the practice of communities in an earlier age, which relied on a ready supply of volunteers and a greater level of personal and community interaction than is often found today. The effectiveness of Churches Together as a concept and for practical action at local level is amply illustrated. **Christians on Ageing** will benefit from making greater contact with those offering specialised support locally and/or those who deploy them.

Caring for the Carers

The message from the responses to the question (in section 5) about being a carer is simple: you are a teeny bit on your own. 18.6% of members responding placed themselves in the category of being a carer and the impression given is that the Churches (again with an emphasis on local) generally show poor understanding of a carer's needs and tend to make noises about offering support without much direct involvement. The responses indicated that if there is someone in a leadership position who is interested, things will happen; otherwise, support of a practical kind is patchy, although where it does exist, it is good. There was a reality in many of the response, including the person who wrote of how hard it can be to love and care for other people. There was also a clear message: the clergy especially need better training in how to visit sick people, how to listen and respond, and how to offer prayer for and with those who are caring for frail older people. **Christians on Ageing** will have to consider how it can offer material in its magazine and its publications which supports home carers, and perhaps encourage research and other investigations within the Churches.

Working with others

The **Christians on Ageing** members who have been able to respond to section 7 of the questionnaire about involvement with other organisations are busy people. Local voluntary schemes, Age UK and U3A occupy some of their spare time but there are also hospital chaplains, home visitors, work with mental health organisations and a spread of well-known charities. It is heartening to know that so many members are active in so many aspects of community, despite some people sadly having to reflect on what they used to do rather than what they are able to do now. The responses in this section have a sense of liveliness and engagement.

It is a different story for section 8, the responses about discussion etc at diocesan, district or synod level. The word which comes to mind to describe how members perceive what the Churches are doing at this level is: 'slim'. It should be noted that just over a quarter of respondents gave replies to this question but, if these are the members involved in their Church beyond their own locality, the responses are probably a reasonable reflection of the reality. The impression given by the responses is not so much apathy or lack of care, but simple carelessness, if such a subtlety is allowed. No one at regional meetings of various kinds is doing much thinking or talking about older people and their place in the life of the Churches. Our members are of one mind about how this should be tackled: the Churches need an organisation to act as a spur to action. And what organisation could do this? **Christians on Ageing** leaps to their collective mind!

A resource to the Churches

Not every member responded to every request in the questionnaire but in section 11 all but eight out of ninety seven wanted to say something. This is the section concerned with **Christians on Ageing** and its planning for development, the task currently occupying the time and energy of the Executive Committee. There is no doubt in many members' minds about the need to continue with the most successful work of **Christians on Ageing**: its publications and, in particular, *plus*, our magazine. Not only has this brought individual comfort and insight to members, it has distributed and developed ideas which have had an effect on practice in the Churches, albeit at mostly local level. There is genuine gratitude for the magazine; all involved in its maintenance and production should be rightly proud. There is encouragement as well, however, for the magazine and other publications to confront some of the current issues affecting older people's lives, not least the growing incidence of dementia as a feature of older age, as more people live to greater old age; and so-called end of life matters, including decision-making about suitable measures to be taken for the prolongation of life in terminal conditions. There is concern for older people experiencing difficulties because of the general economic downturn and reductions in available services from central and local government. There is also a great desire for **Christians on Ageing** to be in the forefront of action to keep older people as part of the picture: "making elderly people visible instead of invisible" said one member.

The list of things which **Christians on Ageing's** members think it could be doing is massive; this is just a small selection:

- Information and advice easily signposted

- Providing opportunities for pastoral carers to meet
- Linking to ministers/clergy in training
- Selling older people as a resource, not just a constituency of need
- Helping older people to understand ageing and its potential for creativity
- Making the name **Christians on Ageing** well-known, even feared by decision-makers
- Looking at existing new ways of providing spiritual nourishment
- Being a voice for the Christian contribution to national debates about ageing issues
- Providing a place for information on practical things like choosing a care home, dealing with bereavement, frailty, and death
- Seeking out good materials to help providers of spiritual care including new resource packs for ministers and leaders
- Building on the work already well-known in dementia care
- Asking questions – such as, what is being done by the Churches to support and include those too frail to come to worship
- Taking every opportunity to speak out in public and offering articles and contributions from our own publications to other media.

The Executive Committee will look at every single contribution, including those listed above.

‘So, what?’

The members of **Christians on Ageing** are spread, mainly, around England with a few living in Scotland and N Ireland, and also lone outposts in the USA and New Zealand. Forty three respondents indicated their interest in attending a meeting if one was arranged in their region. It is part of the Committee’s intention to look seriously at greater involvement with members and especially to give opportunities for members to share ideas both face to face and, in the not too distant future, on a re-launched website. There will be practical issues, and cost-implications and sensible judgements will have to be made about what is possible. One idea may be to host open meetings or day conferences in the areas where there are reasonable numbers of members, who themselves might be encouraged to help prepare and manage the events.

The results of the questionnaire exercise is helping the Executive Committee to decide where to focus the energies of the organisation over the next few years. Nothing will be ignored or forgotten but some ideas will be used first; already, it is possible to see how many of the suggestions for future action fit with the programme of development presented to the AGM in May 2012.