

# **Notes on a Christians on Ageing Conference Call**

## **Volunteers: their recruitment and support**

This was a Zoom conference held on 22 September 2020. We were: Joseph Cortis (leading the discussion), Gerry Burke, Albert Jewell, David Jolley, Jo Kennedy (listening only), Satwant Rait (listening only), Jim Sharpe, Marion Shoard.

We were beset with technical problems with failing microphones and lack of ability to share the hosting facility. Joseph had prepared a careful Power Point presentation but coped by talking to this.

Joseph introduced the discussion by explaining his position at Caritas Diocese of Leeds (RC), and that he had accepted a commission from the bishop to conduct **an audit of volunteering activity** within the diocese. This provided a factual backcloth to exploring the activities of volunteers within a Christian community in these times.

### ***The broad aims of the audit***

- What are volunteers doing?
- Can we capture what is being done and celebrate it?
- How can challenges be addressed?
- Can we identify needs not being met?
- What new initiatives are needed to support what is being done and could be developed?

### ***The survey***

- Following a pilot in April 2017, all parishes, Catholic Associations and chaplaincies in the Diocese of Leeds were asked to complete a survey which was offered on-line and as hard-copy during May through to August 2017
- There were 118 responses from Leeds, Bradford, Kirklees, Wakefield and four other localities.
- The responses identified the main beneficiaries of voluntary activities by the churches as: older people (38%), low income households (25%), with families, young people, homeless people, refugees and ‘others’ making up the balance. Of note however: 69% of these groups were being supported by between 10-20 people per group and mostly elderly.
- Some activities were organised under the umbrellas of: St Vincent de Paul Society ([www.svp.org.uk](http://www.svp.org.uk)) (34), the Union of Catholic Mothers ([www.theucm.co.uk](http://www.theucm.co.uk)) (6), the Legion of Mary ([www.legionofmary.ie](http://www.legionofmary.ie)) (4), over 60s clubs (7), lunch clubs (3), refugee meetings (2) clubs for young people or children (6), and Justice & Peace (1)
- The identified aims of voluntary activities were: support to the vulnerable, friendship, food distribution, inclusion in parish life, strengthening faith and spiritual well-being, tackling loneliness and stimulating social interaction.
- Activities undertaken were: visits, awareness raising of specific issues, financial support, prayers, days out and other social activity, listening, entertainment and giving advice.

### ***After the survey: reflection and questions***

Joseph posed a number of questions and all were invited to offer answers or suggestions from their own experience.

- Is effort matched to identifiable need?
- Do organisations collaborate with others?
- Are volunteers provided with support and development opportunities?
- Are activities linked to gospel values? (Faith, service, courage, justice, hope, love, reconciliation and community <https://cici-online.org/catechetical-connections/gospel-values>)
- Are we only looking after our own?
- Is there need for a more targeted and structured approach?
- Can we look critically at what we do? Can we collaborate with others? Is there joined up thinking?
- Essential in all voluntary work: how do we ensure safeguarding, safety, insurance, data protection, confidentiality, registration, and the provision of a support agency?
- In getting people involved: what would success look like? What do we need to get done? Who do we know who might be interested? Who could we engage to find a volunteer to do it?

An extensive exploration of these issues is available in ‘Reaching Out’ – a report from Caritas Social Action Network 2019 – [www.csan.org.uk](http://www.csan.org.uk)

Saint (Mother) Teresa of Calcutta put it like this: *‘I can do things you cannot; you can do things I cannot (but) together we can do great things’*

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Joseph’s outstanding presentation was followed by a **wide ranging discussion**, with Joseph responding to many points and extending our knowledge.

Jim told us about his own experiences as a volunteer – especially playing the piano for people in Care Homes, often with two friends – a musician and a singer. This had been a well-received mission, and given and enjoyed freely by Jim and his friends. The rules of Covid have denied them access to Homes and denied residents and staff the pleasure and therapy of music. There is discussion to be had about the hazards and advantages of strict rules in Care Homes, but there is a strong lobby to emphasise the life-preserving virtue of activities such as Jim’s; there are well articulated comments that people are dying because of their sadness and lack of stimulation in Care Homes.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/they-could-die-of-loneliness-how-covid-policies-impact-care-homes>

### **Volunteers**

Attention was drawn to the difficulties of **managing devoted but strong-willed volunteers**, who have views about what they should be doing and find it difficult to be directed. It was noted that ‘Prima Donnas’ are not confined to the female gender, nor to one particular denomination

Marion highlighted the tension between organising volunteers and suppressing the initiative of committed people. Volunteers who give up their time and energy to do proactive things often do not like being told what to do by a central organisation. It’s important to **foster their initiative and energy** while ensuring their activities slot into a wider plan for the organisation. But she felt it is often better to give as much power as possible to the local level and allow volunteers as much free rein as possible.

Marion agreed with Joseph that volunteers need back-up support, for instance, if they are visiting older people. This sounds a straightforward activity, but the ***volunteer visitor can easily get into difficult situations.*** Some of the voluntary, secular befriending organisations are sophisticated in the way they match visitor and person to be visited, train visitors and provide ongoing support to them, including counselling if the person they had been visiting should die; she couldn't recall seeing anything quite as effective as that in a church setting.

She also thought voluntary groups work best when someone is responsible for keeping the group together, resolving conflicts and making sure every volunteer is happy with what they are doing.

David asked ***to what extent Christians should confine their voluntary activity to church-based groups*** as opposed to participating in wider voluntary activity e.g. in a friends of a local park group or the dementia charities.

Joseph wondered whether Jim could keep contact with his care home group through Zoom sessions in which residents in the lounge could see and hear him singing and they could join in – in other words, a ***virtual live performance.*** Marion explained that a chaplain she knew was leading services by means of interactive video calls in a care home in Maidstone; they provide a means for both she and the residents to enjoy singing together safely.

Some surprise was expressed at ***how little seems to have been published*** about the characteristics of volunteers in general. One paper from Helen Bussell and Deborah Forbes (2001) points out that volunteering in differing situations probably attracts different people. Overall women are more likely to give time as volunteers than men. People over 50 are more inclined to volunteer and stay with the work longer

- <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/nvsm.183>

***Volunteering with faith communities*** and particularly in relation to Christian Churches in the UK is likely to include a population which differs from volunteers in other settings. Many churches have seen a reduction in numbers of regular worshippers. Most churches have a predominantly old membership.

- <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>
- <http://www.brin.ac.uk/socio-demographic-groups-and-religious-affiliation-in-britain/>

This means that ***volunteers are drawn largely from people in the second half of life.*** Older people may have more time to give – and experience. But they often have responsibilities for older or younger family members, or people the same age. The perception that 'everything falls on the willing few' has to be analysed – we find that those who are now dependent have given massively in the past. Some will choose to give time to charitable activities not limited to the faith community.

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The **Caritas Social Action Network** project is well described and available on line <https://www.csan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Reaching-Out-Full-Toolkit.pdf>

There is a **Good Practice Guide on Christian Volunteering:**  
[https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/UserFiles/File/Faithfully\\_Volunteering.pdf](https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/UserFiles/File/Faithfully_Volunteering.pdf)