

## Notes from a Christians on Ageing Conference Call

### How churches can help older people struggling through the 2021 national lockdowns

This was a discussion held via Zoom on 19 January 2021. We were: Marion Shoard (lead), Barbara Stephens, Joseph Cortis, Isabel Wodrow, Maureen O'Neill, Kathy Hyde, Susan Kirkbride, Cheryl McKellar Young, Eileen Patayiwa, Amanda Gafford, Emmanuel Ajuku, Debbie Pindura, Fiona Williams, Andrew Wileman, Albert Jewell, Jim Sharp, David Jolley (host)

It was good to have such an assembly. **Everyone was welcomed** and given a chance to introduce themselves. We represented a span from Orkney to the Isle of Wight and across denominations. We looked in turn at the ways in which churches can support older and disabled people living at home, unpaid carers, people living in care homes; and (more briefly) people staying in hospitals and hospices.

Throughout these notes we refer mainly to the situation in England, while highlighting significant differences where they occur in Scotland.

#### Older and Disabled People Living at Home

##### *(i) The Formation of 'Bubbles'*

There have been restrictions on meeting other people, even family members, and fellow members of faith communities. Some allowance for meeting indoors and out has been governed by rules on 'Bubbles'.

National Lockdown: [Stay at Home](#); [Making a support bubble with another household - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Scotland: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): local protection levels - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Wales: [Alert level 4: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Northern Ireland: [Coronavirus Guidance: What the Restrictions Mean for You](#)

Membership of a 'support bubble' can prove invaluable to older people living alone. They might form one with another similarly placed person or with another household; in each case participants could mix outdoors and in each other's homes, thus enjoying meals together, playing games, praying together and so on. It's important that all parties agree on the level of risk they will subject themselves to, both when they are within the bubble and during the remainder of their everyday lives.

However, difficulties can arise. A bubble might put pressure on relationships with others not in the bubble if, say, someone has to choose between bubbling with friends close at hand and a relative who lives some distance away. Anxiety can arise if a member of the bubble subjects themselves to new risk, such as from caring for children. Some people with dementia may not understand the rules and so inadvertently subject others in the bubble to a risk of infection.

We noted that childcare bubbles (which may involve grandparents) are separate from support bubbles and the members of support and childcare bubbles are not permitted to mix together.

## ***ii) Telephoning***

There was general agreement that keeping in touch by phone is extremely important, not least for people who do not use digital communication. The phone provides a more immediate means of communicating with people, and phone conversations during lockdown have often been more meaningful than in the pre-Covid world.

We heard of initiatives which have sprung up during lockdown. The Church of England with Faith in Later Life have introduced a **free phone line: Daily Hope** [DailyHope phone line | The Church of England](#) with information, explanations, music and prayer, and exercises! 0800 804 8044.

Faith in Older People has introduced an [online listening service](#) for care home and care at home staff who have been working on the front line during the pandemic. Maureen O'Neill, the Director of FIOP, told us that this facility remains available but FIOP is reviewing it, lest the need to go online to access it may be deterring some people.

Kathy Hyde, an Anna Chaplain in Southampton, told us that just before lockdown she had started sending out a **newsletter** to older people in her diocese and this, together with frequent phone calls, had enabled her to keep in touch.

## ***iii) Digital Matters***

We reflected on the belief of government and others that everything can be communicated to and from everybody electronically and on the [challenges faced by digitally-excluded people](#) who do not have the technology, or could not work it because of impairments in dexterity, sight or cognition, or who do not wish to engage with it.

Nonetheless, digital technology has **transformed the lives of many older people** during lockdown and been enormously beneficial. Barbara Stephens, who heads up the social enterprise Dementia Pathfinders gave the example of her own mother, who swiftly acquired digital skills at the age of 88. Barbara pointed out that some people do not realise they can access the internet through their phone. However, she pointed out that people with dementia often cannot cope with digital facilities, while for others the ongoing cost of broadband is a real deterrent.

It was felt that many older people were reluctant to join Zoom church meetings through the phone.

Fiona Williams, based in The Wirral, reported that she connects people without the internet to online services and prayer meetings by placing her phone beside the speaker of her computer. This is interactive, so a listener can request a prayer through Fiona.

The Salvation Army has a particular mission for excluded people including digitally-excluded older people. There will be a report published soon with Age UK on this issue.

Maureen O'Neill said that digital exclusion is a matter which Faith in Older People often raises at the Older People's Strategic Action Forum, which comes under the Minister for Older People in the Scottish Government - [gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot).

#### ***(iv) Homeless People***

Andrew Wileman, the assistant director of older people's services for the **Salvation Army** who is also a trustee of Faith Later Life told us that the SA's work with homeless people and with people who have been trafficked and/or enslaved has continued. **The number of people homeless on the streets has risen** during lockdown, although anti-trafficking and modern slavery numbers have gone slightly down. However, he feared that the amount of labour exploitation and sexual exploitation has risen during the pandemic but Covid restrictions have reduced the numbers available to go out and investigate situations on the ground. The Salvation Army's safe houses and hostels are full and the work continues, albeit restricted when staff members have to self-isolate.

#### ***(v) Unpaid Carers***

Marion said that unpaid family or friend carers had had a very difficult time during lockdown, often holed up at home with the person they are looking after, with the possibilities of respite afforded by day centres and day-care centres no longer on offer and with many other facilities having closed down.

She drew attention to a new initiative for carers called [Carers Together](#), developed by another member of the executive committee of Christians on Ageing, Tina English, through the organisation Tina founded Embracing Age. Starting on 21<sup>st</sup> January, it offers the facility for carers to meet weekly in small Zoom groups to talk together and, if they wish, pray together; once a month there will be a speaker. Marion urged attenders to spread the word about Carers Together amongst carers in their congregations.

Albert Jewell (also an executive committee member of Christians on Ageing) described a **research project** in which he had been involved which examined the **special needs of the carers** within churches of people with dementia. These carers are often forgotten about and have little opportunity to share their thoughts and emotions; during the pandemic their situation has got worse. It's very important for churches to support the carers of people with dementia because they get terribly isolated. <https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/dementia-the-forgotten-heroes-churchgoing-carers-speak-of-their-long-and-lonely-road/>

Marion pointed out that it is also **important to ensure that carers receive their vaccination**. It has been agreed that [carers who are receiving carers allowance or are the main carer of an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if the carer should contract Covid should be included in priority group six, along with people with underlying conditions.](#)

However, there is a danger that some carers will miss out. Many carers do not receive carers allowance, partly because it is an overlapping benefit for the purposes of the state pension - in other words, you can't claim both. The NHS will turn to GP practices for lists of eligible carers, as practices have long been encouraged to draw up carers registers. But not all practices have done so and not all registers are likely to be up-to-date or comprehensive. We could consider whether there are carers within our communities and make sure they know about this recommendation and, if necessary, contact their GP practice. It's important to protect carers not only for their own health but also because of the plight of the person for whom they are caring, should the carer become unwell.

### ***(vi) A Listening Church***

Joseph Cortis, the coordinator of Caritas Leeds and an executive committee member of Christians on Ageing, drew attention to the need for the church to be 'a listening church' [A listening Church? \(thepastoralreview.org\)](https://thepastoralreview.org). The pandemic has drawn attention to the need to listen to people and communities, because if you don't listen you don't know what the issues are. Churches cannot sort out every problem, but we do have the power to signpost people to different resources. The phrase that Pope Francis has used over and over again is '**walking with people**', listening to them, wherever they are; they might be homeless people, or slaves, or carers, or individuals in churches who would benefit from rapid access to information from the internet.

### ***(vii) Vaccination***

Jim Sharpe said he was much looking forward to being able to play the piano for sing-songs in care homes again, once vaccination has enabled homes to open their doors to entertainers from outside.

The coming of effective vaccines against Covid 19 has given hope. We found that the distribution thus far is patchy; we heard instances of vulnerable people in their 90s who have yet to be called, but in other areas people in their 70s have received at least their first dose. Having received the vaccination, people still must be disciplined and comply with the national rules. We considered the types of people who might fall through the cracks of the vaccination system – not only unpaid carers as described above, but also people who have not registered with a GP – **a hidden population 'under the radar'**. They are just as prone to develop illness, including Covid, as anyone else but some dare not seek help for fear of litigation and expulsion. They all pose a risk to themselves and to others.

Another group who may not benefit as much as they might from vaccination is people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

### ***(viii) BAME communities***

Emmanuel Ajoku works for the Caribbean and African Health Network of Greater Manchester and is the pastor of a church in Manchester. He told us that older members of African and African-Caribbean communities and churches may be living in with younger generations, or by other arrangements provide care for children. Some have come recently to this country to provide care for grandchildren. There is difficulty in comprehending the rules, compounded by issues of language. Most churches for African and African-Caribbean people have fewer old members compared with main-stream established churches – fewer than 30 percent - but these churches are keen to involve older people and to learn from the experiences of others. These churches are a powerful source of support for the families. It is often the case that families will turn to the church for information, advice and help for they trust the church much more than they trust other official channels. The **Caribbean and African Health Network (CAHN – Caribbean & African Health Network)** recently hosted an online event to inform people about the Covid crisis, which attracted 1000 links. This education is important not only because of lack of understanding and misconceptions within the BAME community, but also because many BAME people work in social care and healthcare.

### **(ix) Care Homes**

We spent time on the current situation in care homes, still with high rates of illness and deaths from Covid 19. Some are receiving vaccinations, others waiting. Staff are under pressure. Visits from family and others are banned or limited to special circumstances.

Families are often dispirited and confused by rules which keep them at arms' length – in the interest of their loved one. See for instance '**Rights for**

**Residents**': <https://www.rightsforresidents.co.uk/> and <http://www.marionshoard.co.uk//articles/care-homes-how-we-could-make-amends.pdf?v=1.1>

**Embracing Age** (see above) has recently launched a **new initiative** involving family, friends and others such as people from churches getting in touch with people living in care homes through Alexa. As this does not rely on the care home resident being able to use the phone or a computer, it can be especially helpful for people with dementia.

See also the reference to **Faith in Older People's listening service** for care home staff in Scotland referred to above.

Marion drew attention to the welcome increase in the time envisaged for **end-of-life visits** in the [most recent government guidance for England](#): 'Planning these visiting arrangements should proceed from the assumption that visits are enabled in the final months and weeks of life – not just the final days or hours'. We discussed the difficulty of defining when somebody is at the end of their life – this could involve a matter of minutes, hours or indeed months.

The Salvation Army has a wide interest and commitment to old people, including the provision of twelve care homes. [Care homes | The Salvation Army. Activities in the community | The Salvation Army.](#) Andrew Wileman said that the Salvation Army's care homes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not allowing visits at present, save for essential end-of-life visits when family members can come in for as long as required.

**Chaplains** are hugely helpful and influential in care homes but have been disabled during lockdown except where they are considered to be members of staff, as with MHA for instance.

Marion drew attention to the [differences in the government guidance on visiting](#) between England and Scotland, and in particular **essential visits and also spiritual care visits**. The Scottish government has told care homes that spiritual care visits (whether by clergy, imams and so on or lay people) should be considered as essential visits and people meeting with residents for this reason should not be counted as designated visitors; spiritual care visits should be supported both indoors and outdoors. The English guidance contains nothing similar. Nicola Sturgeon has declined to make this guidance mandatory and Marion's sense was that, while many homes in Scotland were welcoming a larger number of essential visits by family and friends than those in England, many Scottish care homes were choosing not to facilitate much spiritual support.

It was felt that the guidance on spiritual care visiting was not well-known in Scotland. Susan Kirkbride reported that in **Kirkwall on Orkney** she had been permitted to visit people in hospital and a care home had told her she would be allowed in if a resident requested a visit.

*Note: Many individuals and organisations are working to promote the rights of families to visit their relatives in care homes, including*

*Age UK <https://www.rightsforresidents.co.uk/>*

*the Relatives and Residents Association <https://www.relres.org/>*

*and John's Campaign, which is mounting a legal challenge against the Government*

*<https://johnscampaign.org.uk/>.*

*Carers are also to be given priority for vaccinations*

*[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020)*

*[vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020)*

*[immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020)*

### ***(x) Hospices***

Barbara Stephens said that visits to a hospice on the **Isle of Wight** had continued but they are much different from the situation pre-Covid, with visitors and staff having to wear full PPE and be restricted in the range of support they can offer.

Unfortunately, time did not allow us to discuss further the situation on visiting people in hospices and hospitals.

We had covered a lot of ground, some of it in depth – a rewarding and generous exchange of experiences, knowledge and feelings. There is more to be done in similar vein.

***Marion Shoard and David Jolley***