

plus

CHRISTIANS on AGEING

a Christian voice for older people

Vol 42 No. 2
Summer 2026

Quarterly magazine of
Christians on Ageing

Christians on Ageing – a Christian voice for older people

We work for a society in which older people are heard, supported and valued.

Our activities aim to:

- Collaborate with Christian and other agencies with similar visions
- Inform and facilitate debate on issues of concern for older people
- Celebrate the gifts and potential of later life
- Influence policy makers, service providers, paid carers and practitioners

We deliver these activities through conferences, publications, commentaries and informational resources, focusing on faith, spirituality and flourishing in later life.

Current prime areas of interest and action:

- • **‘Cherished not forgotten’ – activities that relate to excluded older people for whom the church can play a role**, such as in illness & disability; in hospital, nursing or residential care; those living with dementia and their carers; the digitally, socially or economically disadvantaged; isolated & lonely older people and older prisoners.
- • **Mission & ministry in later life – activities that inform & support** lay and ordained, by sharing information and good practice, and promoting training and vocation related to ministry with older people.
- • **Later life discipleship – activities that contribute to** understanding older people’s spiritual growth and faith development; promoting a positive image of older Christians’ spiritual roles as elders & mentors; encouraging intergenerational learning.

‘plus’ is the quarterly magazine of Christians on Ageing, distributed free to all members. Back issues and membership information can be obtained from:

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Editorial

Welcome to our Summer issue. The first article invites readers to consider ‘changing landscapes’, and I’m reminded of this during the summer heatwaves which must surely have prompted us all to ponder! Tina English’s timely piece is, however, focused on the field of practice developing around ministry with older people in churches and communities. This was first delivered as a presentation at COA’s AGM in April, and I’m grateful to Tina for the chance to share it further.



The idea of ‘Theologian as composter’ caught my eye as I have used this metaphor myself for adult learning. It is even more pertinent in later life, when we have so much more experiential material to process. Bear in mind that the theology spoken of here is the everyday sort we all do in reflecting on and developing our beliefs as we apply them to life as we walk with God. See also ‘*Ordinary Theology*’ by Christian educator Jeff Astley (2002, Routledge).

Another blog was the source for the *Simple Guide to Organising the Rest of your Life* – this time from the International Longevity Centre (ILC) and their guest blogger, Sir Peter Thornton who, having reached an age of active retirement was keen to share what he had found important. Thanks to him and ILC.

It’s not often you come across a passage of Bible study within an academic article, but the *Biblical Response to Ageing* is just that. The article cited aims to highlight how religious coping, meaning-making, and social support from faith communities significantly aid individuals in managing stress, trauma, and chronic health challenges. See

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-013-9813-z> or you can just enjoy the Bible study!

Marion Shoard gives us the last in her series of Culture Club reports, this time on dementia which features in varied forms of cultural expression. As usual, debate was engaging and we're left wishing that the arts were a bit bolder in telling the story of dementia. Thanks to Marion for all her cultural explorations on behalf of COA.

Last, I share reflections on a couple of events I attended that focused on ageing, and pass on information about some new resources that are taking older people's ongoing development in later life more seriously. I was given an opportunity to bang a similar drum in the *Church Times* recently when I was asked to write on evolving faith in later life. You can see my article at:

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/19-june/features/features/faith-in-retirement-a-welcome-view-in-winter>

Joanna Walker, Editor



Source: Pexels, Krista-Grizdeniece

Ministry and Older People: Responding to Changing Landscapes

Tina English

This article is an edited version of Tina's address that followed Christians on Ageing's AGM in April 2026

I want to spend some time reflecting on the changing landscapes of ministry. I think that Christians on Ageing is uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role in how that might unfold. First, I wanted to encourage you with a short reflection on why this area of ministry is so important. The more I read my Bible the more I'm struck by God's heart for those on the margins, particularly widows, orphans and foreigners. Now, I know that not all older people are widows or are on the margins, far from it. But in my ministry amongst the older generations of my church we tend to come alongside many older people who are bereaved, who are on the margins, becoming frailer and isolated. And there's so many passages in the Bible in which we could find God's heart on this matter.

For instance, the book of Deuteronomy sets out God's guidelines for the Israelites to flourish in the promised land and, more than in any other book in the Bible, God is telling the Israelites to look out for the orphans, the widows and the foreigners in their community. These were the groups that were the most vulnerable – that had no advocate, no one to defend them. And so the Israelites were told to include them in the community rather than exclude them, to feed them, to act justly towards them.

But more importantly, it shows that God himself is a defender of the fatherless and widows. He gives the community a promise that if they do these things they'd be blessed in all the work of their hands. So, I want to encourage you that when we minister to those on the margins (such as with older folk who are perhaps isolated and frail) we're reflecting the very heart of God, and he promises to bless us. I want to go on to consider the changing landscape of ministry in this area.

Changing the Landscape

I've come up with six things that I've observed, and then go on to give some ideas of how we might respond to those changes. The first observation is the *rise in the number of Christian Charities* serving older people. When I started Embracing Age in 2014 there weren't many Christian charities operating in the field of older people that I was aware of, other than some of the care home providers that had been around for a long time. I later learned that Anna Chaplaincy and other ministries started at a similar time. Now over the last 12 years that has changed enormously.

There's now a good handful of Christian charities that operate nationally in ministry to older people as well as some local and regional ones. The newest one I noticed recently was the Silver Trust. Christians on Ageing precedes most of them. You're one of what I call the 'grandparent charities'. You've been around for quite a long time (since 1982). Now there are many Christian charities operating in this space; there are also lots more resources out there than there's ever been for older people and for churches to tap into.

The second thing I've noticed is that, alongside this rise in the number of charities, there's been a *reduction in available funding*. I was at a meeting of the funders yesterday and they're all seeing huge increases in the number of applications coming through. One such funder said he'd got 54 applications for nine grants they had available; others were talking about getting hundreds in and closing their funding rounds early. So that's creating a huge challenge, and the funders are facing difficult choices between the many good causes out there, but they can't give to all of them. How do I respond in that environment?

The third thing I'm noticing, and it's not new at all really, is *ageing congregations*. We all know that the population is ageing and that it's happening across the world. But the ageing of church congregations is faster. Of course, it's not necessarily a bad thing that we're all living longer, and I don't think we should always view it through a lens of challenge, but within that is the obsession that many churches have with 'growing younger'. I hate that phrase but it is the Christian climate that we're operating in, with a focus on children and young people.

I do understand it to a certain extent – the worry that if we don't get more young people in, then the church is going to die – but I believe that Jesus said that he would build his church.

I'm not saying that younger generations are unimportant but that work amongst the older generations is just as important and, if we're not careful, this whole language around growing younger has the potential to make the older generations feel undervalued and overlooked. Whereas actually what we need is an intergenerational church. By which, I don't mean all kids-in services on a Sunday morning, although that might be part of it. What I mean is all the generations – young, middle and older – operating together as family and not everything siloed out. We need to emphasise that we're firmly together with connections between us all.

Fourthly, what I'm seeing and experiencing for those involved in ministry with older people is a *lack of volunteers*. It feels like people's lives are busier, maybe with commuting or having to work harder and longer to make ends meet. And there's just not as many volunteers out there these days which impacts what we can do in our ministry and the support that we can give the older generations. I'm painting a bit of a bleak picture of some of this but it's what I see as a reality.

And then the fifth thing I want to talk about is the *rise of the digital age*. We've seen this growing for years online and then the introduction of smartphones and apps. And it's so different from when I had children; there's an app for everything now on your mobile phone. There's lots of positive things in this; you can order repeat prescriptions and do online shopping. When I started out in working with charities for older people it was really hard for them to get their groceries delivered but nowadays it's so easy, isn't it? However, despite lots of good things about it, there are also dangers, especially people's vulnerability to cyber-crime and digital exclusion. So, there's sort of two sides to the digital age, as well as for those who just don't like being online – who might then become more isolated because everything else is online.

And then finally, in terms of the changing landscape, I just wanted to mention the '*quiet revival*' and the anecdotal evidence of more young

people coming into our churches. The reason I mention it in terms of the changing landscape is I've been really struck by who's going to disciple them, because the middle generations are largely missing from church. I think there's a real opportunity here for our older generations to be the spiritual grandparents of these younger ones.

So these are the six things that I'm highlighting in the changing landscape of Christian charities working with older people: *a rise in Christian charities but a reduction in funding, ageing congregations but obsession with growing younger, reduction in volunteers, the digital age, and the quiet revival.*

I'd like to cast a vision for how we might respond. To make it hopefully a bit more memorable, I'm using the word 'cast' as an acronym to offer a four-part response – my CAST framework:

Collaboration

- Charities are increasingly working together; funders value this.
- Mergers (e.g. Home for Good with Safe Families) create unified messages and greater impact.
- Christians on Ageing, as a 'grandparent' organisation, could convene and unify efforts across the sector.

Example: CEOs of major youth charities regularly pray together—an inspiration for the older adult sector.

Adaptation

- Ministries must evolve with changing needs and demographics.
- Older adults today are more active and tech-savvy; ministries should reflect this (e.g. walking groups, computer clubs).
- During COVID-19, care home ministries adapted to maintain connection despite restrictions.

Example: Housebound older adults could be mobilised to pray for younger generations.

Simplicity

- With fewer volunteers, ministries should streamline efforts.

Example: Shifting from lunch clubs to coffee and cake would reduce workload but maintain fellowship.

Other examples: Lunch clubs meeting in pubs, using store-bought cake instead of homemade.

Trust

- Ultimately, ministry belongs to God; leaders must trust His guidance through change.

Example: Personal story – I liken my own journey to following a tour guide, uncertain of the path but confident in the leader's knowledge.

In finishing, I'd like to say that trust underpins everything we do. I had a real sense of God calling me to hand over the baton of Embracing Age but, even knowing that God goes before us and He guides us every step of the way, handing over wasn't easy – it was my baby. But I just had such a strong sense of that's what God was asking me to do, and so could trust Him. In the end, our ministries among the older generations are not actually our ministries, they're His.

So we need to hold everything with open hands before God and not hold on to it tightly. In our walk of ministry, when the landscape is changing and we're having to navigate uncharted territory, we have a guide in Jesus, and if we lean into Him, we can trust His promise to lead us and guide us.

Tina English is the founder of Embracing Age and author of 'A Great Place to Grow Old' (2021, Darton Longman and Todd). She was recently ordained in the Church of England, in the diocese of London.

I'm Not a Theologian, But... I Could Be a Composter!

Ruth Harvey, Student Christian Movement (SCM)

At SCM, we care deeply about making theology accessible. One of our aims is to form radical theologians, not just among those who study theology formally, but also among all who want to explore faith more deeply. So when I attended the recent Modern Church retreat, “I’m not a theologian, but...”, I was hopeful that it would be a fruitful resource-gathering mission. What I didn’t expect, however, was to end the weekend being so excited about the idea of composting.

Wrestling with Tradition

Across the sessions and conversations of the retreat, two threads kept returning for me: theology isn’t just for the ‘experts’, and in our theological practice, nothing is wasted.

A session on seeing Saint Paul more clearly was where the idea that “nothing is wasted” took root. Whilst we wrestle with the tradition of Paul, Paul himself is wrestling with the traditions he is entrenched in. We were encouraged to look at the many different Pauls we encounter through his life – the tentmaker, the persecutor of Christians, the missionary – and to also look at the different versions of ourselves throughout our own lives.

Out of this, for me, came the idea that our own faith journeys and traditions shift over time. There is room for growth and new insights, but none of what has come before is necessarily wasted or wrong – it is simply built upon and perhaps reinterpreted in light of our experiences. It also showed me the value in the traditions of the Church, even as we wrestle with them and what they mean for us today. It reminded me to continue to ask questions of the Bible, of my own tradition and of what I was taught growing up, and so to reignite my desire to engage.

Could this be a way in for those who find the idea of theology daunting? Start with yourself, and the traditions you know. Where have you been on your faith journey so far, and where has God been in that journey?

Composting Theology

A further session explored the idea of composting in terms of breaking down ideas and traditions – not to throw away any parts, but rather to throw them into the mix and see how they reform and regenerate. We formed our own compost heap of ideas on, among other things, who the person of Jesus is to us, what his character is like, and what he has to offer the world. I think this idea of ‘composting theology’ struck a chord with many of us, and while I’m still mulling on its outworking, I’m really excited by the thought that old ideas, inherited beliefs, doubts, questions, and experience all go into the heap and something new can grow out of them.

For many people, the understanding of faith and belief has to be a finished product that never changes – polished and authoritative, even passed down from scholars to the ‘ordinary folk’. They might be scared of trying an idea out and getting it ‘wrong’, or feel they need the right language or the right answers in order to engage. The idea of composting theology is a brilliant way in for people who feel uncertain or sense changes in themselves in this way, because it can be seen as an ongoing, participatory, active process. It’s messy and experimental, and open to change. It’s not just handed down finished but, rather, worked on and re-worked, in community. What new ideas could emerge if we all approached theology in this way?

Theology is for Everyone

What I’m taking away from this retreat is not just a new metaphor (and a love of composting) but a renewed passion to make theology more accessible for those who have written it off as ‘not for them’. Through starting with our own experiences, wrestling with tradition, and ‘composting’ our ideas, I hope my members can recognise theology not as something reserved for the experts, but as something

that emerges in community, conversation, questioning, and shared experience. Perhaps then theology becomes less about having the right answers and more about making space for experimentation, transformation, and growth. And that, to me, feels like a hopeful vision of theology for all believers and the Church as a whole.

Ruth Harvey is Comms and Marketing Officer at SCM, which can be seen at www.movement.org.uk

This article is a slightly edited version of its original that appeared as a blog on the website of Modern Church



Source: Pexels, Eva Bronzini

The Later Years – the Simple Guide to Organising the Rest of your Life

*Sir Peter Thornton, Visiting Professor,
King's College London*

How should we get organised for our later years? What can we do to help those who will be left behind? Whatever your age, it is important to address such life admin questions.

With just a little preparation, while we are fit and healthy, we can express our wishes for what may become more difficult times. Mental or physical disability may strike suddenly (a stroke or heart attack) or slowly (dementia or Parkinson's). So, before it's too late, it may be time to think about the options: not just a will and other formal documents, but also simple, positive steps to maintaining independence longer, staying at home longer and enjoying life longer.

Nearly one in five of the population of the UK is 65 or over, more than 13 million people. This is not just a number but is made up of individuals, all different, all with experience, talent, friends and family. Based on the last Census, the over 65s are happier, less anxious and have a greater sense of self-worth than any other age group. We are faring better on many measures of personal, social and financial wellbeing than our younger counterparts. And those still working at 75 (like me) report the greatest job satisfaction of all ages.

In addition to being positive, we should be practical and purposeful. **First**, I want to suggest a few steps for better organisation. A will is a *must* but more than half of 50-65 year-olds have not made one. If there is no will and you die intestate, your wishes for your money and your property may be ignored; the state will decide for you. For example, if you have a long-term, much-loved partner, but you are not married or in a civil partnership, your partner will receive nothing.

In addition to a will, you should consider the *two types of lasting powers of attorney* (LPAs): health and welfare; property and financial affairs. You can appoint trusted ‘attorneys’ to look after your interests when you are no longer able to. You may also like to think about an advance decision to refuse treatment (ADRT, sometimes known as a living will). This is a legally binding document which lets you refuse life-sustaining treatment, such as CPR or artificial ventilation, at a time in the future when you have stopped breathing or your heart has stopped beating and you are no longer in a fit state to decide for yourself. Another document, an advance statement, can set out your wishes, for a time when you can no longer express them, for your care, personal treatment, even funeral details.

Second, I suggest you keep a *death file*. This can be a paper or a digital file, and its contents will help your family and loved-ones immeasurably after your death. For those who will be left behind, it will be a difficult time of loss and grieving. There will be much to be done, such as registering the death, informing friends and relatives, notifying banks and insurance companies, contacting government departments, organising the details of the funeral and working towards the grant of probate. But you can help out.

Put in your death file copies of any documents I have already referred to. Add in all the details you can about your personal life: birth and marriage certificates; NHS number and GP contact details; financial information such as NI and tax reference numbers, bank details, insurance policies; property details; other assets; your wishes (if any) for the funeral.

You may also wish to pass on to your family and friends a little memoir. Who you are, your family history, and what you have done in your life. All of this organisation will help those left behind. It may also give them and you a little peace of mind that it has been done.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult of all these suggestions, is a *discussion* with your close family, those you can trust. If you possibly can, you should have a conversation about the contents of your will (what you have chosen and why) and other wishes expressed in LPAs and other documents.

Fourth, you should *think about your health*. There are obvious steps you can take to improve your physical, mental and social health. Research shows that even a little physical activity can help the ageing process and delay cognitive decline. Keeping up mental pursuits, such as learning a foreign language or a musical instrument, even playing bingo or card games, is beneficial. Surprisingly perhaps, recent studies suggest that social health is of great importance, even more significant than physical or mental health, especially to avoid loneliness. Research has now confirmed what may be obvious that connecting to other people, having good social relationships, can lead to a better, happier life.

Fifth, consider the importance of *survival and protection*. Make sure you are in a secure and safe home, with necessary locks and alarms, free from carbon monoxide poisoning. Alarm bell and technology systems can help in case of the dreaded fall. Be mindful of scams: be watchful of cold-callers and ever-present tech scams, particularly those that may be targeted towards older persons who are seen to be more vulnerable because of age.

In addition, steps can be taken to stay at home longer. You can adapt your home as appropriate and share it in the right circumstances. You can de-clutter, even downsize to advantage. There may come a stage when you need more help, with visiting or live-in carers, or a move to sheltered or supported accommodation may be beneficial, before moving to a care home becomes necessary.

Finally, it is important to end on a positive note. The clear *expression of your wishes* in relevant documents, and family discussion about their contents, may provide much needed reassurance for you and for those who will be left behind. A little organisation can go a long way. Looking after yourself and where and how you live may also reap benefits in ageing. It is true that in youth we sometimes run into difficulties, and in old age difficulties sometimes run into us. But, never mind. As Shirley Bassey put it: '*You don't get older, you get better.*' And anyway, it's not how old you are, but how you are old. Living life as best we can whatever the circumstances is a good motto.



Source: Pexels, Yankrukov

His Honour Sir Peter Thornton KC was a practising barrister in human rights law, a QC (now KC), founder member and head of Doughty Street Chambers, a Senior Circuit Judge at the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court) and the first Chief Coroner of England and Wales. He is currently a Visiting Professor at King's College London and a member of the Independent Expert Panel of the House of Commons.

This article appeared in the weekly blog of the International Longevity Centre (ILC), and is reproduced with permission of ILC and the author. It was based on his recent book [The Later Years: The simple guide to organising the rest of your life](#) Bedford Square Publishers, 2025.

Psalm 71 — A Biblical Response to Ageing

Excerpt from ‘Righteousness in the Land of Forgetfulness’, article by Mairi Finlay, Aberdeen University.

Ideas of age and ageing are common themes in the Bible. Human suffering is never denied or explained away and, consequently, the problems and challenges that commonly characterise old age are dealt with in various ways. However, it is important to remember that, for the Christian, this suffering always takes place within the context of God’s love for his people and their ultimate redemption through Christ.

Psalm 71, often described as a prayer for old age, provides a strong example of an older person giving voice to the experience of increasing age and its spiritual implications.

The author of the psalm is unknown but he appears to have had a troubled life (v7, 20). The psalmist begins by calling out to Yahweh for refuge and deliverance (v1, 2). The phrases “a rock of refuge” and “my rock and my fortress” emphasise the steadfast nature of God and the knowledge that God is the source of deliverance. After calling out, the psalmist then moves to a remembrance of God’s presence throughout the whole length of his life.

The affirmation of God’s sovereignty is important (v5) as it shows that the psalmist recognises God’s sovereignty in every aspect of his life and experience, not just when things are going well. Although initially remembering his youthful relationship with God (described by Kidner (1973) as looking back to “the limits of his memory”), the psalmist then moves beyond conventional memory to the recognition that God has been with him since birth and even before (v6). It is a powerful reminder of his lifelong relationship with God.

This is of particular importance in relation to people with memory problems because it shows us that even when we are not obviously able

to be consciously aware of God's presence, in this case before birth, our lives are always in his hands. It emphasises that the relationship is of God's devising and initiation, bringing with it resounding echoes of covenant love and grace friendship. Just as God has initiated the relationship, the psalmist can look to him to uphold it, stating "you are my strong refuge" (v7) and this leads him to praise (v8).

Now the psalmist brings his own situation before God. In his weak and vulnerable state of old age and infirmity, there are those around him who claim that "God has forsaken" and will not come to his aid (v11). The psalmist, reminded of God's lifelong relationship with him, calls out "O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!" (v12).

Following the affirmation of God's grace in his life and the hope that this brings, the psalmist turns to praise (v14). He wants to proclaim God's righteousness and salvation, even though it is too great for him to comprehend (v15). Amidst the praise, the idea of restoration is prominent. The realisation comes that the God who is with him in times of trouble, who saves him, is also the God who will bring restoration and revival (v20, 21). This eternal perspective has the potential to transform the way old age is viewed.

While not minimising the many losses that increasing age can bring, the psalmist's hope is firmly in God and the restoration he will bring—moving the focus from self to God. In this passage, we also have a reminder of the resurrection power of Christ and his victory over death (Romans 8:11). Finally, the psalmist returns to fulsome praise, highlighting the righteousness (v24) and faithfulness (v22) of God.

The idea of God's grace and faithfulness in lifelong relationship with an individual is a key theme in the psalm. A quote from Charles Spurgeon (1867) strongly conveys this same idea.

"As for His failing you, never dream of it—hate the thought. The God, who has been sufficient until now, should be trusted to the end".

The knowledge that the relationship does not depend on the individual's intellect or ability to maintain the relationship is of particular

pertinence to those with cognitive impairments and memory problems. As well as providing a bedrock for faith, it also has implications for the relationship between carer and cared-for.

The importance of remembrance of God's past works in a person's life presents a challenge to the church and those who are carers. Those with dementia may have difficulties in accessing these memories or in expressing praise and thanksgiving. The church has a vital role to play in helping to nurture spiritual expression and experience for those of its members who cannot do so for themselves. In Romans 12, Paul instructs Christians saying,

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are".

These words are written in the context of practical teaching about love and what it means to show God's love in practice. In our culture, those with dementia are often placed in a very low position. The combination of increasing age and a mental health problem is imbued with a particular stigma by society. As Shamy (2003) writes "to be old...and dementing is very often to be represented as a person completely without worth". Paul's teaching on how to love, taken together with his teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 on the body of Christ, provide Christians with a powerful response in the face of the suffering and stigma that dementia can bring.

Published (2015) in the Journal of Religious Health, Vol 54, p279-286 (excerpt is p282).

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All Biblical quotes are from New Revised Standard Version (NRSV 1989)

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Culture Club Report: How to Deal with Dementia

Marion Shoard

How often do you hear of a son or daughter declining to visit their parent in a care home on the grounds that they have dementia and so wouldn't remember their visit afterwards? The arts have huge potential to reset public understanding. So, how successful have they been in this crucially important area? If, as we soon concluded at the May meeting of Culture Club, any success has been patchy at best, what stands in the way?

A key problem is the long-term nature of dementia. The medical challenges like heart attacks and woundings from accidents that are the bread and butter of TV plays, series and soap operas offer unexpected drama. However, to begin to comprehend how dementia can affect someone, and how best those around can respond, requires more than a few minutes in a hospital ward or, at best, a week or two in a soap opera.

Keith Albans, COA's Chair, singled out two exceptions: in *The Archers*, the actor who played the wife of leading character Jack Woolley was able to bring her first-hand experience of dementia to bear on the script, so much so that Jack's dementia journey played out over several years, until his death in 2014. Keith also praised the production team at *Emmerdale*, who had allowed several months for the portrayal of the development of Ashley Thomas's dementia in 2016-17.

But these are very much the exceptions. Catherine Shoard, the film editor at *The Guardian*, explained to us that the financial imperative, certainly of film, is translated as a need to be dramatic or at least to offer a way of getting box office traction by attracting awards. Thus, the 2020 film *The Father*, which seeks to place the viewer in the mind of someone with dementia, offered Anthony Hopkins a meaty part for which he won several gongs. But several of us felt that film does

little to illuminate what dementia actually means let alone how best to relate to such a person, while sympathy in the film tends to focus on the impact on close family members.

Mindful of her experience with her grandmother and other patients in a long-stay NHS dementia facility, Catherine reflected that interacting with someone with dementia gives enough of a glimpse to make you realise this is a world so complicated, sophisticated and mysterious, that the coshing logistics of film and TV cannot possibly hope to come anywhere near its re-creation.

Referring to the work of Professor John Swinton, Debbie Ducille, Ministry Lead at Anna Chaplaincy, reminded us of the phenomenon of “muscle memory” – that people living with dementia may well retain memories involving movement. Barbara Stephens (COA’s Hon Secretary and a founder and leading member of the Dementia Community) reported that in a scheme in the New Forest, people living with dementia, including those who struggle to move if asked to do so, start pedalling once seated on the back of an adapted bicycle. In her research into the ways in which arts including music can help, Dr Ruby Williams of Worcester University recalled that, when she started to play dance music, a woman who spoke and who moved with great reluctance suddenly started dancing.

Doctor, publisher, and dementia expert Professor Richard Hawkins confirmed that he had also witnessed people in care homes suddenly coming alive in response to music. Corrinne Mulhall told us that while working in a hospital assessment ward, she would look in a patient’s notes for their former occupation and give them things to handle that would use this “muscle memory”, such as pieces of tubing and other gadgets for a former car mechanic. This seemed to absorb her patients and give them a sense of purpose.

The low-budget, 2023 film *Grey Matter* celebrates movement involving a woman during her dementia journey. And perhaps because the progression of dementia plays out alongside other plot lines, this little-known film might offer a way forward:

Rebellious teenager Chloe quits school, is fired from her Saturday job, and shuts herself in her bedroom. Meanwhile, her lively grandmother, Peg, is developing dementia and soon Chloe's mother decides that she must move in, to prevent mishaps in her own home. But as she and her husband are out at work all day, Chloe must keep an eye on her grandmother. One day, while sitting on the sofa together watching daytime TV, Chloe has the idea that her nan should draw up a bucket list of what she would like to do "before you forget everything". Thereupon, their days are spent larking around on the seafront, feasting on exotic Indian meals and, more poignantly, watching the sun go down over the sea. So, this film suggests that caring for someone living with dementia can include fun and, what's more, provide treasured memories – if not perhaps for the person with dementia, certainly for those close to them.

In contrast, in the 2014 novel by Emma Healey *Elizabeth is Missing* and its TV adaptation starring Glenda Jackson, the portrayal of the family carer of someone with dementia is wholly negative. Maud, the heroine, is trying to solve the mysterious disappearance of her friend Elizabeth and of her own sister many years before, succeeding on both counts. But Helen, her daughter, takes every opportunity to show her irritation, sighing loudly whenever her mother forgets something. Maud reflects, "I forget things – I know that – but I'm not mad. ... And I'm bloody fed up with everyone deferring to Helen rather than listening to what I have to say. My heartbeat quickens and I clench my teeth. I have a terrible urge to kick Helen under the table."

Brilliant stuff! But read by only a tiny proportion of people who will be the family carer of someone living with dementia. We agreed that the arts have, to date, barely scratched the surface of this most important of subjects. Let's hope someone makes a film that can have the same sort of water-cooler response as the 2025 TV drama *Adolescence* to open the eyes of the nation to just what living with dementia may mean.

Marion Shoard is a COA member, writer and campaigner for older people's issues

Editor at large – Joanna Walker writes ...

I was pleased to visit *The Coming of Age*, a free national exhibition currently at the Wellcome Collection offices at 183 Euston Road, London NW1 (on until 29 November), featuring original and stimulating visual representations of later life and how it has been seen in culture. I attended with an ex-colleague, now 80+, and noted the many ways in which experiencing the exhibition had been made age-friendly (strategic chairs, audio guides, walking aids, etc).

The exhibits raised big questions about ageing that we could all benefit from thinking about now and then, in our various contexts, seeking to be of service to older people.

In the past, elderhood has often been viewed with respect, possibly because it was less common.



Image from *The Coming of Age* exhibition guide: *It's on the Cards*, 2025. Magic Me and Wellcome Collection, 2025.

Nowadays we tend to see older age as something to fend off – a paradoxical desire to live longer without getting older. Some elites even attempt not only to stop ageing but to reverse it. In considering the strong links between wealth and health, we could ask whether ageing well and having a long life are becoming ultimate luxuries.

Bringing together different perspectives from art, science and popular culture, this exhibition challenges assumptions about life stages and asks what greater longevity means for all of us. For related special events, <https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/the-coming-of-age>

A further ageing-related outing this month took me to Southampton University, where the Department of Gerontology was celebrating its 20th anniversary – a significant achievement in these straightened times in higher education, and a survivor in a field that has lost many other centres for the study of ageing. Its success has been rooted in a conscious policy to view ageing in global terms, as an issue for many different countries who could benefit from studying the experience of others. Southampton's online distance learning courses and campuses have served a truly international audience.

This was the context for my doctoral studies (completed 2020), where ageing and spirituality was a welcome but fairly rare contribution. Attending the anniversary were my supervisors, whom I was delighted to see again. We're in three different decades of our lives but were a great team.



Peter, Joanna and Elisabeth

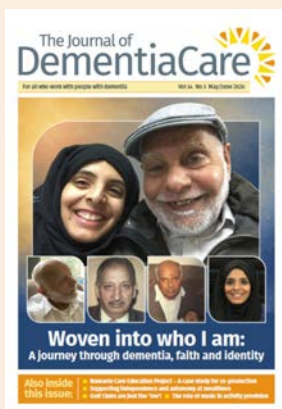
New Resources

Dementia, God and the Church: Journeying with hope

Author : [Wendy Gleadle and Frances Attwood](#), Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) £12.99. In announcing their new publication, BRF say: Christians with the condition may worry about losing their faith and their connection to God. However, those living with dementia can still find meaning in their life and their faith.

Written by two practitioners in this field, *Dementia, God and the Church* aims to show how person-centred approaches to dementia can provide hope. Wendy Gleadle examines the difficulties of maintaining religious beliefs as cognition declines. She explores other forms of spiritual awareness, such as relationships, the arts and creativity.

Frances Attwood asks how churches can better support those living with dementia, through examining what they and their families and carers find helpful and want most. Throughout, space is given to first-hand stories of those with dementia, those working with them and those caring for them.

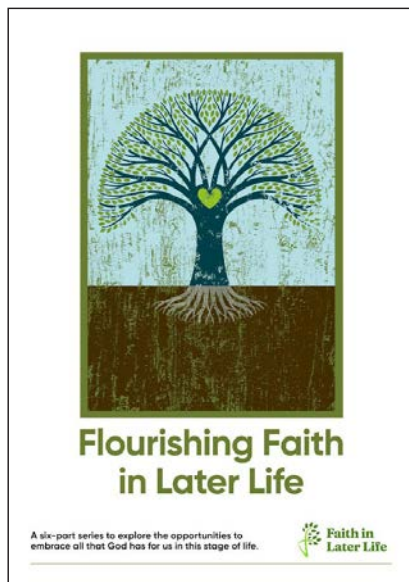


The latest issue of the Journal of Dementia Care (Volume 34 No 3: May/June 2026) features their Editor's Pick: *Woven into who I am: A journey through dementia, faith and identity*. See <https://journalofdementiacare.co.uk/current-issue>

New Resources continued ...

Flourishing Faith in Later Life is a new six session course designed to facilitate warm, guided discussions among older believers, especially those navigating the changes of later life while embracing the opportunity for spiritual growth and renewed purpose.

For home groups, church fellowship or care-home settings, these sessions aim to help bring the hope and purpose promised in the Bible, to support a flourishing faith in later life. The Participants' guide can be downloaded by clicking here [Download Resource](#)



The Leader's guide can be downloaded [here](#). Flourishing Faith in Later Life *has been developed by Faith in Later Life*, in partnership with **Presbyterian Church in Ireland**, as a discipleship resource especially for older Christians.

And lastly, one further recommendation from Marian Muskett of the Anna Chaplaincy national team:

Ageing Gracefully – also a free downloadable course created by Dr Ian Donald, a retired consultant geriatrician. The resource – subtitled 'Practical Theology of Later Life' – comprises a study guide and access to six fifteen-minute videos, and can be studied in a group or home setting. See <https://ageing-gracefully.co.uk/>

Thought from Richard Rohr

*God does not love you because you are good; God loves you because God is good, and then you can be good because you draw upon such an Infinite Source of Goodness. **The older I get, the more I am sure that God does all the giving and we do all the receiving.***

God is always and forever the initiator in my life, and I am, on occasion, the half-hearted respondent. My mustard seed of a response seems to be more than enough for a humble God, even though the mustard seed is “the tiniest of all the seeds” (Matthew 13:32).

Source: Center for Action and Contemplation weekly blog, June 29.
See <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-grace-is-from-gods-side/>



Source: Pexels, Shvets Production

For Retirement

Here is where your life has arrived,
After all the years of effort and toil;
Look back with graciousness and thanks
On all your great and quiet achievements
You stand on the shore of new invitation
To open your life to what is left undone
Let your heart enjoy a different rhythm.

When drawn to the wonder of other horizons
Have the courage for a new approach to time;
Allow it to slow until you find freedom
To draw alongside the mystery, you hold
And befriend your own beauty of soul.

Now is the time to enjoy your heart's desire,
To live the dreams you've waited for,
To awaken the depths beyond your work
And enter into your infinite source.

– John O'Donohue,
To Bless the Space Between Us (2008) Doubleday

Christians On Ageing Publications

Dying and Death – Gerry Burke. New edition 2024.
£5 print, £2 digital

Faith in the Third Age – Dr Michael Lowis. New edition 2024.
£2.50 print, £1.50 digital

Growing Dementia Friendly Churches – Revd Gaynor Hammond.
£3 print only

I'd Like You to Know – Sue Kennedy & Rodney Searle.
£2 print, £1 digital

Light of Faith: Reflections on Growing Old – Bishop George Appleton. New edit. 2025. £5 print, £2 digital

Making a Start: Developing Pastoral Care – Sue Kennedy (Ed).
£2.50 print, £1.50 digital

Seeking a Peaceful Heart – Gerry Burke & Sister Maureen Murphy.
££2.50 print, £1.30 digital

The Spirituality of Ageing – Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh.
New edition 2025. £5 print, £2 digital

With Grateful Hearts – Sister Maureen Murphy.
£2.50 print, £1.30 digital

Worship in Residential Care – Michael Butler (Ed).
£2.50 print, £1.30 digital

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Charity registration number: 289463

Registered Office:
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ISSN 1358-7404