

Christians on Ageing Online Conference 2022 - Report

Older people need the best: supporting faith and care

September 21st 2022, conducted via Zoom

We began at 10.00am with a welcome and introduction to the day from Dr David Jolley, chair of Christians on Ageing. He said a little about Christians on Ageing and then gave chance for everyone to introduce themselves. There were 26 in attendance

The morning session: Faith development in later life was chaired by David Jolley

10.30am. The first presentation was from Reverend Dr Keith Albans

To serve the present Age(ing): how can Faith Communities prepare their leaders to work with older people?

Keith Albans is a recently retired Methodist Minister living in Newcastle upon Tyne. From 2001-2017 he was Director of Chaplaincy & Spirituality with Methodist Homes (MHA) and he is the co-editor of *God, Me and Being Very Old* (SCM 2013).

Keith started by observing that church communities in the UK and their leaders do not see older people and the phenomenon of the ageing of the population, especially the population of church fellowships, as priorities. He recalled the common attitude to older people in church when he was in training in the 1980s: they were seen as obstacles to modernising. Older people are still not a priority post-Covid.

Rather than thinking in the round and in the positive, churches find themselves with fewer regular attenders and less money. Feeling in crisis and survival mode, short-term measures prevail and the emphasis is on involving younger people. But the issues of ageing and the presence and needs of older Christians do not go away. They require clear thinking and well informed leaders, prepared to plan a flexible future.

Keith looked at three levels of leadership and their current attitudes:

- Organisational hierarchies: The overall sense is of lack of interest. Older people are seen as the church of yesteryear and so of little concern. For example, a higher education course on 'senior ministry' recently failed to get off the ground through low enrolment.
- Ministers in oversight: Older age continues to be peripheral to core training, although Keith believed a recent policy statement allowed for some hope on the place of older people. Continuing professional development for ministers did sometimes include later life as a pastoral issue.
- Local lay leadership: This is growing as most churches find themselves short of qualified professional clergy. We need to be intentional about a commitment to older people as part of our natural spiritual constituency.

Keith made reference to the inspirational work of Anna Chaplaincy [Anna Chaplaincy | Offering spiritual care in later life](#) and their recently launched training programme for

Spiritual Care and Ageing [Spiritual Care Series | Anna Chaplaincy | BRF](#) but highlighted the danger of only 'doing to' older people, rather than taking a lead from them.

What targets should we aim at to improve the quality of leadership regarding older people?

First, Keith encouraged us to 'clear the decks of assumptions.'

- Older people are not all the same; ageing is not a homogeneous process or experience
- Older people do not represent the church of yesterday; they are part of the churches now and the future
- It is not all a matter of Vera Lynn. Our understanding of life events and life worlds of older people need updating, as does our attitude that older people cannot use modern technology. Increasingly they will have used it at work, and certainly within families.
- We do not all find that we have faith sussed in later life. There is wrestling and unravelling, which need to be understood by faith leaders.

Second, we need to use our imagination to combat the ageism that pervades society, including the church. (For example, apologising for being 'a small elderly church')

We must take in the imagery and iconography of ageing: e.g. [Range of free-to-use 'age-positive' icons launched to replace stereotypical symbols of ageing | Centre for Ageing Better \(ageing-better.org.uk\)](#)

James Woodward has encouraged us to identify the old person in all of us (our 'inner elder'); and to know that an image of their younger self lives within an old person (disguised by the 'mask of ageing')

Third, we need to recognise ageing as a lengthy enterprise, so we are no longer surprised by it, or its increasing longevity. What are the implications of long-life discipleship? We should think not just of added years, but the changed shape of a longer life-course – like the addition of another room to a building. Extended years after retirement are a resource for the planet. A longer-term view of hope, not burden, needs to develop.

Keith pointed us to several writers who have made contributions to understanding the nature and experience of ageing, including its spiritual dimension:

Composing a Further Life by Mary Catherine Bateson

The White Stone: The Art of Letting Go by Ester de Waal

The Warmth of the Heart Prevents the Body from Rusting: Ageing without Growing Old by Marie de Hennezel

Keith reflected on the life of Queen Elizabeth – a life which showed her faith distilled. He acknowledged the need for Church communities and church leaders to evolve a stronger understanding of age and ageing and to include this in ministry. In addition, he pointed to examples of good practice and growing scholarship and insights which will serve the future well. Our current pursuit of greater inclusion in the church should also include the old.

There was a lively discussion. Among the points raised were:

- There is now a global focus on longevity, but sometimes still a belief that the presence of more old people carries disadvantage to the population.
- Keith responded to encourage that we start early to contemplate and plan a long life – ie. beyond the career.
- The much wider age-ranges now available call for better articulation of the experience of ageing and reconsideration of assumptions - such as older people always talking about the past.
- Making memories is good for all of us, at all ages, but we need to work on better images.
- The use of words is so important – notions of loss, seasons, and desolation should be balanced by appreciation of new growth, new hopes, and possibilities.
- Amongst the tasks of ageing well, spiritually is being prepared to let go
- Wisdom – Jesus placed a child at the centre.
- We remember with gratitude the work of Graham Hawley.

11.15am. The second presentation of the morning session was from Dr Joanna Walker

Older Christians and their Later Life Spiritual Learning

Joanna introduced herself as an educationalist who had applied her interest in adult learning to gerontology. Following practitioner experience in various professional roles, she conducted research to extend her own understanding of how we grow spiritually as we get older.

She found that continuing to learn spiritually is both possible and beneficial in later life: Most learning is informal but can be pursued consciously and actively. Her research questions included: Is learning different in later life? How can we do spiritual learning better and how can we encourage and support spiritual learning?

Older people are psychologically (still) able to learn, and the learning process has benefits socially, physically and mentally. Thus, spiritual learning can and does take place throughout life, and faith-life continues to grow. Later life is an important part of the journey in knowing ourselves in relation to God. It can be seen as the gateway to spiritual maturity.

The New Testament encourages:

- Growth to maturity: Ephesians 4: 13-15. *‘that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity - that measure which is meant by ‘the fullness of Christ’.*
- Become wise: 1 Corinthians 2: 6-13. *‘The wisdom we speak of is the mysterious secret knowledge of God’.*

- Fulfill our calling: 2 Thessalonians 1: 11. *‘that God will count you worthy of his calling, and by his power may fulfill all your good intentions and every effort of faith.’*
- Be Jesus’ disciples and apprentices and do what he did: Matthew 4: 19. *‘Follow me and I will send you out to fish for people.’*

The outcomes of continued spiritual learning include: To know ourselves as others know us; to become more like Jesus; to take part in God’s mission. We grow in spirituality and faith individually, but also in groups and in community.

Joanna’s research explored the question: ‘How do older people recognise spiritual development in their lives?’ She interviewed 23 people individually and 30 in focus groups. They were age 60-92 and were drawn mostly from church communities or were otherwise ‘spiritually engaged’. Their responses identified spiritual development as: experiential and personal; growing a spiritual identity through an inner life with God; and making a spiritual meaning and narrative.

Their learning and development was incidental (making sense of experiences) and was recognised in activities such as reflection, reminiscence, journaling, contemplation and meditation. In addition, it could be self-directed and supplemented by involvement with talks, courses, house groups, festivals, summer schools, retreats, pilgrimages, blogs and other online activities.

Later life is not a fixed concept – it changes generation to generation:

There is reference in academic writing to stages in the ageing and maturing process, and to life journeys. But the model of initial growth, followed by maturation, followed by senescence is no longer satisfactory. Growth and learning continues throughout the life-span and includes iterative return and reassessment of earlier conclusions as part of progress. Successful spiritual ageing can be characterised as transition and transformation throughout later life, fuelled by spiritual (re)formation, learning and development. Life-long experience is the teacher.

Spiritual development relates to the whole person: It is bigger than training or equipping an individual. It relates to identity and calling, to being and doing. It takes place in the context of the life-journey with God, following Jesus in discipleship. The people who Joanna interviewed found that late life can often be a special time of growth and change

Stories are an important resource to individuals and to faith leaders – stories for their power of making sense of experiences so that these can be addressed and shared with others (generating meaning and purpose). Telling our own stories and listening to the stories of others were vital sources of learning and growing together.

Spiritual issues that people reported encountering in later life:

- There were previous questions which were revisited and explored again in new contexts
- There were life experiences – most often losses or difficulties encountered, diminishment and an appreciation of finitude
- All through life there was growth of understanding of the self, contributing to greater confidence to express one’s spirituality.

Joanna ended by posing a series of questions raised within her research – and provided indicative responses: **How can we enable spiritual learning?**

- We need to talk, listen, discuss and stay flexible to accommodate change and other people's viewpoints
- We can reflect on and respond to the changing landscape of later life
- We can transform experiences into new constructs of meaning
- We can support faith communities to develop their ministry with older people.

How can faith communities and churches help?

- We can give value to the spiritual journey of later life
- We can expect and facilitate continuing development
- We can be the place which people turn to when reassessing and negotiating meaning and purpose
- We will not exclude older people or take advantage of them
- We will encourage later life vocation and ministry
- We will be endlessly supportive

Why should individuals seek to develop their spirituality in later life?

- To make sense of their life journey
- To benefit their health, wholeness and wellbeing
- To 'run the race' and fulfil their God-given mission
- To be a source of spiritual capital and social cohesion for communities

Discussion - among the points raised were:

- The usefulness and limitation of models which talk of life stages and journeys. These are not watertight compartments, there is flow forward and back and around again.
- Experience is the key to growth and understanding; life stories can help explore beginnings and endings.
- Faith and spiritual learning are a strand of the ongoing adult development process.
- A reference again to the James Woodward's pointer 'Learn to live with our inner elder'.
- A reflection that witness (based on experience) should be without arrogance.
- The movement in later life 'from role to soul' – ie. less 'doing' and more 'being'.
- David Ford's commentary on John's Gospel was recommended. [The Gospel of John: A theological commentary by David F. Ford \(churchtimes.co.uk\)](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk)
- Reflection on the importance of role models which emerge from people's stories.
- Comment on the advantages of the concept of the (changing) landscape of later life.
- The need to unlearn ideas held previously in the light of additional experiences and new insights.
- A reference to the challenge: 'What would you like to be said in a eulogy after your death?'

1pm. Barbara Stephens introduced Kathryn Lord who provided an interlude:

Your story, my story, our story. Let's be curious about this story

Kathryn Lord is the co-lead for Stories for the Soul and has been a trainer since 2008. She provides training that can bring well-being to people and communities and help re-envision care homes and churches. Kathryn has led training in the UK, Belgium, Ireland, Canada, and the Netherlands. She has written a chapter 'The spiritual care of older people in care settings' in the book '*Godly Play: European perspectives on Practice and Research*' and a case study for the Church of England Liturgical Commission's forthcoming book on accessible worship for those living with Dementia.

David writes: This was an interactive workshop using the power of story and play to inspire wonder, encourage reflection and create meaning and connection. It was brilliantly conducted and held us entranced and thinking. It was all done in a calm and focused manner, with a sand-tray and simple props (story not revealed to avoid spoiler alert!). We examined continuity, change and ageing. We pondered the meaning of real value. A totally wonderful and generative experience, even via the internet.

The afternoon session: *The world 'in care' was chaired by Dr Joanna Walker*

1.30pm. The first presentation in this session was given by Tina English

Being a blessing to Care Home Residents

Tina had begun her career in nursing, and later worked in the voluntary sector, leading to her setting up Embracing Age which has a special focus on visiting people in care homes. In her presentation, Tina explored ways in which churches can reach out to people living in care homes.

Tina began by asking: **Why should we seek to be a blessing to Care Home Residents?**

Her answer was: Because God has a special place in his heart for orphans and widows. He sets the lonely in families and draws alongside the outcasts of society. He places worth and value on those society diminishes:

- Psalm 68:5-6 *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.*
- Matthew 25:40: *Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me— you did it to me. (The Message)*

People living in care homes are amongst the most vulnerable of our community – elderly and frail, many are within months of death when admitted to care. They have always been at risk of being a forgotten group and this has been made worse by the pandemic and lockdown rules.

Tina gave an overview of the Care Home Sector, using the latest statistics from Carterwood Home - Carterwood, [improve decision making](#)

- There are 10, 476 care homes for older people across Great Britain (NI has about 305) (444,737 bed spaces), with an average size of each home of 42-43 beds.
- There are 5500 care providers; 80% own just one care home but there are big chains which have many homes
- Only 4.3% of homes are rated as outstanding by CQC, but 72.2% are rated as good, so nearly a quarter are felt to be less than good.

Homes struggle with staff shortages:

- There is a vacancy rate of 8.2% in the social care sector - twice the UK average.
- Overall the sector faces a shortage of 105,000 workers, in the context of a population which will continue to have many more older people, predicting a need for 627,000 extra care staff by 2030/31
- Work in care is amongst lowest paid of occupations. People earn more working in a supermarket or walking a dog!

Some characteristics of care home residents

- They are twice as likely to feel severely lonely compared to older people living at home.
- 70-80% are living with dementia or significant memory loss and there are high rates of depression and other mental disorders amongst residents.
- They have lost most of their possessions, their independence and their ability to manage their own lives.

Impact of the Pandemic

There has been a huge death rate amongst residents of care homes (40% of deaths in first wave were of care home residents). The lives of the living have been severely diminished: Residents were restricted to rooms in care homes experiencing outbreaks, there is limitation of connections with the outside world and loved ones. Activities within homes have been reduced, staff are worried and dispirited.

The finances of the care sector have worsened. There has been extra cost associated with PPE and other requirements, and reduced income as beds became empty.

Many restrictions have remained in place despite the rest of society opening up and relatives have been living on a devastating emotional roller coaster

Churches and Care Homes

Care homes have a duty to provide for the spiritual needs of residents. There were already challenges for some in the relationship between churches and care homes. Covid closed doors of care homes to visitors, including churches, and re-opening has been patchy and stop-start. Not all those who volunteered pre-pandemic are confident to re-engage.

In response to this daunting scenario, Tina gave an inspiring and uplifting account of what we can do to make things better for residents, staff and families:

How can we be a blessing to care home residents?

There are things we can make or acquire and give to a care home. Examples from the work of Embracing Age were: Thankyou gift bags, bouquets of blessing (posies), cards of kindness,

knitted aquariums, pictures of joy, clothes and capes, plants and seeds. It may also be possible to help with technical issues and to provide online services. We can recruit and support Care Home Friends - nothing can really beat the in-person connection. Relatives, residents and staff will benefit. We can organise Carol singing and other seasonal celebrations.

Where to begin? Connection and engagement

If you don't have an established relationship with a care home, start with some easy wins that build bridges and develop trust, eg. thank-you gift bags, carol singing, bouquets of blessing. Who do you have available? If you have lots of crafty people - knitters, card makers etc - involve them. Find out from the care home what their needs are. Ask if any of the above would be helpful / appreciated.

Resources

A Great Place to Grow Old, Reimagining Ministry amongst Older People – Book by Tina English, published by Darton, Longman & Todd in October 2021.

How to Adopt your Local Care Home and The Care Home Friends Tool Kit both available from www.embracingage.org.uk/adopting-your-local-care-home.html

Making Moments Series www.embracingage.org.uk/resources1.html

🔗 www.mha.org.uk/news-and-blogs/information-advice/worship-engagement-later-life/

🔗 www.annachaplaincy.org.uk

Discussion after Tina's session

Tina's honesty and compassion were infectious. The emotion, frustration and determination behind questions and observations that people made were obvious. Expressing and addressing them enabled a sense of release and hope for future improvements, through Tina's review. Conference participants were excited by the creativity and novelty of possible approaches to care home support.

The idea that churches or a group of churches should adopt their local care home was well-received, although one attender reported a hostile reaction from a home she had approached with a view to offering acts of worship. It was pointed out that churches are four times more numerous than care homes, so if one in four churches could adopt a home, every home in the country would be linked to a church. It was also noted that Covid had prompted the development of many new resources for engaging with care home residents such as letters, cards and pictures. It was important to continue to provide these.

One delegate wondered whether Roman Catholics in a care home would have difficulty in accepting Communion. Tina reported that no objections had been raised when her husband (an Anglican ministry trainee) took services at a local care home in south-west London using bread and wine consecrated by the local vicar. Another delegate explained that she tells residents (or those holding power of attorney on their behalf) who it is that has consecrated the elements so they can decide whether they wish to accept it. She felt that the paraphernalia of sacramental worship can provide reassuring signals and symbols for people living with dementia.

Various resources were recommended in particular: *Church at Home* which is a free resource provided by [Stories for the Soul](#) offering suggestions for services provided at the time when churches were not permitted to go into homes; and *Making Moments* available on the website of [Embracing Age](#). This offers suggestions for quiet times of engagement with people living with dementia.

2.30pm. The second presentation in this afternoon session was given by Marion Shoard

Rights for Care Home Residents

Marion spoke from the perspective of someone with experience of seeking a care home for her mother living with dementia. She had visited many older and disabled people in homes as a church pastoral visitor, conducted enter-and-view visits of homes for Healthwatch Medway, undergone Eden Alternative training (<https://eden-alternative.co.uk/>), and was a past trustee of the Relatives and Residents Association (relres.org). Marion had published *A Survival Guide to Later Life* and *How to Handle Later Life* examining many different aspects of care home life.

Over these years, Marion had been struck by the wide variation in residents' quality of life, quite separate from the quality of their care. In many homes, little attempt seemed to have been made to consider how to create a sense of 'home' in which freedoms which residents once enjoyed could as far as possible be retained. Also, residents seemed to have little or no idea of what they could reasonably expect the home to provide other than meals, accommodation and help with personal care. Anything they enjoyed by way of activities and overall quality of life turned on choices made almost entirely by the home's owner and manager.

Marion urged a change in the balance of power between resident and manager through the introduction of new legal rights for care home residents. These would come on top of the few which residents already possess, such as legal protection for people whose mental abilities are failing under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and rights under the Consumer Act 2015, both of which apply outside care homes as well as within them. (Existing rights are usefully outlined in *Living in a Care Home in Wales: A Guide to Your Rights*, published shortly after the conference, in October 2022, by The Older People's Commissioner for Wales.)

Marion gave three examples of the sort of new rights she envisaged.

A right of access to acts of worship and to officers of one's chosen religion:

- The right to choose one's belief and one's religion is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 – but residents may be unable to make their choice meaningful, since illness and disability may prevent their going outside the home to participate in acts of worship.
- The welcome for church and other faith groups into homes to share acts of worship varies considerably – some homes provide faith groups with as much support as they need; others deny them access, while others permit them but are lukewarm.

- Failure to provide a quiet space for the act of worship can mean it is held in the lounge but other activities are taking place there – the television may be on, or a staff meeting continues in the corner, or worship is interrupted.
- In prison, chaplains enable prisoners to pursue chosen beliefs and religion through the provision of acts of worship and one-to-one conversations.

If the right she proposed were implemented, care-home residents could expect their home to use its best efforts to ensure exercise of their belief or religion. If faith groups were offering to hold acts of worship, the home would permit this, unless there were a good reason why not, and the home would provide a suitable environment for acts of worship.

A right of access to the open-air:

- Access to the outdoors is an important and beneficial aspect of daily life; some care homes automatically take their residents out, and may weave being outdoors into the everyday life of the home.
- But elsewhere, residents are not always offered the possibility of being taken outdoors and for many, this cannot be achieved without the help of others, which may not be available. Marion mentioned research from 2018* which reported that many care staff (in a sample of 1500) were never or almost never aware of a resident being taken out of the home for their enjoyment.
- The Covid restrictions had made open-air access more difficult to attain, and the return to freer regimes had been variable and sluggish.

A need for contact with the fresh air is recognised in other settings in which people are not free to come and go as they wish – like schools and prisons. For instance, access to the outdoors is treated as a right for every prisoner, rather than something a prison governor might – or might not – offer at their own discretion.

A right of access to a resident's invitees:

- This was a key right for residents. The Covid pandemic had drawn attention to managers' power to control visiting, but this had raised difficulties before then, and continued to do so.
- The problem was that visitors threatened with being barred have no right of appeal to an external organisation which could, if necessary, overrule the home's manager. Homes could continue to disbar troublesome people, but not if they failed to demonstrate a convincing reason for doing so.

Implementation

Key points were:

- The Care Quality Commission does not take up individual cases; responsibility for implementing rights could be (in England) with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), which already pursues complaints about social care organisations and care institutions.
- To provide a framework for implementation, the LGSCO (or some other organisation) could publish guidance about how it expects the rights to be implemented – for instance, as done by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the field of disability and discrimination.

- Residents and their representatives need to be more aware of rights, both new and existing ones. Marion urged that anyone living in, or moving into, a care home should have a right to receive a written copy of their rights and to have them explained to them.

Discussion

A lively and informed discussion followed concerning life in care. Many conference participants were involved in visiting, pastoral work and worship leading. The following points were made:

- It was felt that we may have to acknowledge the limitations which are associated with economics and staffing, but there are opportunities to work positively and effectively with those providing care.
- In response to the costs of implementing rights, Marion did not consider that the provision of suitable conditions for faith groups to conduct acts of worship, or allowing visitors as long as their presence would not be seriously harmful, would incur significant additional costs on homes.
- On access to the outdoors, frequent or lengthy excursions were not being recommended – rather, that residents be able to enjoy the open-air, whether in the home’s grounds or a local space for at least a minimum period, if they so wished.
- Before lockdown she had been visiting homes that provide such outdoor access and interviewing managers about any operational and cost obstacles. Examples had been found where cost implications seemed to be minimal.
- Some participants argued that, rather than residents being given a right of access to acts of worship, every care home should have its own chaplain, following the example of care homes associated with many religious organisations - but the cost of such a step could be significant.

Participants interested in taking this debate forward were invited to contact Marion at marion@marionshoard.co.uk

*Reference to research: Cooper, C. et al, ‘Do care homes deliver person-centred care? A cross-sectional survey of staff-reported abusive and positive behaviours towards residents from the MARQUE (Managing Agitation and Raising Quality of Life) English national care home survey’, *PLOS (Public Library of Science) One*, 21 March 2018.

There was opportunity for reflection on the day and for people to think about prospects and ideas for the future. Some points raised included:

- Older people still having many roles, including encouraging others to learn about faith, such as through grand-parenting, witnessing to their own experience, passing on a faith-based culture.
- How to enthuse churches to develop a wider and richer vision for later life.
- The idea of ‘later life landscapes’ rather than life/faith stages to understand ageing - acknowledging that an older person is the same person (as when younger) but also changed and changing.

- Recognising challenges that need to be made to practice and policy, including rights.
- How to campaign for access to chaplains in all residential homes
- How to reach a bigger audience with these issues.

We closed the conference at 3.30pm.

The conference was not recorded but speakers shared copies of their slides with the people who attended. Fuller versions of the presentations will appear in *'plus'*, our quarterly publication, over the next couple of issues

This summary note attempts to convey the essence of the day, which was very well received by all who were able to be with us. We are encouraged to use a similar approach in future. A hybrid (Zoom and face-to-face) conference, or the recording of main speakers' contributions could be considered for future events.

DJ / JW November 2022

