

Christians on Ageing Conference Call

Jesus' love in the midst of age and dementia

A practical Christian ministry with older people and people living with dementia

Led by the Reverend Ben Boland

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Ben is a pastor and chaplain working in aged care in Australia. This was our first Conference Call linking with Australia. Much to be learned – and the technology worked.

We were: Ben Boland, Keith Albans, Alison Delaplace, Sarah Sykes, Vikki Bunce, Chris Larson, Helen Mc Cormack, Bill Hawes, Joanna Cox, Gerry Burke, David Wells, Domini Lucas, Katharyn Mumby, Joyce Odell and David Jolley

We took time for everyone to introduce themselves and share a little about their work or situation. Ben was far away in Queensland, and we had a span around England from North to South and East to West.

Ben told us of his call to work for improved understanding of older people within the Churches and beyond – countering the culture which values youth and dismisses or ignores older people. He works with others to produce resources which explore the theology and practice of sharing Jesus with older people providing tools to help others: people who already know Jesus, and people who have not previously known Jesus. It is a challenge to encourage Churches to care about older people. For some the concept of 'Evangelism' is a dirty word and discussion of religion or politics may be seen to be socially unacceptable. But an appropriate approach is non-coercive and aims to share the love of Jesus:

Ben brought to us five myths about older people, and especially people of any age with dementia:

- Set and neglect: They are where they are and can be best forgotten
- It's not strategic: with limited resources, the resources we have should be direct toward those more likely to benefit
- Faith of a child: old people, especially those with dementia become childlike and unable to engage with complex ideas and feelings
- They are beyond salvation: unable to learn and to change
- Work with old people is for those who are not good enough to work with other

He contests all of these with material summarised in a podcast:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWHmkjRj_xU

His inspiration comes from many researchers and practitioners, most especially from the Reverend Professor Elizabeth MacKinley. Most impressively her work confirms that:

- We become more aware and more interested in spiritual matters as we get older
- Even in the presence of dementia, new learning can occur – and people with dementia do come to faith

Ben gave two quotations to challenge us:

Our reluctance to question or challenge older people may subtly remove them from the human race. It pretends, in effect that they are moral non-entities; it treats them condescendingly as though they were toys. We will take an important step towards re-entry into community with the aged when we are willing to attend to them seriously enough as moral beings to approve and reprove their behavior.

William May

In the same way that we encourage people in our care to explore and engage with new activities and interests, holistic care must encourage new spiritual activities and interests.

Andrew Cameron

He followed these with a test we might apply to our own situations:

- What proportion of your Church resources are directed to those who are aged less than twenty?
- What proportion of your Church resources are directed to those who are aged over eighty?

None of us might know the answer in detail but we all acknowledged that a disproportion of resources is directed at the young. The rationale is: 'Children are the future of the church'. Ben wonders how much this is supported by biblical teaching.

We turned to The 3 Ps:

Prayer: fuels all that we do

- Praying for and with individual older people.
- Praying for and with the generality of older people, within churches, beyond churches and around the world

Presence: turn up – be there for and with older people

- Learn about and respect the spirituality and relational life of older people
- Help build relationships between older people in whatever setting they present – and between them and others of whatever age group
- Be aware that modern society, with its emphasis on mobility, can undermine long-term relationships and require the formation of new networks of friendship and faith
- Be aware of and make use of all modes of communications which can sustain togetherness: letters, postcards, treats by post, telephone, email and other internet modes
- We can become so busy that people are left without satisfying time with important others – Hence loneliness (not confined to older people).

Pastoral care: so powerful and so simple in principle but demanding of time and understanding. Some find the challenge scary.

Ben shared with us references from his own work and the work of others:

Boland, B. *Book Review: Disciples & Friends: Investigations in Disability, Dementia and Mental Health*, Journal of Contemporary Ministry, 2023, Vol 8.

<https://www.journalofcontemporaryministry.com/index.php/jcm/article/view/243/207>

Boland, B. *Book Review: From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry and Congregational Leadership*, Journal of Contemporary Ministry, 2023, Vol 8.

<https://www.journalofcontemporaryministry.com/index.php/jcm/article/view/243/207>

Boland, B. *Book Review: Redeeming Dementia: Spirituality, Theology and Science*, Journal of Contemporary Ministry, 2023, Vol 8.

<https://www.journalofcontemporaryministry.com/index.php/jcm/article/view/243/207>

Does the church love old people? The answer is we don't prioritise them

The Other Cheek.com, May 2023

<https://theothercheek.com.au/does-the-church-love-old-people-the-answer-is-we-dont-prioritise-them/>

Why the church does not love older people as much as Jesus did

The Other Cheek.com, May 2023

<https://theothercheek.com.au/why-the-church-does-not-love-older-people-as-much-as-jesus-did/>

Scripture and older people

The Other Cheek.com, May 2023

<https://theothercheek.com.au/scripture-and-older-people/>

How churches engage with older people

The Other Cheek.com, May 2023

<https://theothercheek.com.au/how-churches-engage-with-older-people/>

How and why Chaplains came to share the love of Jesus.

Eternity, June 30 2022.

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/how-and-why-chaplains-came-to-share-the-love-of-jesus/>

Six signs of Elder Abuse and how you can help.

Eternity, June 15, 2022.

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/six-signs-of-elder-abuse-and-how-you-can-help/>

Hope, loss and Dementia

Eternity, September 24, 2021.

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/hope-loss-and-dementia/>

Should Churches stop providing aged care?

Eternity, August 19, 2021.

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/should-churches-stop-providing-aged-care/>

Guarding against elder abuse in Church.

Eternity July 1, 2018.

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/opinion/guarding-against-elder-abuse-in-church/>

Radio Interview <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ben-boland-finding-hope-through-dementia/id1576141155?i=1000565556448>

Elizabeth MacKinlay (*Ageing and Spirituality generally and Spiritual Reminiscence*)

Christine Bryden (*life with dementia*)

Coming to Christ in Dementia, by **Mark Wormell**, Mountain Street Media, 2015

Making the most of the rest of your life, by **John Chapman**, Mathias Media, 2007

Music remembers me; connection and wellbeing in dementia, by **Kirsty Beilharz**, HammondCare Media, 2017.

Sunny Street books (e.g. *The Picture book of hymns and Picture book of Gospels*)

Faith for Life Suite, Hammond Care (e.g. *Jesus Loves Me and Joy to the World*)

Ben has other material in preparation, which he is happy to share with people who are interested.

We had received an informative and stimulating presentation and a lively discussion followed. This included many comments of thanks and appreciation – ‘So helpful’.

The 3 Ps were warmly welcomed and will be adopted.

- There was comment about the illustration proposed for a front cover: wrinkled hands. There was unease at the use of this; it appears in many situations as an equivalent of later life. There was enthusiasm for thinking further on this, perhaps using sketches or photographs of real and lively older people. It was remarked that other organisations struggle with this issue.
- This moved us to consider knitting: an activity often associated with older ladies in knitting groups and Knit and Natter clubs. Interestingly younger people of both genders are showing a thirst for crafts, including knitting.
- The issue of presence – being alongside an older person, including someone with dementia – was picked up with enthusiasm. The phenomenon of coming to faith in dementia is startling and encouraging.
- One of us shared that during the time she was caring for her mother into the most severe stages of dementia, and beyond the time when words were possible – they had a shared sense of presence – ‘A sixth sense’. Quite wonderful. Barbara Pointon had remarked on this when her husband Malcolm was mute in advanced dementia. She felt she had become closer to him spiritually than ever before.
- The balance of interest and resources which Churches give to young and old raised further discussion and debate, some feeling that the balance is beginning to shift whereas others are doubtful.
- There is the matter of ‘What is old?’ and ‘Who is old – as perceived by themselves and by others?’ There may be differences according to culture and ethnicity. The pros and cons of compartmentalizing congregations by age or other characteristics might be explored further.
- The matter of language and presentation, content and style was raised, taking into account the needs of older people, some of whom have sensory impairments or slower cognition. This applies in general worship situations but even more so in a Care Home. Examples of good and poor practice were shared: making one clear and simple point is better than trying to cover complexities; recycling Sunday’s sermon is not a good idea.
- Providing materials such as those described and demonstrated by Ben is greatly appreciated and will help ministers and other preachers and worship leaders.
- Materials produced by Embracing Age were commended. [Embracing Age - EmbracingAge](#)
- The need for training in work with older people to be included in the education and qualification requirements for ministry was emphasized. Sadly we know that there is very little in the curriculum of many colleges – and little enthusiasm to include more plus frank hostility from some. ‘Young people are the future of the church.’
- There is hope that compulsory EDI Training will help: EDI is Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. An example of training is found on the Methodist Church website [Mandatory EDI Training \(Equality, Diversity and Inclusion\) \(methodist.org.uk\)](#)

We heard of the wisdom shared by a nun in Malta: ‘We grow up to the age of 40 – Then prepare to die’. Well, it is a thought which we might discuss at length

A thoroughly engaging, thought-provoking and instructive session – inspiring us with Ben’s positivity and evidence-based approach. We will share and use all this. Thanks to Ben – and to everyone who contributed to this session.