

In the News:

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Acting Chair of Christians on Ageing. Here is my look back at some of stories which have made the news during the month of January and which seem relevant to the concerns of our members. Wherever possible I have included links to the original stories which will hopefully give you more information. The comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

1. Ageism

I was recently involved in an online gathering of leaders of organisations concerned to address the subject of Ageism in the Church, and I look forward to seeing how those discussions will develop over the coming months. Ageism is an insidious, but sadly common, feature of contemporary society which, for a variety of reasons, has not received the same level of attention as the other “isms.”

The Centre for Ageing Better has begun the year by launching its *Age without limits* initiative (www.agewithoutlimits.org) which aims to change the ways in which we think about ageing. The website offers a quiz to help people assess whether or not they are ageist, and also offers a free collection of age-positive images. They are planning an Action Day on 20th March, with the theme of See and be Seen, and folk are encouraged to visit the website, sign up and receive updates about the project.

In a related story, the Church Times (<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/12-january/news/uk>) reported that six former Readers with an average age of 70 and with a combined experience as Readers of over 100 years have become Priests. Their vocation was discerned back in 2017 by former Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, and he ordained them as distinctive deacons in 2019. The article concludes with this comment from the Revd Mandy Coutts, the Start of Ordained Ministries Adviser for the diocese of York: *“This group of seven deacons are living proof that, when we have the courage to say ‘Yes’ to God’s invitation, there are no limits to what God can do through us.”*

Finally, on this topic, my good friend Josie Smith made a typically delightful contribution to the blog Theology Everywhere (<https://theologyeverywhere.org/2024/01/22/god-in-all-things-including-ageing/>). She begins by declaring that *“there are many good things about being very old,”* and when a friend in his forties tells her he cannot imagine what being 90 is like she continues: *“There I have the advantage. All the people I have ever been, at whatever age, are still in there as part of the ‘me’ I am now, as are all the people whose influence has contributed to what I have become, and I know well how it feels to be fortyish.”*

2. Health and Well-being

January began with more strikes within the NHS as part of the on-going dispute with Junior Doctors, exacerbating the usual winter pressures on the system with which we have become familiar. The Daily Telegraph carried the encouragement to older people to keep warm (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/02/junior-doctors-strikes-nhs-yvonne-doyle-elderly-keep-warm/>) something which the Centre for Ageing Better’s Good Home Network underlined in their latest report (<https://ageing-better.org.uk/good-home-network>).

The Guardian focussed on increasing the uptake of the Covid-19 jab – linking it to a *“world-first study [which] shows thousands of hospital admissions and deaths in the UK could have been avoided if everyone had had all of their doses.”* Interestingly, 31st January marks the last date for this season’s

vaccination campaign, but the study was based on the summer of 2022 when 45.7% of people in England were under-vaccinated, as were 49.8% of people in Northern Ireland, 34.2% in Scotland and 32.8% in Wales. Researchers used mathematical modelling to find that 7,180 hospitalisations and deaths out of 40,393 Covid hospital admissions and deaths from 1 June to 30 September 2022 were avoidable had the UK population been fully vaccinated. Under-vaccinated people aged over 75 were more than twice as likely to suffer a severe Covid-19 outcome than those who were fully protected, the study found.

Another concern raised by The Guardian during January was the struggle some people are having to get vital medicines. (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/jan/14/the-worst-ive-known-it-the-struggle-to-get-vital-medicines-in-the-uk>) Although the individual examples quoted in the article were aged 19-44 years, the issue of shortages potentially affects people of all ages.

And finally, in this section, news that dermatologists have expressed concern over girls using anti-ageing products. (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/jan/11/uk-parents-urged-not-to-buy-children-anti-ageing-skin-products>). The article suggests that social media is behind the trend with children as young as 10 putting pressure of their parents to buy products which can adversely affect children's sensitive skin.

3. Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias

I often feel that being health editor for a national newspaper should come with a health warning! Stories come around all too frequently which at first sight appear to promise the earth, and yet which soon disappear into the long grass. That, of course, is how scientific research proceeds, with initial findings giving hope of a particular development, only for further work to extinguish the hope or push the development years down the line. But every so often new reality does dawn and the promise is fulfilled.

It is with those caveats that I read reports suggesting that a blood test for the over-50's could detect Alzheimer's disease in people, 15 years before other symptoms become noticeable. The study, conducted at the University of Gothenburg, and published in the journal JAMA Neurology was welcomed by Dr Richard Oakley of the Alzheimer's Society as a step in the right direction. <http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1589/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/1589/pub/1589/page/2/article/NaN>

Back in the present, a poignant article in the Family Section of The Guardian, and reaction to it from readers, reflect the real experience of those caring for family members living with dementia. In the article, (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/jan/08/i-wouldnt-have-missed-it-for-the-world-10-things-i-learned-when-my-father-had-dementia>) Fanny Johnstone writes about her father who developed vascular dementia after suffering a stroke, and the experience of moving to Cornwall to support her mother in looking after him for 18 months before his death. The article is full of sound advice and the inevitable emotional roller coaster of experiences, but the author surprises herself and her readers in how she concludes. *"A few weeks after his death, my best friend, who had known my father since childhood, invited me for a drink. I hadn't seen her in a while. She took me to a beautiful bar. When the waiter had placed our first drinks in front of us, she said: "So how was it then?" Meaning all of it – the last 18 months, and my father's death. My exact words – which surprised us both a lot – were: "I wouldn't have missed it for the world."*" From what I imagine was a large postbag in response to the article, The Guardian published three responses. (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/jan/11/hope-amid-the-hell-of-being-a-dementia-carer>).

4. Dying and Death

I noted last month that I fully expect the issue of Assisted Dying to be given, or at least promised, parliamentary time before the end of 2024. Interestingly in her piece mentioned above, Fanny Johnstone describes herself as a convert to the cause based on her personal experience. It is important therefore to note this piece from the Daily Telegraph in which Camilla Tominey comes to the opposite conclusion.

<http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1552/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/1552/pub/1552/page/62/article/NaN>

Meanwhile, just as the cost of living keeps rising, it would seem that the cost of dying is doing the same. (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/jan/15/uk-faces-a-cost-of-dying-crisis-as-funeral-costs-reach-record-high>). Based on the Sun Life Funeral Costs report (www.sunlife.co.uk/funeral-costs) and the finding that the average cost of a basic funeral has risen to £4,141, Rupert Jones writes that “growing numbers of grieving families are having to sell belongings, raid their savings or borrow from friends to cover the cost of a loved one’s funeral.” He adds that, “while the majority of people (70%) do make provisions to pay for their funeral before they die, only 54% leave enough to cover the full cost. This means that, overall, only 43% of people are making adequate financial provision for their own funeral, so those left behind are faced with an average bill of £1,872 – which, in a cost-of-living crisis, is causing huge issues for millions of families.”

5. Office for National Statistics

Amongst this month’s releases of data from ONS was the publication of the National life tables which track trends in period life expectancy, a measure of the average number of years people might be expected to live beyond their current age.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifetablesunitedkingdom/2020to2022>

Life expectancy at birth figures have generally been rising over the past 40 years for both males and females, although that rate of increase has slowed since 2011. More recently the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic mean the figure for 2020-2022 has decreased to 78.6 years for males and 82.6 years for females.

The increased mortality seen since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has also led to a decline in period life expectancy at age 65 years compared with 2017 to 2019. In 2020 to 2022, this was estimated to be 18.3 years for males and 20.8 years for females in the UK. These estimates are approximately the same as the level of life expectancy at age 65 in 2011 to 2013 for both males and females.

Another set of data published this month covers estimates of the very old and centenarians from 2002 to 2022. The data only covers England and Wales at this stage.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/bulletins/estimatesoftheveryoldincludingcentenarians/2002to2022>

In 2022 the estimated population of England and Wales aged 90 years and over grew by 2.1% compared with 2021; this was its highest ever total (550,835 people). The number of centenarians has more than doubled since 2002, with an estimated 15,120 centenarians living in England and Wales in 2022. The large post-First World War birth cohort, aged 102 years in 2022, still affected the number of centenarians in England and Wales and accounted for 17.0% of those aged 100

years and over. The sex ratio among centenarians in England and Wales has almost halved in the last 20 years, from 8.2 women to every man aged 100 years and over in 2002, to 4.5 women to every man in 2022. Similarly the sex ratio among those aged 90 and over has gone from 3.3 women to every man, to fractionally over 2:1.

6. And finally...

It is said that nostalgia “ain’t what it used to be,” but a recent Guardian editorial begs to differ, suggesting that “local nostalgia could be a potential community asset.”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/12/the-guardian-view-on-local-nostalgia-a-potential-community-asset>)

The Italian anthropologist Vito Teti argues that the social value of nostalgia has been underrated and misunderstood. In his book *Nostalgia: Anthropology of a Feeling in the Present*, he writes, “It’s not about imagining a return to the past. We can never turn around and go back. It’s about regarding the past with pietas [dutiful respect] for that which was and wasn’t, and also with consideration, perhaps via possible utopias, for the unrealised potential of men and women who once existed.”

The article goes on to describe some research by UCL academics in the North-East of England which is due to be published next month. This suggests that productive nostalgia can be a useful form of social capital which might help so-called ‘left-behind’ places recover their sense of community. The article concludes that this approach might prove to be a more productive route to levelling-up than some suggested so far.