

Christians on Ageing Conference Call

February 2024

Worship in Care Home settings

Led by Islay Roberts and Sarah Crockett – MHA Chaplains

We began Lent with an excellent and helpful Conference Call. Islay began by introducing himself, stating that his interest in older people developed through his mother living with Alzheimer's disease, and extended through working for Citizen's Advice with lots of elderly clients – many of whom had financial problems often caused by grandchildren for whom they were financial guarantors. Alongside his current role with MHA he is studying for an M.A. focussing on worship with those living with dementia.

Islay spoke about the importance of how the room is set, citing research from 2021 which suggests that the way the room is set out helps folk with dementia focus. Thus a table with a cross and a Bible soon starts to help the residents realise what they have come to. His acts of worship usually last around 30 minutes and any reflection tends to focus on the gospel passage which is likely to be best known.

Islay quoted research by Meaningful Ageing looking at frailty and spiritual care which explored the issue of what folk, who might have had a negative experience of Church, feel about finding themselves in an act of worship. It reminds us that it is essential that worship leaders acknowledge that not everyone is happy to be present at a service. MHA is looking at Spiritual abuse training for chaplains – in recognition of this particular issue. We must be conscious of our style of worship – and of those who have no faith or no recollection of having had a faith who may be present.

One resource which Islay drew our attention to is 'Take Time Meditations' (<https://taketime.org.uk/>) which are a series of Ignatian meditations using gospel stories which allow people to take a journey with Jesus. The Methodist Minister Rev. Clive McKie has developed these out of ministry as a Prison Chaplain but they can be helpful in many settings.

Islay ended his input by quoting Christine Bryden from her book *Dancing with Dementia*: "the way you talk to us, rather than what you say, is what we remember..."

Sarah then began by introducing herself and her work, both with those living with dementia and those living with significant on-going mental health issues. She spoke of "making setting up the room a performance" – laying out table, cross and candles, and offering people a holding cross or a rosary. Also taking a wall-hanging embroidery around and getting folk to describe it – then hanging it on the front of the table. Use of the senses to engage people is really helpful.

Sarah uses a lot of creativity in her leading of worship and she shared several pictures illustrating her work. She emphasised that the residents need to hear that God will remember them and never forsake them – she does a lot of comforting in worship – one example being the use of air-dry clay for making thumb-prints as a way of reminding residents of their uniqueness and that they are remembered.

Issues of memory and what is remembered were addressed. For example, playing and singing just the first verse of a hymn can be helpful, as that is more likely to be remembered. Equally it should not be assumed that everyone remembers the Lord's Prayer.

Sarah drew attention to two particular resources. Firstly there was a form of embodied meditation called Biblical Yoga which has been developed by an MHA Chaplain. It breaks readings down into phrases each of which is linked to an action.

(https://www.mha.org.uk/files/3016/2808/8496/Multi_Generational_Biblical_Yoga_for_website.pdf)

The second resource is called Out of the Box – a development of Godly Play thinking which uses models and props. (www.storiesforthesoul.org/outofthebox)

Sarah ended by addressing the comment which many visiting worship leaders make after coming into a care home – “There’s no response.” She reminded us that a response is more likely once a relationship has been established, but this takes time and commitment.

We then invited comments and questions. We were reminded of the importance of acknowledging that in setting up for an act of worship, you are walking into someone’s lounge. The use of music while setting up can be helpful in encouraging a buy-in from the residents. It was also noted by Islay that on occasions he has been told by night-staff that have experienced a sense that a room has been used for an act of worship.

Asked about using the lectionary, we recognised that the liturgical year can be helpful, as can world events which the rest of the home’s activities are remembering. It is always worth recognizing who your allies are in a Care Home – what they are doing can have a positive effect on residents’ spirituality...