

Meet the Members

Heather Saint



My name is Heather Saint and I have been the pastoral coordinator for St Andrew's URC Cheam, which is in south London since March 2020.

I have been a member of St Andrew's since 1980. We are an active and vibrant congregation, but we also have a high percentage of members in their late seventies, eighties, and nineties. Many of these people I have known since I joined the church in my early twenties. At that time, these members were involved in the running of the church, in spiritual leadership, in leading Sunday school, planning events, cooking and hosting, and so much else. I and my peers were part of a large group who were often mentored by these members, drawn into their circles, and encouraged to serve the church. We were the 'young ones'. To be fair those of us still in the church are still seen as the 'young ones', even though we are in our mid- to late-sixties. Which I suppose if you are in your 90s is understandable.

I became involved with teaching in Junior Church when my children were small and this continued over 20 years, including a period of co-leading. This was all enjoyable and rewarding and I felt that I was called to do this as teaching was my profession and my gift. However, I began to feel that I was getting stale and work commitments were proving rather burdensome, so I stepped down from leadership. I was also a serving Elder, but again I was glad to step back from this for a period too. I was still very much involved with the annual Holiday club for 5-11 year olds in the Summer and with other church activities, but I did feel at a bit of a loss as to how I could continue to serve God and my church and continue to work full time.

Roll forward a few years and I was planning retirement and very conscious that I needed to find something meaningful to do with my time when it was freed up. It was Autumn 2018, and I volunteered with Christian Aid to visit schools and talk in assemblies and in classrooms. I jumped at the chance in 2019 to be part of a small group visiting Ghana to travel around visiting schools and projects. It was an eye-opening experience, and I was excited to build upon this and talk about it and the amazing work of Christian Aid. Then came Covid and all opportunities for engaging with schools came to an end. It was a little frustrating, but then in 2021, I saw online that Compassion UK was asking for volunteers to undertake some training via Zoom to speak on behalf of the charity in churches. I already sponsored a child and knew about

their work, so I signed up. Which is why I now speak in churches of varying denominations 6 to 7 times a year, which is such a privilege.

I know that you are wondering what that has got to do with Christians and Ageing. Well, it hasn't directly, but it has developed my faith and confidence and I know God wants me to go out beyond my church and raise awareness of children living in poverty. So, what is happening within my own church community?

At the start of 2020, I had again been a serving Elder for two years and had agreed to take on the role of Pastoral Coordinator. When lock down came in March 2020, I was very worried that many of our congregation, particularly those living on their own, and some of whom had little family would become very isolated and lonely. I organised extra phone calls by the team of pastoral visitors to those most vulnerable to check on wellbeing and any shopping or prescription requirements. When we started online services, we had a Zoom 'coffee and chat' and we tried to encourage those who were able to join in. Some had difficulty at first, but with gentle persuasion and coaching in technical issues many managed and really valued the time of fellowship.

As we gradually came back to normality, with in-person church services it was important to encourage older members to be confident to re-enter church life, and of course many were very eager to do so. In July 2021, I organised a cream tea in the church building itself - a large airy space and with plenty of room for well-spaced seating. It was well attended and a very joyous occasion and prompted many to feel confident to return to in person worship.

Before Covid, a monthly afternoon group had met, initiated by my predecessor, called TLC: Tea, Laughter and Chat. It was decided to reinstate this on the church calendar but to meet twice a month. In October 2021, the first afternoon took place and the bi-monthly pattern has continued ever since. We usually have a picture quiz, sometimes some poetry, often there are good discussions initiated, simple crafts games. There is much laughter, and many are regular attenders and look forward to meeting friends. As I listen to and join in with conversations, I am reminded that laughter is so good and can help dispel anxiety and unwanted thoughts, if only for a while. I am reminded that those who may forget they ever came will retain for a while that feeling of having had a good time, having had some feeling of 'how things were', and were able to relax into the here and now. I am also reminded that young and old enjoy a funny story, to share a joke and to gently rib one another.

A few have been reluctant to come, considering themselves 'too young' or saying 'it's not for them', but with gentle persuasion when they try it, they return. Some come with a partner who has care needs, or they come to have an afternoon off from caring. The

helpers make the tea, provide the refreshments, and facilitate participation in the activities. An exciting new development is that I was approached by a local secondary school to see if their year 12 students studying Health and Social Care could join us, with a view to developing their communication skills with older people. A group of six came for the first time in early February and it was such a success and will be continuing. I think it is an amazing and a God-given opportunity to involve younger and older generations, and it will be beneficial all.

We have also 'adopted' a care home and visit once a month. Most of the residents have varying degrees of dementia, but they recognise us and love to sing. That gradual lifting of the head and smile of recognition is so rewarding. It is challenging to devise a short time of worship which is meaningful, but we are getting better at engaging the residents and sharing God's love for them. As staff and sometimes visitors are present, we are also ministering to them too. We also go to individuals in their rooms to chat and offer prayer, silent or spoken. It is a privilege to do so.

From being rather unsure that I wanted to be involved to any extent with older people, I have gradually developed a greater understanding of their needs but also a great respect for those in my congregation who continue to worship and engage with the church in whatever way they can, share their faith and encourage others. Many of them, past and present shaped my faith and helped me on my spiritual journey, and I want them to feel still valued and I want my church, to quote the title of a book written by Tina English, to be 'A Great Place to Grow Old'.

I am in the early stages of planning a 'Holiday at Home' event over three days in July this year. A keen band of volunteers is in place and so it is full steam ahead for this new initiative. I hope that both older and younger members of St Andrew's will find the event uplifting, joyous, beneficial and give a sense that we are all valued by God and each other at whatever stage of our lives we find ourselves. I also hope to tempt those who have perhaps been on the periphery of our community and who live locally to join us, as they have done previously for our Jubilee and Coronation celebrations. Through a chance conversation I have already been given some good advice and information through a friend's sister who has experience of running such an event. I know God has his hand in this and I feel excited and blessed, although I have a good deal to learn.

Ben Boland



Who am I – A son, husband and father? A woodworker, gardener and reader? A chaplain, advocate and lecturer? Depending on the context I use all the above descriptors. Indeed, I could write about the 1921 Model 20 Willys Knight I am restoring (a car), the fence I need to fix because my sheep have escaped (again) or the snake (a red belly black) I almost trod on the other day.

In the context of Christians on Ageing, I am now somewhat of an expert on ministry with older people and also people living with dementia. My initial training came primarily through experience. Specifically, some of my earliest memories are of interaction with my maternal great-grandmother. Sitting and listening as she told me stories of her life and showed me her treasured scrap-books full of newspaper cuttings and memories.

Then, my grandparents moved to a house just down the street and soon after she moved into a nursing home. So, on the way to the bus stop in the morning my siblings and I would visit her and the other people who lived there. Our visits were not profound, simply a brief greeting and shaking of hands, but I hope it helped those who lived there. It certainly shaped me in terms of familiarity with clinical spaces, enjoyment of being with older people and an emerging pastoral gifting (though I did not recognise it at the time).

Indeed, by the time I was sixteen I had a career plan mapped out – I was going to be a mammal researcher/missionary working in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. With this objective, after I finished school I enrolled in a Science degree. After repeatedly failing at statistics and chemistry, I took time off university and worked on chicken farms and in the abattoirs. Then I returned to study, completed the degree, got married to beloved Beth, and spent a year doing research honours looking at flying-fox reproduction. Before working in the electronics and then meat industry. During which time our son James was born, and I spent a season as a stay-at-home dad.

It was during this period that I experienced a profound ‘call’ to serve as a missionary in China. It was profound in that I spent significant energy telling God He was wrong and Vietnam was just a bit south of China. Part of bowing to God’s will on this geographical argument included applying to go to Bible College, fully expecting not to be accepted (I enrolled in a one-year diploma and left after three with masters!)

The next major step in my journey towards ministry with older people was, during a Bible College mission trip, when we conducted a church service in a care home. I remember being shocked by how uncomfortable the other people on the mission team were with the older people and those living with dementia. So, throughout my time in college, I visited Mary, an older lady who was blind. Her bed was surrounded by Icons, an expression of Christianity I was totally unfamiliar with. What touched me was her love of Scripture and inability to access it. So, I would simply sit and read the Bible with

her. This was the first time I had to wrestle with some of the theological challenges of ministering to older people – their access to Scripture, and being called ‘father’.

By the second year of Bible College James (our eldest son’s) ongoing health problems made it clear overseas service was not feasible. The two churches I had been involved with had ministers burn out, and I became increasingly aware of the need for chaplains within Australia. So, in the third year of my course, I enrolled in a module which entailed pastoral visiting, and I chose to do this in aged care.

When I had completed 100 hours in aged care, I was offered a new position as ‘student chaplain’, which was a great blessing both in terms of experience and income. At the end of the year, I was offered a full-time chaplain role. This was ground-breaking, as I was not an ordained Anglican minister, and I was a ‘young’ (30 years old).

My first year was strenuous as my peers had been ordained for decades while I was completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. But the next major challenge came after about eighteen months of chaplaincy, when the Chief Executive Officer strongly suggested I study older adult ministry. While I was flattered, I was also very aware that this program was not offered by the training institution which my denomination saw as the path to ordination. However, I decided to study older people’s ministry, and I believe that that decision has profoundly and positively shaped my ministry.

After completing the course and getting years of experience ‘under my belt’, I started working, as well as extending my experience, and I started training other people about the importance of and skills for ministry with older people and people living with dementia. I began writing magazine articles, speaking at churches, and developing resources. This in turn slowly developed into speaking at conferences, on radio and podcast, as well as a little academic work and the development of resources to aid others in mission with older people and people living with dementia. I co-authored two books, *Jesus Loves Me* and *Joy to the World*, which seek to share the Easter and Christmas accounts with people with moderate to advanced dementia.

Over the last few years, I have changed organisations so that I now work with Churches of Christ Queensland; I have moved (from Sydney to Stanthorpe in rural Queensland). I have also been ordained as a Churches of Christ minister, and am focusing on academic writing as a step towards a PhD. I am delighted that Christian Focus Publications have accepted for publication my first solo book, *Jesus’ Love in the Midst of Growing Older and Living with Dementia: Practical and Theological Ministry with Older People and People Living with Dementia*.

Finally, I want to thank Christians on Ageing, for their great work and opportunity to share. If you are interested in knowing more about my ministry, I am on LinkedIn or simply drop me an email – jesusloveinagedcare@gmail.com.

Rev Ben Boland Bsc (Hon), MDiv, Grad Dip (ageing and pastoral)

PS: Some people may be interested in a podcast interview I gave about mental health and faith in later life - <https://www.anxiousfaith.org/episodes/ep26-old-people-get-depressed-too>