

Meet the Members - Marion Shoard

Hello! I am a 74-year-old member living since last year in a small village near Edenbridge, tucked away in a leafy part of west Kent, having moved here unexpectedly (after a family death) from crowded, urban north-east Kent. There, I was a member at Gravesend Methodist Church, whose outreach focus was on helping the many people living on the edge, not least homeless people. In contrast, my new church, Marsh Green URC, contains a nature reserve – one reason for its Rocha gold eco-church award.

Wind back to the late 1990s: illness catapulted me into the world of older people's care and thence to churches' engagement (or lack of it) with older people who desperately need help. For at that time, my mother developed dementia (which advanced rapidly), while losing much of her eyesight through age-related macular degeneration.

I felt very isolated: my mother must have felt ten times more so. In those days, dementia was little understood by most people, so that friends and family members, confounded by her new condition, started to fall away. My first concern, when social workers told me to find a care home as soon as possible, was to work out just how somebody nearly blind and with severe dementia should be cared for. I hot-footed it from Kent to the University of Stirling, having heard on radio about the newly-formed Iris Murdoch Centre. Its then director, Mary Marshall, was generous with her time, but alas revealed that virtually no research had been conducted on how to sustain someone who is both nearly blind and living with dementia. Meanwhile, back in Kent, the consultant in my mother's hospital mental health ward barked an order at me to find a care home in which to place Gladys within a fortnight. A steep learning curve followed, as I tried to discern just what care any home would actually deliver behind the managers' reassuring smiles. Time after time, I would return to face the consultant to report that I had searched in vain for a home I felt sure could care adequately for my mother. Finally, the NHS agreed to place her in its long-stay unit in Ramsgate, where she was well looked after for the last four-and-a-half-years of her life, funded by NHS Continuing Healthcare.

My life up till that point had focused on writing and campaigning about conflicts over the use of the countryside and teaching rural planning at universities. I decided to switch focus to try to offer some of the lessons I had learned in the world of care to a wider audience, realising that there are many choices we make as we grow older which can have a major impact on our quality of life at the time and also if life becomes challenging in the future, not least in the fields of housing, transport, money, diet, exercise, healthcare and power of attorney. By 2004, I had gathered this information and guidance together in a book, *A Survival Guide to Later Life*. More than a decade later, after further research and travel, came my 1000+-page handbook *How to Handle Later Life*. This sets out a framework to understand ageing, its physical manifestations and the special psychological, nutrition and exercise needs of older people, then goes on to explore key choices which confront us in later life, from where we live to how we die.

During these years, I was a member of Dorking URC in Surrey, and, after my mother's death, I sought to seek to engage through the church with older and disabled people. This mainly involved helping with acts of worship in care homes; offering individuals pastoral care (an activity that came to absorb most afternoons); and running outings into nearby countryside for older and disabled people without cars. Two of the people for whom I served as pastoral visitor had lived in the countryside (one working as a cowman on a local estate, another the daughter of a farm worker), and they much missed rural sights and sounds.

Other older people, many living in the same sheltered housing complex jumped (yes, almost literally) at the chance to go out into the real countryside – not artificial playgrounds and garden centres, but unfrequented country lanes and natural areas. So, we would set off in the church's minibus, slowing down to take in the dazzling sight of sheets of bluebells, and stopping off at various places. I was fortunate not only that the church had its own minibus, and I could call upon volunteer drivers, but also that another church member, a paramedic, would push Jim in his wheelchair and keep an eye on Ruby, who so happily pushed her rollator over the uneven ground of lovely, hidden-away nature reserves. We would round off these trips by being welcomed into a country church hall for tea and cake.

At Christians on Ageing's national conference via Zoom on September 20th, our focus on social care prompted conversations about the wide range of ways in which churches can reach out to older and disabled people. CoA will doubtless continue these through channels such as its journal for members, plus, and its video Conference Calls open to anyone. But if you run some kind of outing, I should be grateful if you could get in touch with me – it could be helpful to swap tips on the range of possibilities, practicalities like insurance and publicity, but also on how country churches (including now, my own) can play host to trips for older and disabled people living in towns and cities not too far away.

I joined Christians on Ageing about six years and have been a trustee for much of that time, initially attracted to the organisation by its expertise in working out how to address the spiritual needs of people living with dementia, spearheaded at that time by The Rev Dr Albert Jewell. For, looking back, I much regret not trying harder to seek out spiritual support for my mother. Her own minister seemed confused at my mother's changed state and rarely visited; no churches brought services into the long-stay unit. Yet the sounds and atmosphere of things spiritual would, I am sure, have helped meet not only my mother's spiritual, but also her emotional needs. For that sense of quiet holiness, together with familiar words and sounds could have provided her with a sense of the 'home' she had once known in church – and this at a time when she had had to leave the physical environment which she had called home for nearly 70 years (although she had come to fail to recognise it as such).

After my two books about later life were published and until Covid struck, I gave talks at book fairs, public libraries, U3A branches, older people's forums and sometimes to audiences of people training for church work, such as Anna Chaplains about some of the issues with which older people grapple. I am beginning to resume these talks, but also lead discussions about ways in which churches and church members (where action by a church as a charity would rule out political action) can support older and disabled people in their communities, such as campaigning to keep local post offices and station ticket offices open. BBC Radio Kent regularly brings me in to offer an opinion about older people's issues; meanwhile my monthly Nature Notes on BBC Radio Kent's Sunday Breakfast programme gives me the excuse to continue to explore this beguiling county of contrasts which I call home.

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