

In the News:

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Chair of Christians on Ageing. Here is my look back at some of stories which have made the news during the month of March 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.

My apologies for the absence of this update for the last couple of months – I broke my ankle on the last day of January and have been somewhat incapacitated since! As always, the comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

I. Government / Parliament

There have been two primary, but related, themes going on in the parliamentary news over the past month (and more) – the decisions emerging from the Trump White House, which seem to have cast doubt on most of the post-2ndWW settlements, and the debates in our own parliament as to how to respond, both politically and economically. In both contexts the faith communities have not hesitated to make comment, particularly on behalf of the poorer members of the human society.

It is often said that Donald Trump owes his political triumphs to the backing offered by evangelical Christians in the USA in particular. It is interesting therefore to note that proposed cuts to foreign aid and international development have attracted criticism from precisely this constituency. They protested on Capitol Hill against US foreign aid cuts, saying this will hurt millions of people around the world. Speakers called the cuts an assault on vulnerable people and a policy and moral failure. Matthew Soerens, from World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, said that while he was glad that aid had been re-instated for their work in Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nevertheless the grants are up for renewal this month and there has been no promise on their future. In a similar attack, the US National Association of Evangelicals has taken issue with the Trump administration's decision to cut international development aid, which it says, will mean an end to a programme preventing deaths from HIV/Aids. It has also criticised the administration's "harsh" response to refugees which it says is unChristian. The President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (Pepfar) is exempt from aid, but critics believe there is a lack of awareness in government that the aid cuts mean the infrastructure to deliver help is gone. A mission doctor says people will die unless the administration changes its approach.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/17/hiv-aids-pepfar-christians-trump>

Meanwhile, in the UK, changes to welfare benefits and the general tone of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Spring Statement have attracted widespread criticism. Headline decisions to cut benefits by £5bn a year by 2030, including changes to Personal Independence Payment disability payments, freezing incapacity benefit and stopping universal credit health payments to people under 22, have been criticised by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, who said it was important to address the underlying causes of ill health and worklessness, the increased reliance on foodbanks and struggles to heat homes, and warned that the consequences should not be borne by the most vulnerable. The Bishop of Leicester, Martyn Snow, the lead bishop for welfare, agreed that "the burden of these decisions should not fall on those already struggling", highlighting the disproportionate effect on disabled people already in poverty. Canon Alice Kemp, a member of General Synod and the Disability Task Group, criticized the proposed restrictions to PIPs and said there was a Christian obligation to advocate for the most disadvantaged.

Paul Morrison, who is Policy Adviser for the Free Churches Joint Public Issues Team, was also critical, saying, "As disabled people already have high rates of poverty, foodbank use and

destitution, it is near certain that the proposed cuts will lead to more hunger. In the UK the number of people who are food insecure – or hungry – was at the last count 7.2m. It is “profoundly unjust” that the weakest in society are affected and, he said, the changes show “a deeply embedded preferential option for the rich”.

Christians Against Poverty, which offers debt advice to lift people out of poverty, says more people may be pushed into deeper debt because of the welfare cuts outlined in the Chancellor’s Spring statement. Chief Executive, Stewart McCulloch urged the government to reconsider in order to protect the most vulnerable, adding that the changes to Universal Credit payments “will strip away thousands of pounds from those already struggling with health conditions or disabilities. This feels like leaving behind the most vulnerable, not supporting them”. The Christian Just Money Movement condemned cuts to disability provision and overseas aid as “morally wrong” calling on the government to “introduce a wealth tax to help address soaring wealth inequality whilst raising revenue to provide for the most vulnerable and support public services.”

2. Carer’s Allowance / Social Care

Having been in receipt of a reenabling Social Care package over the past 7 weeks, I can testify to the immense value of such care, as well as some slightly baffling aspects of the system! I have also benefitted from living next door to family members who have supplemented the official provision magnificently. I was therefore saddened, but not surprised, to read this article outlining the burdens borne by family carers, particularly when they feel abandoned and unsupported by “the system.”

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c15qn2kv3qno?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAAR0S6PNEYqMRO3v7pXR_z3OnB05zDcP0iolb-tubXsBVRUd52EFIIaDR34Y_aem_BlylgTaMPHVP-f4XALFTCA

The changes to the National Living Wage and to employers’ NI contributions which have just come into effect are likely to add further strain to the Social Care system, adding costs which seem to be unfunded. Writing in The Guardian, Frankie Tobi and John Harris describe the changes as ‘seismic’ with operators saying they will have to cut back on their provision, quoting one company in Lancashire, providing daily care for 450-500 households, which has said it may have to fold and leave its area’s local authority to take on its workload because it cannot afford the NIC rises. The article also includes a response from a government spokesperson saying, “This government inherited a social care system in crisis. We have taken immediate action, including a £3.7bn funding boost, 7,800 new adaptations to help disabled people live independently in their own homes, and we are also introducing the first ever ‘fair pay agreement’ for care professionals.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/20/social-care-sector-faces-collapse-as-nics-and-wage-rises-loom-providers-warn>

Meanwhile Parliament voted against exempting hospices and some other providers from the NIC changes, something which has left many wondering about their future. One such example is St Catherine’s Hospice near Crawley which moved into new purpose-built premises in 2023. Now rooms are mothballed, jobs have been lost and service cut back as described in this article by Harriet Sherwood.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/mar/24/hospices-in-retreat-funding-crisis-squeezing-uk-palliative-care-providers>

According to Hospice UK last year one in five hospices warned of service cuts. Government funding averages around 30% of their total costs, and a recent funding announcement of £100 million is aimed at improvements in hospice buildings and equipment rather than running costs.

In the light of all this, it is hardly surprising that the ongoing impasse regarding those caught up in carers' allowance debts seems no nearer a conclusion. Indeed the numbers affected seems to be increasing as the investigation widens. The Charity, Carers UK, was among 108 charities and campaign groups who have signed a letter warning that more than 9000 unpaid carers looking after sick and disabled loved ones have become the latest to be hit with carers allowance overpayment debts in the past year, prompting calls on ministers to suspend the controversial practice. While the government has promised to tackle the carers allowance scandal and launched a review, the latest figures show that 144,000 carers now have outstanding repayments after falling foul of drastic "cliff edge" rules limiting the amount they can earn from part-time jobs while still claiming carers allowance.

<https://www.carersuk.org/press-releases/thousands-of-carers-receiving-new-debt-letters-as-review-into-carer-s-allowance-overpayments-continues/>

To return to where this section of the review began, personal testimony to the value of social care came from another source as Emma Hemmings, the primary carer for her husband, the actor Bruce Willis, responded to the deaths of Gene Hackman and his wife Betsy. Hemmings said she hopes the tragic deaths of a couple and one of their dogs would prompt people to reflect on "the broader story" adding that caregivers need care too and that they are vital and that it is so important that we show up for them so that they continue to show up for their person.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/11/entertainment/emma-heming-willis-gene-hackman-betsy-arakawa-caregivers/index.html>

3. Assisted Dying

The ongoing debates around this issue have continued apace as the draft bill has been undergoing scrutiny and amendment, prior to its expected return to the floor of the House of Commons later this month. And in the midst of this, the Isle of Man became the first part of the UK and Crown dependencies to pass an Assisted Dying Bill, which will allow adult Isle of Man residents who are of sound mind, are terminally ill, have twelve months or fewer to live, and have a clear and settled wish to die, to apply for assisted dying. Members of the Legislative Council, the upper chamber, agreed amendments to cut the residency criteria from five years to 12 months for someone to be eligible. The Bill will now go for Royal Assent will come into force from 2027.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8rkz02nmy8o>

In the UK parliament several key changes have been debated in the committee stage, but it would seem that none of the changes made have gone far enough to satisfy opponents of the legislation – indeed some have been described as making things worse. Thus the committee voted by 15 to 7 to remove the need for a High Court judge to approve assisted dying requests. This follows concerns that the judicial system has no spare capacity to deal with requests.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/03/12/mps-vote-to-scrap-high-court-to-approve-assisted-dying/>

Meanwhile, as a result of a concession made by Kim Ledbetter MP, the sponsor of the bill, the timeline for possible implementation of the bill has been extended by two years to 2029,

prompting suggestions that this makes its enactment less likely as 2029 is the probable date of the next General Election.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/mar/25/assisted-dying-law-thrown-into-doubt-as-plans-for-rollout-delayed-by-two-years>

Faith groups and others continue to mount attacks on the bill and to ask members to lobby against it. The Bishop of London, Sarah Mullaly, has warned of the risk that people may opt for assisted dying because they feel they are a burden, adding that, “The Church of England’s opposition to the Terminally Ill Adults Bill is rooted in the impact the Bill would have on the most vulnerable members of society,” Meanwhile, Bishop John Sherrington, the lead Catholic bishop on life issues, urged people to continue to speak out against the bill, and the Muslim Council of Britain is planning to hold a briefing on collective action needed to resist assisted suicide being legalised, with speakers including three Muslim doctors.

A letter sent to all Labour MPs by a group of six opponents to the bill has described it as “flawed and dangerous” adding that they felt that the promise that the bill would be strengthened and safeguards increased had not been delivered.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/mar/26/assisted-dying-bill-is-flawed-and-dangerous-after-changes-says-group-of-labour-mps>

It is worth noting that in the Netherlands, which legalised euthanasia and physician assisted suicide in 2002, with the law decreeing that only a doctor can end someone’s life and only if several conditions are met, there is concern over the rising number of people with a psychiatric illness dying by euthanasia. Unlike the UK’s Assisted Dying bill, the law in the Netherlands does not require people to be near death.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/mar/24/euthanasia-death-increase-netherlands>

4. Dementia

There has not been much in the news in the past month, but a new play focussing on the impact of dementia on a Black British family is being staged in London. *Miss Myrtle’s Garden* is part of Lynette Linton’s final season at the Bush theatre in West London and the artistic director said “the beautiful and heart wrenching” production is an important opportunity to discuss the havoc dementia causes. A report in 2022 found that black people had a 22% higher incidence of dementia recorded than white people in the UK.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/mar/20/new-play-about-impact-of-dementia-on-black-britons-can-start-conversation-lynette-linton-bush-theatre>

5. In other news...

And finally, the Centre for Ageing Better has released its annual State of Ageing report. It reveals that millions more of us are living into our seventies, eighties, nineties and beyond, in good health, working for longer and supporting our communities through volunteering and caring. But it also highlights that this rosy, positive picture of ageing is unobtainable for many, such as those who are living in poor housing, in poverty and poor health, and who are isolated from their communities and society. The report shows the impact of regional inequalities that determine the quality of people’s later life. Quite simply, where you are born in England determines how you live and how well you age.

https://ageing-better.org.uk/state-ageing-2025?utm_source=Ageing+Better+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=34150afcf5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_AB_News_27_Mar_2025&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-e8d90c2b06-375066448

March has seen the 5th anniversary of the Covid-19 lockdowns, and with it the provision of online services by the Church of England. The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, marked the anniversary by saying that the services had connected a Christian community and an online community with far reaching influence. The CofE says that since Covid, the services have become important to people unable to attend church due to illness, remote living, or other circumstances. During the pandemic, 71 per cent of churches went online, but now that figure is 30 per cent. 33,540 online services have been provided by local churches in five years.

And finally, the Observer has carried a review of *The Life, Old Age and Death of a Working-Class Woman* by Didier Eribon (translated by Michael Lucey) which is published by Allen Lane. Described as a son's reflection on his mother's decline in older age, the review suggests that the author's guilt and shame "fuels an angry and eloquent meditation on our attitudes towards the elderly and the end of life."

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/mar/30/the-life-old-age-and-death-of-a-working-class-woman-didier-eribon-review>