

plus

**CHRISTIANS on AGEING**

a Christian voice for older people

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Christians on Ageing

## **Christians on Ageing – a Christian voice for older people**

*We work for a society in which older people are heard, supported and valued.*

### **Our activities aim to:**

- Collaborate with Christian and other agencies with similar visions
- Inform and facilitate debate on issues of concern for older people
- Celebrate the gifts and potential of later life
- Influence policy makers, service providers, paid carers and practitioners

*We deliver these activities through conferences, publications, commentaries and informational resources, focusing on faith, spirituality and flourishing in later life.*

### **Current prime areas of interest and action:**

- **‘Cherished not forgotten’ – activities that relate to excluded older people for whom the church can play a role, such as in illness & disability; in hospital, nursing or residential care; those living with dementia and their carers; the digitally, socially or economically disadvantaged; isolated & lonely older people and older prisoners.**
- **Mission & ministry in later life – activities that inform & support lay and ordained, by sharing information and good practice, and promoting training and vocation related to ministry with older people.**
- **Later life discipleship – activities that contribute to understanding older people’s spiritual growth and faith development; promoting a positive image of older Christians’ spiritual roles as elders & mentors; encouraging intergenerational learning.**

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# Editorial

Welcome to the Spring issue of 'plus' as we journey through Lent. Hoping that you're reading this around mid-Lent, I have included items that have inspired me this season, and have reinstated the mid-issue 'reflection' pages (pp18-19).



We continue with the theme of spiritual care, this time featuring thoughts on how churches can accompany older parishioners and their families living with dementia. Joseph Cortis reflects on the good practice offered in his edited book '*Journeying Together*'.

Next, we consider a community response to dementia support, illustrating how groups can offer specific services but also come together to create greater momentum locally. Victoria Smith describes how this process has worked in her corner of South Hampshire, developing a community interest group (CIG).

Having featured the keynote papers from *Ageing as Adventure* in our Autumn 2024 issue, I'm offering my own conference contribution in this issue. As usual, I'm banging the drum for opportunities for learning and growing in older age, in addition to the good pastoral and community support that churches are known for.

Turning to CoA activities, Marion Shoard gives us her usual comprehensive and entertaining account of our Culture Club which, meeting on Valentine's Day, was the perfect excuse to pursue the topic of romance in later life. Do follow the link if you'd like to be part of future discussions, delving into books, plays, art, film and other cultural expressions concerning older age.

If you're within striking distance of York, do also sign up and come to our first in-person event since Covid consigned us all to Zoom. As this encompasses our AGM, it is a free event. We are delighted at the prospect of meeting together as members and with anyone interested in our programme on how the churches can 'accompany age' in various ways (see pp. 30-31).

As a new feature of our conferences, we planned to invite someone to act as observer and rapporteur to give us a useful and hopefully challenging response to the day. We are excited that Richard Staples has agreed to take on this role. Richard worked for the BBC for 34 years mainly in local radio but also as religious affairs correspondent and for the BBC World Service. He now produces podcasts, writes, and helps run a bookshop in York.

I look forward to seeing you there!

**Joanna Walker**  
**Editor**

# Spiritually Accompanying People Living with Dementia

## Revd Dr Joseph D Cortis

The bedrock of Catholic Social Teaching is that we were created in the image and likeness of God. This basis of human dignity states that individuals have an inherent, immeasurable and unique worth, and that human life is sacred. Human dignity is not compromised if and when people change due to dementia. Tom Kitwood, a pioneer in dementia care, once said: *'If you've met one person with dementia, you've met one person with dementia'*.

Furthermore, every person, family and group has something original to offer to the community and it is important to realise that mental capacity is situational. We do not flourish as people by being isolated, but by engaging as members of our community. We have an obligation to help and support those around us whilst allowing ourselves to be supported.

### ***Spirituality***

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*<sup>1</sup> Spirituality is essential to every person, though it is often invisible. The visible aspect of spirituality can be expressed within a particular religion or in spiritual practices such as daily prayer, reading scriptures and doing works of charity. However, all humans

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*.

are spiritual beings whether they belong to a particular religious tradition or consider themselves religious. Spirituality's invisible aspect can be described as a turn inwards to an inner life. But it is important to distinguish between two aspects of the inner life: First, the inner life that is a **human life**, enjoying activities in the world, such as that shown in relationships, music, art, poetry, joy of creation and its beauty; Second, **the spiritual life** within our human life.

Living fully with dementia reminds us of the importance of fostering and encouraging this first, human, aspect of the inner life. However, the second aspect of the inner life, spirituality, enables the relationship a person has with God - whether or not they self-identify as religious. The invisible inner life of spirituality is also described as the way in which a person finds meaning and connection or sources of hope in the world.

However, if we think of spirituality only in terms of finding meaning then we may wrongly assume that someone in the last stages of dementia is no longer a spiritual person. This can be especially so if the person no longer seems to demonstrate a human life of enjoying activities in the world. However, once we realise that spirituality is as much, if not more, to do with God than our own abilities, then we can understand how every human being, no matter their situation, is a spiritual being.

### ***Assessing spiritual needs***

Initially, we can identify a basic approach that simply gathers essential information about the person. If someone

is already involved in a parish or other faith-based community life, then their faith affiliation may be clear. However, there may be situations, for instance when a person is new to a care home, when this is not so clear. In any event, it is helpful to have such basic information as faith affiliation and whether the person has particular religious or cultural needs such as diet, religious observances, or certain restrictions. But this basic information provides quite a static view of the person's spiritual life, so it can be useful to look deeper and build up a spiritual history with the person if possible.

A spiritual history is more dynamic because it seeks to identify ways in which a person's spiritual or religious life affects their care. Unlike the basic assessment, usually done only once, a spiritual history can be extended as the person's situation changes and as ongoing relationships with carers and professionals develop. A spiritual history can also help with identifying current or future changing needs.

Spiritual histories are not so much about what a person believes but rather how their faith and beliefs operate in helping them to cope. Such accounts respect the person's faith and beliefs even if they differ from those of the person who is doing the assessment. They are not about judging or trying to fix a person's beliefs.

A spiritual assessment is designed to take a deeper look into a person's spiritual outlook so that appropriate care can be planned. This means looking together with the person concerning their needs, hopes and resources. If the person agrees, this can be done with family and/or carers. A good



spiritual assessment values the person as an individual who comes from a particular culture, country and faith tradition, and who has their own background and experiences.

A key element of any spiritual assessment<sup>2</sup> is the conversations we have with people. Hence in assessing spirituality we need to explore that person's current **Image of God**. This can tell us a lot about how someone faces up to their new reality of living with dementia. For instance, if a person has a view of God as a supreme judge, then they may become worried about things that they have done or failed to do in the past and this may cause considerable distress. If a person has not thought about God except in terms of an impersonal being or an abstract figure, they may find it difficult to relate to a different image of God as a loving and forgiving father. And if a person has had poor or abusive relationships in the past, a view of God as Father may be a trigger for serious distress – even saying the Our Father may present them with real difficulty.

### ***Practical spirituality***

What seems to be clear is that despite apparently 'withdrawing' into another place in their minds, many people living with dementia are able to pray and their spiritual lives are still present. Hence, we must presume nothing about what the person can and cannot appreciate spiritually. We should never underestimate the power of Our Lord to bring comfort to people in any situation, or the value that frequent, reverent words have

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<sup>2</sup> For more details of specific spiritual assessment tools refer to Chapter 6 of my publication, *Journeying Together*. See refs p.10.

for people with dementia and their families and carers. Getting to know the person living with dementia and the family as early as possible is crucial to establish a healthy pastoral relationship.

Clergy have a responsibility to raise their own awareness about the different types of dementia and, importantly, to hold regular dementia awareness sessions for the parish. Such activities help to reassure people living with dementia, and their family, that they still belong to that faith community.

At the early stages of dementia, keeping to the same routine of the person is important e.g. attending the same mass, sitting in the same area of the church, allocating a responsible parishioner to look out for the unaccompanied person living with dementia.

It is particularly important that if a person with early stages of dementia is an active member of the parish, such as arranging flowers, catechists, etc., such situations are dealt with in the most sensitive and caring way. Whenever possible support needs to be offered so that the person continues to fulfil their roles as long as possible.

***What can be offered when engaging with parish life is no longer possible?***

Here, a good relationship with the family will help to appreciate what the person's favourite prayers and hymns are, as well as favourite devotions, saints, etc. Ongoing understanding of spiritual needs is also important including the role of faith and prayers in that person's life.

Where the family's praying practices are different, or they do not appreciate that this aspect of life is still important to the person living with dementia, this may present a challenge that needs to be addressed in a sensitive way.

### ***Some practical suggestions***

Be prepared to be flexible in administering spiritual care as responses and behaviour may be very different even from the last recent visit. Read the non-verbal signs – is the person restless or uncomfortable?

Visiting clergy should wear clericals as this will signify that you are an ordained member of the clergy. Use familiar prayers and scripture readings, maybe those you have discovered in dealing with the family. Engage family members in these sessions as much as possible even if it is not their usual practice. Take your time in praying with the person concerned.

With memory loss, there cannot be confession of sin but the healing through this sacrament is possible. There is a need for visible, tangible, audible signs of God's love when visiting a person at home or care home or attending a service of reconciliation. When appropriate, physical touch can be healing.

Prayer is a practical thing that we can do and, even in very advanced dementia, people may still be able to somehow respond to familiar devotions. They may well hear and understand what is happening. Singing a hymn can also bring healing and comfort. However, prayers need to be greatly simplified, depending on the stage of the condition.

Use of symbols such as a statue, rosary beads or cross can be very effective.

However, we cannot assume that a person wants to pray or indeed wants to attend a religious service. The individual experience of dementia may bring about a change in the way that a person experiences their faith. They may no longer be able to read or have forgotten the words of cherished prayers. Trying to make the person remember may cause distress.

Christine Bryden, who lives with dementia once said, '*I may not always remember who you are, but I will always remember how you made me feel.*' I would suggest that this encapsulates what spiritual accompaniment really means.

### **Resources:**

Caritas Leeds:

<https://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/our-resources/>

Bryden, C. (2012) *Will it still be me?* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Cortis, J.D, and Matthews, P. (2023) *Journeying Together: Accompanying people living with dementia.* Redemptorist Publications.

Kitwood, T. (1999) *Dementia reconsidered: The person comes first.* Open University Press.

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# Dementia Friendly Havant Borough

## Victoria Smith, Project Lead

We are a new charity working for the dementia community in the Borough of Havant in South-East Hampshire. We were born out of the Dementia Friendly Community Network of Havant who have been meeting and working together over the last ten years. We are part of an active community working collaboratively around the Borough providing activities, support groups and advice to residents, and broadening awareness of dementia in our community.

### ***Background – my journey through the networks***

Havant Borough was fortunate in having several dementia friendly networks, and I became part of it in about 2019 after I'd been working for an online organisation called *Unforgettable*. *Unforgettable* sold products and provided advice and support to people living with dementia, their families and carers.

My background is fashion retail buying, having worked for Marks and Spencer and FatFace in the UK and Target in Australia. My colleague at *Unforgettable*, Barbara Stephens, joined the organisation to bring her expertise and knowledge of the dementia field. Barbara has been a family carer, worked for the Alzheimer's Society, and was CEO of Dementia UK before co-founding Dementia

Pathfinders<sup>3</sup> in 2013, which I subsequently joined in April 2021.

I started my role at Dementia Pathfinders sourcing and buying activity products to enhance quality of life for people living with dementia for our website. I have also commissioned colouring books and organised online community activities including Life Story workshops, art classes and variety hours. By chance, another member of the Havant network knew Barbara, and they had both heard of a new initiative to support people living with dementia in the community called *Meeting Centres*. We felt it could be a great idea for Havant.

### **What is a Meeting Centre?**

A Meeting Centre is a local resource operating out of ordinary community buildings that offers ongoing warm and friendly expert support to people with mild to moderate dementia and their families and carers. At the heart of a Meeting Centre is a social club where people meet to have fun, talk to others, and get help that focuses

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<sup>3</sup> Dementia Pathfinders works nationally and locally to provide therapeutic care and support for people with dementia and their families and programmes of education and learning for people in the dementia care field. The perspectives of those living with dementia are often unheard. We believe that people with dementia can express their views and influence the way services are designed, and so we are committed to listening to people with dementia and their relatives. We aim to translate their views and aspirations into practical changes at local level and we work with partners to offer activities that promote well-being and encourage connection.

on what they need. Meeting Centres are based on sound research evidence of what helps people to cope well in adjusting to living with the symptoms and changes that dementia brings. People can feel overwhelmed and confused about where to get help. Support for families and for people affected by dementia is often fragmented and varies tremendously across the country. Meeting Centres are a way of providing accessible support on a local level to mitigate this. Local dementia friendly communities are in a good position to utilise social assets and social capital in a particular locality.

Meeting Centres were developed following a community needs assessment in the Netherlands around 30 years ago. There are now over 180 Dutch Meeting Centres with a national infrastructure that local groups can utilise to bring new ones on stream. Many communities within the UK have now developed Meeting Centres.

They fit well with the notion of social prescribing since, in the absence of a disease-modifying medication for dementia, social interventions are the main way that people living with dementia can improve their health and well-being. The University of Worcester Association for Dementia Studies led a project to develop Meeting Centres in the UK.



The Association of Dementia Studies created a how-to booklet called *Guidelines* for setting up and running a successful Meeting Centre, which provides advice on all aspects of the process from setting up information meetings to engage the community, to the job description for the Meeting Centre manager. Dementia Pathfinders sponsored me to start working with this booklet to set up a Meeting Centre in Havant.

### ***Setting up the charity – keeping agile in the voluntary sector world***

Early in the process we were fortunate to work with Jane Ward of Dementia Friendly Hampshire, and with another local charity who were keen to be our partner in the project. They gave us great support and encouragement and shared their experience to get the project off the ground but, after a year of working together, circumstances changed, and Jane (Dementia Friendly Hampshire) and I (Dementia Pathfinders) were back to the beginning of the process looking for a partner.

In the meantime, Jane had been working with Dementia Friendly Alton to set up a Meeting Centre, and Barbara was working in the West Midlands with partner organisations to set up a Meeting Centre in Sandwell. We also joined the online Meeting Centre training provided by the University of Worcester Association of Dementia Studies. We created, as suggested by the Meeting Centre Guidelines, a Meeting Centre Initiative Group to guide the project. This included members of the various dementia friendly networks across our borough and representatives of several further organisations from the local area (see p. 16.)



Having cast around for a new partner, we decided that the best option was to set up a charity who could specifically become a partner in the project. We put a proposal to the Dementia Friendly Havant Network that we create a charity called Dementia Friendly Havant Borough with an objective to

*Promote social inclusion for the public benefit of people diagnosed with dementia who are excluded from society, or part of society, because of their illness, with two main priorities:*

- *Running Meeting Centres, support groups, and other dementia accessible activities within Havant Borough;*
- *Raising public awareness of the issues affecting people living with dementia, their families and carers (paid and unpaid), both generally and in relation to their social exclusion (and specifically collaborate with Havant Borough Council to organise The Dementia Information Day).*

The network's previous experience of working together to deliver The Dementia Information Day encouraged them to support the plan for a charity with clear objectives in this kind of work. It was also noted that all the networking activities are delivered by individuals and organisations volunteering their time, so we decided that a body was also needed to help apply for funding to pay for some of the work.

## **Where are we now?**

We have a charity with four trustees, we have a charity number, name, constitution and bank account, and importantly some money in the bank. Our grant application is with The National Lottery Awards for All, and we are waiting to hear if we have been successful.

We have arranged access to premises where we plan to open the Meeting Centre. Until we have some more funding, we are working with Dementia Friendly Hampshire to create a dementia hub at the location by providing activities including a choir, an exercise class, a gardening group and, soon-to-be a circle dancing group.

We have met with the County Council Health Board, and have councillors who are very supportive of the initiative, one of whom is a trustee. Last month we presented at our local Health and Wellbeing Partnership, which is a group that meets together to improve the health outcomes of the local population.

We have spent time building the foundations of the charity so that when we are able to open our first Meeting Centre, we have the support of as many local health-related organisations both statutory and voluntary as possible. The supporting networks are the life blood of a Meeting Centre as it cannot stand alone.



## **The last word goes to The Dementia Information Day**

*Havant Dementia Information Day*



Finding ways to communicate the help and support that is available to people living with dementia and their families and carers, is always a priority. To help the flow of information the network group, working with Dementia Friendly Hampshire and Havant Borough Council, have organised an annual Dementia Information Day for residents for the past two years,

*The Dementia Information Day for 2025 will take place on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 10.00am and 1.00pm in the Public Plaza of the Civic Offices in Havant. Do join us if you're local!*

### **Links for further information**

<https://www.worcester.ac.uk/about/academic-schools/school-of-health-and-wellbeing/health-and-wellbeing-research/association-for-dementia-studies/ads-research/uk-meeting-centres.aspx>

<https://www.dementiaphinders.org/>

<https://www.havant.gov.uk/havant-dementia-information-day-2025>

<https://dementiafriendlyhampshire.org.uk/>  
<https://dementiaroadmap.co.uk/>

## **Lenten Scriptures for Reflection from 'Soul Food – not by bread alone' Themes for the week from Methodist Church website resources**



Last week of March: **Soul repair - nourished by unconditional love and forgiveness.**  
Psalm 32, and Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32.

*Ps 32:7 You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

First week of April: **Soul Mates - nourished by companionship.**  
Psalm 126 and John 12:1-8.

*Ps 126:3 The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy;*

Second week of April including Palm Sunday: **Soul songs - nourished by music from the heart.** Psalm 118:1-2 and 19-29, and Luke 19:28-40.

*Ps 118:14 The Lord is my strength and song, he has become my salvation.... v24: This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.... v29: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever.*

Third week of April, including Good Friday: **Soul support - nourished by each other in tough times.** Psalm 22 and John 19:13-42.

*Ps 22:19 But you Oh Lord be not far off; O my strength come quickly to help me.... v21-22: Rescue me from the mouth of the lions .... I will declare your name to my brothers, in the congregation I will praise you.*

## The Springtime of the Soul

*In the Middle Ages, Lent was thought of as 'the springtime of the soul' as, when the earth was renewed and came back to life, so our souls surged with new life and grace in a burst of blooming. It's no wonder that the forty days of the liturgical season of Lent is a time for spring cleaning of the body, mind and soul.*

Megan McKenna, quoted in *Spirituality and Practice*, February 2025. (Visit [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com))



Photo: Aaron Burden  
Unsplash

*Felice Rhiannon adds: Elderhood offersthe remarkable opportunity to let go, to strip away all that distracts us from the process of deepening consciousness, all that clouds our ability to be fully in the now. We can find the energy to release outworn ideas and contribute our long unused paraphernalia to charity. Thus, we make space to refine our inner possessions as well as our outer environment.*

From *Ageing with Awareness: 52 Contemplations for a Year of Inspiration* (2023).

# **Spiritual learning as part of ‘adventurous ageing’**

## **Joanna Walker, Trustee CoA**

I was asked to provide some reflections on the theme of ‘Ageing as Adventure’ to a conference last year, to illustrate the role of spirituality and faith. I have often thought that having a lively sense of faith and spirituality can be very much part of the adventure of ageing. It also contributes significantly to our badly needed re-imagining of later life, as a society. Terms such as searching, questing and journeying are prevalent in spirituality literature, and particularly so regarding spiritual development in later life. This is when issues of identity, meaning and purpose can re-appear and new challenges present themselves.

### ***My research journey – an adventure in later life***

I feel that spiritual ageing is very much bound up with the sense we make of ourselves over our lives, and that this is contextualized by the times and places we age in. I’m a great fan of Richard Rohr’s ‘second half of life’ thinking, where later life is for discovering the contents for the container that you have built in the first half (Rohr, 2011); also, Jung’s notion that the later part of life is its true purpose (Jung, 1963). A mature faith/spirituality can greatly support older people’s sense of self and potential in later life, as well as their resilience.

I have also often thought that, like spirituality, ageing is very much an inside process, which is why those who try to define it from the outside can be somewhat off the mark. It's why academic and policy trends such as 'productive' and 'successful' ageing feel like imposed interpretations rather than the meanings of later life that people actually experience. I prefer the term 'flourishing' as an aim for later life, since this can be appreciated from within a wide range of circumstances, including the limitations of fourth age.

'Ageing as adventure' is an idea that has the same advantages, recognising that growth is still possible alongside (or even as a result of) the difficulties we associate with growing older. What adventure can you have without problems, dangers or thwarted efforts?

### ***A research puzzle***

Growing older is typically thought to prompt a greater interest in spirituality, as intimations of mortality or the challenges of life impinge. But I felt that little is known about the views and understandings of older people themselves and how they regard their faith and spirituality as responding to the circumstances of later life; there are very few learning resources and opportunities concerning spirituality that have been designed for older adults to explore these matters.

Older people mostly have to rely on informal learning for their development. This usually comprises learning from experience and by gathering such learning resources as they can, either opportunistically or through more purposeful searching. Of course, later life can contain

events or experiences which additionally prompt the kinds of reflection that fuel further learning. Because of social change, today's older people are additionally grappling with significant challenges to the spiritual meanings they grew up with.

### ***Finding out about later life spirituality***

People's spiritual outlooks are based on their evolving story: a kind of personal spiritual narrative that explains themselves to themselves. Reflection on life experience can produce either slow, incremental growth of spiritual meaning and understanding, or it can produce more radical changes in a person's faith or spirituality, triggered by a sudden realisation or a new experience – whether positive or less-so.

What other kinds of spiritual learning do people engage in to address life-meaning questions? There's very little formal education or training in spirituality for adults, although children and young adults have access to some through school and further education. The only adult provision I can readily identify is for those on academically-validated vocational pathways sponsored by faith communities, which include an element of 'spiritual formation'. Otherwise, higher education in areas such as theology and religious studies tend to be primarily 'learning about' spirituality rather than engaging with it personally.

On a more voluntary basis, most faith communities offer some sort of discipleship learning for their members, such as congregational teaching or small group programmes. But it seems that spiritual learning and development is almost



entirely self-directed. This includes opportunistic learning, where someone develops an interest in spiritual topics which they pursue with varying degrees of planning, such as going on short courses or being an active member of a spiritual group, going on retreats, pilgrimages and conventions, or receiving 'spiritual direction'.

### **Discussion**

Contemporary research suggests that spiritual learning is subject to cultural influences that encourage greater self-authorisation of people's spiritual outlooks. Spiritual or religious teachings are less likely to be adopted uncritically. The capacity to make spiritual life personalised and individually salient is much greater than previously recognised (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Williams, 2019). While this was often the case privately, it is now much more acceptable as the norm. The contemporary emphasis on practice is supported by a culture of 'does it work?' rather than 'is it true?' (Graham, 2014).

### **Application? My next adventure ...**

I feel it could be valuable to work with groups of older adults who are interested in their own spiritual/faith growth, as a complementary offering to the learning which church organisations or parishes can make, alongside their well-developed pastoral services. In some ways, this feels like offering something that no one has quite noticed is needed! It can be difficult to get beyond a caring model in local provision, valuable and necessary as this is.

How can we create situations that enable people to express and explore their spiritual learning journeys? William Randall and his colleague Gary Kenyon have talked about cultivating 'wisdom environments' - safe and somewhat structured contexts, where older adults could share their stories with one another and even mentor one another into 'elderhood'. Ann Morisy has written and spoken about 'Conversation Matters' for older people (Morisy, 2016), to help them get beyond rumination and towards helpful reflection.

Let me finish with some direct quotes from my research participants:

*'I would say that everyone has a different experience of faith and spirituality. I'm not sure that age is the most important factor, rather the response of the individual to life events and their capacity to accept change and to grow their involvement with faith.'* Carrie, 65

*'It's certainly something to do with getting closer to death; the further away from birth – endings. It's to do with having more flexibility because I'm retired and not so distracted by work --- a general opening up of the question 'How am I spending my time?'* Mary, 68

*'I feel that in my third age, I am deepening and widening my readiness to embrace my spirituality, to trust my feelings and emotions in getting in touch with spiritual experiences, without having to justify them intellectually. I am now readier to rest in the*

*deep unknowing, to trust the God in whom I have always believed more completely, and to be more open with others about my faith. I also feel more acceptance of others' faith experiences --- witnessed by my readiness in the last two years to interact with a circle of trusted others.'* Jean, 79

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## **Romance in Later Life: Culture Club report by Marion Shoard, CoA Trustee**

On Valentine's Day, Culture Club met as always on Zoom to consider love in later life. First question: can 80-somethings fall head over heels in love with the same intensity as when they were 18?

Reports from friends and acquaintances, but also examples of the many recorded romance scams involving older people, suggest that they certainly can. We recalled the 2004 film *Ladies in Lavender*, based on a short story published in 1908 by William John Locke, in which two elderly sisters living in a Cornish fishing village are amazed to find a young Polish man washed up on the beach below their house. They nurse him back to health and one of them, played by Judi Dench, falls deeply and touchingly in love with him, despite an age gap of at least 50 years. So, no reason to oppose age-blind casting of, for instance, 72-year-old Geraldine James as Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in 2023?

Second question: is a spontaneous, chance encounter, combining surprise at the unexpected with a sense of destiny-intended-this, more likely to quicken the pulse and lead to a more intense, even long-lasting romantic relationship than a blind date arranged by a friend or through online dating? What effect does the transactional, algorithmic nature of online dating – tick-the-box: non-smoker, at least six-foot, must be Christian, no dogs, perhaps – have on subsequent romance? The anecdotes we shared suggested that online dating is common

amongst older people and can lead to happy unions. So, algorithmic box-ticking and passionate ardour may not be incompatible, after all.

Nonetheless, that chance encounter is the bread and butter of fiction and the big screen – in film, it is known as a “meet cute”. In the 2018 film *Book Club*, one of four long-time friends now in her 70s, played by Diane Keaton, accidentally tumbles into the lap of a smoulderingly handsome fellow passenger on a plane. Recently-widowed Keaton is off to stay with her two daughters in another part of the USA who, fearful that she might have a fall and they be expected to down tools and travel thousands of miles to look after her, have persuaded her to come and stay, in the hope she will agree to move permanently into their basement. This is a classic meet cute – two people destined for a romantic relationship collide for the first time in an unusual, often charming and amusing way. Sometimes the humour of a meet cute is absent but the chance interaction just as charged, as in *Brief Encounter* (1945).

Keaton's daughters' strong disapproval of their mother's new romance prompted a discussion about the attitudes of grown-up children to new romantic attachments involving their parents. In *Book Club*, Keaton's daughters assume a parental role and wish to protect their mother while also looking to make their own lives easier. In many other cases, particularly if a surviving parent marries someone much younger, children can fear for their financial inheritance.

Yet in the anecdotes which Culture Club attenders shared, emotional rather than practical or financial ripples to the new situation seemed to loom largest, with talk of a new partner usurping the role of the departed mother or father. This, despite the fact that the death of mother or father might have come at the end of a long period of caring, leaving the life of the surviving parent much restricted for many years. In that situation at least, should not adult children view a new relationship as a gift, instead of the betrayal of a departed parent and an attempt by a stranger to usurp his or her role?

In other words, newly-married older couples can find themselves puzzled and dismayed when their adult children resist stepping into the new little bubble of happiness they have created – not only with their widowed parent's new partner, but also his or her adult children. Give it time, perhaps.

Widowers are about three times more likely than widows to form new romantic partnerships, according to recent studies. We wondered whether male domestic reluctance loomed large in the enthusiasm of widowers and, if so, how societal change leading to greater ability by men to look after themselves might change the balance in the future. Intriguingly, one of us observed that the new romantic partnerships which had come to his notice often involved a widowed person choosing as their second partner someone with a different personality and different interests from their previous spouse, even though they had been happily married with him or her for many years.

One of the four older protagonists in *Book Club*, played by Jane Fonda, finds love again, albeit a different sort of love, with their teenage sweetheart, and one Culture Club attendee knew of several people who had reconnected after widowhood with a love from their early years, the process often facilitated by the internet. Does a connection forged in youth with someone with a shared history and shared values trump later connections?

In the film *Past Lives*, which attracted two Oscar nominations in 2024 (for Best Film and Best Original Screenplay), a Korean boy and girl who have an innocent date aged 12 reconnect when, at 36, Nora is happily married and living in New York and Lae Sung comes to visit. The two are clearly right for each other and understand each other in a way that Nora and her American husband never can. He (Arthur) acknowledges the tension and wonders whether he can ever compensate for the much deeper bond Nora and Lae Sung share. Spoiler alert: like the Celia Johnson character in *Brief Encounter*, Nora goes back to her husband, tearfully. We ended our lively conversation with a plea from a long-time, happily married man, sitting next to his wife: "You know I like flowers, so please go out and buy me a bunch too!"

Our next meeting, at 1.30 pm on Friday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, will reflect on the ways in which various art forms have depicted the carers of older people. See the March newsletter or the Culture Club page on website. To join us contact [secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk](mailto:secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk) or book via the link <https://www.tickettailor.com/events/christiancouncilonageing/1413677>

# Christians on Ageing

## AGM & SPRING CONFERENCE



*Accompanying age:  
what are the churches doing?*

30<sup>th</sup> April 2025, 10.30am-4pm  
at Bar Convent, Blossom Street, York  
YO24 1AQ. Free event.

### Programme:

10.30am: Refreshments on arrival

10.50am: *Welcome and introduction* to the day: Revd Dr Keith Albans, Chair CoA.

11am: *Keynote presentation* on conference theme: Revd Dr Chris Swift, Director of Leeds Church Institute and previously Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality at Methodist Homes. Presentation will be followed by Q & A, and by small group discussion.

12.30pm: *Annual General Meeting*, followed by updates on CoA and *LUNCH*: Sandwiches and drinks will be available (cash donations to cover costs welcome). Time to meet and greet and view resources.



2pm: *Accompanying age – practical initiatives*. Three short presentations followed by brief Q&A, chaired by Revd Keith Albans.

- Helen McCormack, Pastoral & Development Worker for Older People, North Yorkshire, URC: *The Gift of Time*.
- Dr Joanna Walker, CoA Trustee and previously researcher on older people's spiritual development: *Accompanying the later life transition of retirement, using 'Retiring Well'*.
- Dr Katherine Froggatt, Anna Chaplaincy Coordinator, Diocese of Blackburn: *Anna Chaplaincy: Embedding Spiritual Care in your Community*.

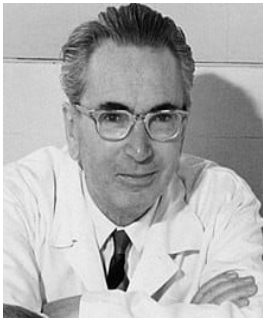
3.45pm: *Summary and feedback* from guest observer, Richard Staples, followed by closing remarks.

Do join us at this free event in York – our first face-to-face meeting for a while! Please book to let us know you are coming by contacting [secretary@christiansonageing.org](mailto:secretary@christiansonageing.org), or <https://www.tickettailor.com/events/christiancouncilonageing/1532201>



## International Conference on Spirituality and Aging – Encore webinar series

This international conference meets every few years and was most recently held in Waterloo, Ontario (2023). Such was the interest, beyond those who could attend in person (see *plus* Autumn 2023 for Keith Albans' account), that subsequent online webinars have been offered. These have often represented contributions from the conference, or featured related topics.



January 2025's meeting was on spirituality, transcendence and meaning-making. It drew on the classic work of Viktor Frankl, and on the writings of American scholars Mel Kimble and Jim Ellor who have studied and developed Frankl's themes. The application of Frankl's therapeutic work, Logotherapy, was linked to contemporary psychotherapy. A

recording of this Encore session is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mQkjFq6QLY>

Photo: Viktor Frankl, as featured in *Human Values in Ageing* newsletter, March 2025. To subscribe (free), email the editor [hrmoody@yahoo.com](mailto:hrmoody@yahoo.com)

The great psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, survivor of the Nazi death camps, wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*. He lived to be 92 and his last published book (though written earlier) was significantly titled *Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything*.

Encore Webinars are especially relevant for practitioners of all kinds who work with older people because they encourage application of well-researched theories and practice. It's a good chance to hear and participate in discussion on topics available at conferences.

The next webinar on April 23<sup>rd</sup> features Kathy Berry on 'When words fail – spiritual care and dementia'.

To sign up for (free) participation visit

<https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/spirituality-and-aging-seminar>

### **Further reading:**

Ellor, J.W. (2013) *Aging, Spirituality and Pastoral Care: A Multinational Perspective*. Routledge.

Netting, F.E. and Ellor, J.W (2005) *Faith-Based Initiatives and Aging Services*. Routledge.

Frankl, V. (1946) *Man's Search for Meaning*. Various editions available since original publication.

Frankl, V. (1969) *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Application of Logotherapy*. Various editions, e.g. Penguin 1988.

Kimble, M.A. (2001) (Ed.) *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging*. Routledge.

Kimble, M.A. and McFadden, S.H. (2003) (Eds.) *Aging, Spirituality and Religion. A Handbook. Volume 2*. Fortress Press.

## 'Faith in Ageing' Poetry Competition

**Embracing Age** is delighted to announce their latest poetry competition, inviting aspiring writers aged over 50 to explore the profound theme of *Faith in Ageing*. This competition aims to celebrate the wisdom, resilience and spiritual depth that often accompany the journey of growing older. In particular, it seeks to illuminate the beauty and power of faith as it sustains and enriches individuals in their later years. We encourage poets to delve into the complexities of ageing, exploring themes of hope, reflection, acceptance, and the sustaining power of faith.

Sinéad Crosbie, CEO of Embracing Age says 'This competition offers a platform for writers to share their insights and perspectives on faith and ageing, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for the lived experiences of older adults.'

**'Faith in Ageing' Submission:** Deadline 9<sup>th</sup> May 2025. Details of submission guidelines available on [embracingage.org.uk/poetry](https://embracingage.org.uk/poetry)

A panel of esteemed judges, Pam Rhodes, Dave Bilbrough and Andrew Pratt will select the winning entries. The winning poems will be read on Pam Rhodes' Premier Radio Show, *Heart and Hymns*, and shortlisted poems will be published in an anthology to celebrate International Older People's Day

**Embracing Age** is a Christian charity working by combatting loneliness, mobilising volunteers, equipping churches and speaking out.



**Contact: Tina English** [tina@embracingage.org.uk](mailto:tina@embracingage.org.uk) 020 3778 0035

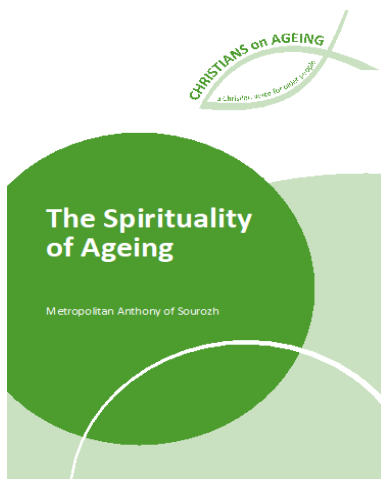
## Christians on Ageing: New Publications

*The Spirituality of Ageing* is one of CoA's classic titles, which we have been keen to re-publish in a more modern format for a new audience. It was written by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh as a conference address, and subsequently published by us in 1994 with a foreword by our then vice-president, Mannes Tidmarsh, whom some readers will remember. It was featured

for discussion in a Conference Call in 2023, led by Professor Emeritus Peter Coleman. We now offer this new edition with Peter's fascinating contemporary input on spirituality and ageing, and on his personal knowledge of the person and work of Metropolitan Anthony.

On the same basis, we have also updated a further classic publication, *Light of Faith: Reflections on Growing Old*, by Bishop George Appleton, first published in 1995. The updating material has again come from a Conference Call led by Dr David Jolley, our recent Chairman who died last year. Additional material from the Call participants has been added as commentary interspersed in the text, as collated by David and edited by Gerry Burke. We publish in David's memory.

*Both publications will be available at our AGM/Conference.*



## On the Spring Equinox

*'Spring invites us to unfurl, as the days now lengthen, and draw us gently, inexorably toward Easter. There in the desert of Lent, Jesus prepared to unfurl his arms, wide as God's heart, to hold it all for us, in him, when we can't hold it anymore: the wonder of this world, as well as its pain; death itself, and the unstoppable outpouring of life that flows, as surely as winter turns to spring.'*

Brian Draper, Lent online meditations *The Place where Beauty Starts*, 20 March 2025. See [www.briandraper.org](http://www.briandraper.org)

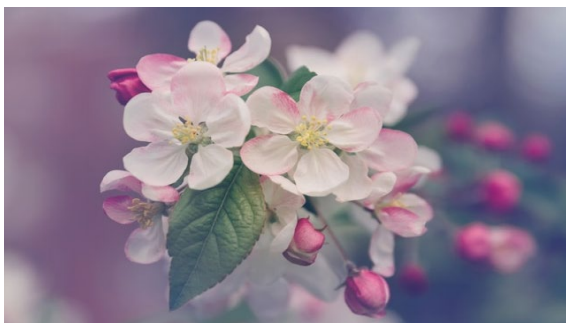


Photo: Marivi Pazos  
on Unsplash

*'Spring teaches me to look more closely within myself and trust the green tendrils of possibility: the intuitive hunch that may morph into a larger insight, the glance or touch that may start to thaw a frozen relationship, the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem like home again.'*

Excerpt from [\*There Is a Season: A Meditation on the Cycles of Our Inner Lives\*](#) by author, educator, and activist [Parker Palmer](#) originally published as Chapter 6 in his 1999 book, *Let Your Life Speak*.

## Christians on Ageing Publications

Dying and Death - Gerry Burke. New edition 2024.	£5.00
Faith in the Third Age – Dr. Michael J Lewis	£2.50
Growing dementia-friendly churches – Rev Gaynor Hammond	£3.00
I call you friends – Sister Joan Kerley, FMSJ	£2.50
I'd like you to know... - Sue Kennedy & Rodney Searle	£2.00
Jubilee milestones - Paula Francomb, Jo Kennedy and Mannes Tidmarsh	£2.50
Light comes with dawn – Sister Joan Kerley, FMSJ	£3.00
Light of faith: reflections on growing old - Bishop George Appleton	£2.00
Love is the dream – Sister Joan Kerley, FMSJ	£2.50
Making a start: developing pastoral care.... Sue Kennedy (Ed.)	£2.50
Reflections during a pandemic: Covid-19 in 2020	£2.50
Seeking a peaceful heart – Gerry Burke and Sister Maureen Murphy, FMSJ	£2.50
The spirituality of ageing - Archbishop Anthony Bloom	£2.00
Through another's eyes – Ann Bowes, Sue Kennedy, John Lansley	£2.50
With grateful hearts – Sister Maureen Murphy	£2.50
Worship in residential care – Michael Butler (Ed.)	£2.50

Price inc. postage and packaging.  
Cheques payable to Christians on Ageing

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