



plus

CHRISTIANS on AGEING

a Christian voice for older people

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Quarterly Magazine of
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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Contents



Editorial	2-3
A Window Into the Wisdom of Older Age	4-8
CoA Spring Conference & AGM Report	9-14
The Caleb Pathway - a Third-Age Calling to Ordination	15-21
Hope – A Reflection	22-25
Culture Club Report: Carers	26-27
A Prayer for Summer	28
The Death of Us	29-32
Saint Jerome Writing	33
Christians on Ageing News and Events	34
From the Editor's Desk – Learning Opportunities	35
A Sonnet for Petertide	36

Editorial

Welcome to our Summer issue of 'plus', as sun and rain pour down on us in generous measures!

'A window into the wisdom of older age' is how Emily Spencer describes her experience as a young woman engaged in pastoral assistance. I'm delighted to hear she intends to further her ministry as an Anna Chaplain.



I was similarly inspired to hear about a recent Anglican initiative to pursue what we all know – that older Christians have much experience as lay people that is of value to the Church. The Caleb pathway to later-life ordination has now been piloted sufficiently to lead to national development. I had the pleasure of interviewing Bishop Peter Hancock and two of his Caleb 'students' who, I gather, are now through their final selection and on their way to ordination. I thank them both for their willingness to talk about this challenging time in their lives.

In this particular Jubilee year of 2025, Pope Francis has emphasised themes of pilgrimage and hope. The focus on hope is taken from Romans 5:5, '*Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.*' Joseph Cortis, CoA Trustee, reflects further on the meaning and outworking of hope in our older lives.

Christians on Ageing activities are represented in this issue, first, by a report on our successful and enjoyable Spring Conference, programmed to accommodate our AGM. We met in York in the lovely Bar Convent and participants and most speakers came from the region. It was a joy to reflect and discuss face-to-face at last. We also benefitted from some reflection on our proceedings from well-known writer and broadcaster Richard Staples, who lives in York.

Second, Marion Shoard keeps us up-to-date with the wide-ranging discussions of Culture Club, and invites further participation. Third, we have some news and events to share on a future conference and new publications. Unfortunately, we report an unforeseen need to move office within Ryde, due to the sale of the building (see p.34).

An interesting piece from the Church of England's National Public Policy Adviser, Anne Richards, discussed an emerging trend in funeral practice. Both she and the publisher, Modern Church, were happy for CoA to reproduce it. It is an opinion on a topic of interest to all but especially for those considering funeral arrangements.

To aid our reflection this season, I offer my own thoughts on a famous painting that I saw on a recent trip to Malta with my choir. I found in Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome Writing* a meditation on late-life spirituality. See what you think. Other artistic offerings in this issue include poetry from Brian Draper and Malcolm Guite who can always both be relied on for good words in season.

Joanna Walker, Editor

A Window Into the Wisdom of Older Age

Emily Spencer, Lay Pastoral Assistant

Tea and cake. Such a simple pleasure for many, but a powerful one too. Many a conversation happens around a cup of tea and a slice of cake; conversations full of joy, sadness, uncertainty, fear or anticipation. Sharing food and drink together seems to be an integral part of our human nature, something that is familiar and comforting to us and a chance to talk about how we're feeling, our experiences, our hopes and dreams and quite often, our story.

In my previous role as a Pastoral Worker in Bristol, I spent a lot of my time having tea and cake with people, primarily from the older generation, around their house. Despite being a 'perk' of the job, I also found it to be an immense privilege being invited into someone's private space, where they would often share personal and emotionally significant parts of their lives with me in a very real and genuine way. And all this often centred around the power of a piece of cake (or some nice biscuits)! From these hospitable experiences, I learnt the power and healing that is in a simple conversation with another person. Quite often, the people I was visiting in my role just needed someone to share their story with and to feel valued and validated.

I had always felt God's call to work with the older generation since my early twenties, and found an incredible sense of peace and awe when working with people a lot older than myself. It is true that society tends to label the older generation as entering the 'final stages'

of their lives. As such they become a generation that gets forgotten about or cast to the side in favour of the 'generations of tomorrow'.

Wisdom in 'wintering'

As I write, the weather is warming, the colours of the spring flowers are popping up everywhere and winter seems a fading memory. For many, winter is a bleak time of year, where not much grows, the air is damp and cold, the days are short and the nights are long. There is also a sense of entering into the winter of our lives when we reach older age; that we've lived our best lives and now there isn't much more to it other than to fade away quietly. However, what I have learnt in my roles over the years is that there is a profound wisdom in the 'wintering' of older age.

Although often bleak, winter is also a time of gathering, preparing and storing; a time for slowing down and appreciating. Winter is crucial to the life cycle of plants, where they enter a state of dormancy; a resting period where they conserve energy for growth in the spring. Similar symbolism can be found in older age - a time to share our story, to gather our experiences together, to impart our wisdom and guidance to those younger, future generations who will carry forward into the spring.

Indeed, old age does bring about a certain vulnerability for many; uncertainty about the future, health concerns, getting personal affairs in order. But there is also a beauty and elegance in it too, like the refining of a diamond that emerges in those wintering years.

The words of J.R.R. Tolkien's poem '*I sit beside the fire and think*' beautifully summarise the reflective reality of older age:

*I sit beside the fire and think
of all that I have seen
of meadow-flowers and butterflies
in summers that have been;
Of yellow leaves and gossamer
in autumns that there were,
with morning mist and silver sun
and wind upon my hair.*

*I sit beside the fire and think
of how the world will be
when winter comes without a spring
that I shall never see.
For still there are so many things
that I have never seen:
in every wood in every spring
there is a different green.*

*I sit beside the fire and think
of people long ago
and people who will see a world
that I shall never know.
But all the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door.*

Our life story forms part of our identity, how we see ourselves, other people and the world around us. Our stories are full of chapters and memories, a mixture of emotions and experiences that shape who we are. Even in my work with older people with dementia, where those chapters often become scrambled and mixed up, being able to share in moments with them when they did remember little details of their past was an incredible and humbling experience. Learning from the care staff and family members about that person underneath the dementia was also a significant reminder that we all have a story to tell and that we want to be heard.



Photo: Editor, seen in a churchyard in Cornwall

Sharing our stories

Having a story to tell is not just for the older generations; whatever age we are we all have a story to tell. On a personal level, being married to an Anglican vicar has opened up a vast array of people of all ages to get to know and walk alongside, and a common thread with all ages is

this need to tell our story. My current work with adolescents has again revealed to me how significant is the sharing of our story with others to our own identity. Being heard and validated is crucial to having a sense of belonging and value in the world.

As we go about our lives, I would encourage us all to have our spiritual antennae alert to the stories that others are carrying, whatever their age - the little old lady taking her time paying for her shopping at the till, the man behind the diagnosis of dementia, the teenager who is struggling with their behaviour at school. And what is crucial to telling our story is having those who are truly listening.

American researcher Dr Brene Brown¹ suggests that having empathy with another person drives connection; that a person feels truly listened to when that other person enters the sacred space of vulnerability and openness, and willingly takes on their perspective without judgement. There is not even the expectation that the other person will fix their problems either, it is just having the chance to be understood and heard. And this is what I have found to be most powerful in my ministry with older people. It is the act of active listening that empowers and provides opportunity to share their wisdom and experience. For me, this has been a window, a glimpse, into the wisdom of older age.

Emily Spencer, a lay pastoral assistant, currently works as a wellbeing support worker in a secondary school in Hampshire and is due to take up the role of Anna Chaplain in Alton this coming September.

¹ Search for 'Brene Brown on Empathy' to view video

Christians on Ageing AGM and Spring Conference, held in York 30 April 2025

Accompanying Age: what are the churches doing?

As well as the necessary business of an AGM we focused on one of CoA's core objectives – celebrating the gifts and potential of later life – and helping churches and others to develop activities which contribute to facilitating older people's spiritual growth.

Revd Dr Keith Albans, Chair CoA, welcomed participants and noted the pleasure of being able to hold a face-to-face event for the first time in several years.

Our keynote speaker was **Revd Dr Chris Swift**, recently appointed as Director of the Leeds Church Institute, and previously Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality at Methodist Homes (MHA).

Chris initially spoke about how we currently view age and ageing, and the actions involved in 'accompanying'. The accompaniment of our own, and of others' ageing develops mutual understanding and reduces the sense of 'do-ers' and 'done to'. He outlined different kinds of wellbeing that were important to maintain in later life, when coping with change can take more effort.

The first kind of wellbeing involved physical and psychological necessities ('hedonic'), and the second

relied upon being able to conduct a helpful life review. A third kind of wellbeing ('eudemonic') involved having purpose. How could church communities help with these, especially the latter two?

In terms of an enduring purpose, Chris asked who might be considered good role models for ageing? We might think of people who have remained useful or successful to the end of their lives, such as Pope Francis or the late Queen Elizabeth II. Another example could be Dr David Nott, 70+ and still a war zone surgeon.

How can a society model and accompany good ageing? The prophet Zechariah describes (chapter 8: 4-5) God declaring *"Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets."*

Case studies

A series of three case studies was presented, involving older people and how their needs might be met, and Chris invited us to envisage how they could be better accompanied. There was small group time to briefly discuss each situation on our tables.

The first study was of a Third World elder: 2% of the global population is aged 80-99. This is a comfortable experience for some and desperate for others. How should we accompany these greatest needs and respond to challenges we often don't even hear about?

The second case study considered the great needs sometimes associated with 'fourth age' circumstances, such as in living with dementia, and the impact on lives of carers. What does it mean to accompany the 'disjointed reality' of dementia? Are there characteristics that constitute a 'spirituality of dementia', and what can the church and society do to help improve the lives of those involved?

A third case study returned to the theme of long-lived people still 'in harness' and the meaning of 'successful' ageing. Does their example imply that others have 'failed' by moving into fourth age? Is their work a denial of ageing? (NB, 'doing' vs 'being' is a common feature of discussion about later life.) How should we regard such third age 'ambition' that wishes to continue?

In a subsequent plenary discussion, we valued the idea of embracing age in all its variety and contexts – to adjust rather than deny. We also noted that many carers are themselves ageing whilst accompanying a loved one. Such costly situations merit collective and individual responses and support, in order to share the burden. Churches themselves are often ageing communities and could lead the way by recognising and celebrating their role in accompanying each other.

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After lunch, we looked at three examples of good practice in church activities that can 'accompany ageing':

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

Helen McCormack spoke on the gift of time in accompanying older age. Helen is Pastoral and Development Worker for Older People in the Thirsk and Northallerton Methodist Circuit & Zion URC Northallerton.

▪*Take time to plan*

This new collaborative project had taken shape after much preparation and planning how best the churches could accompany older people in their communities.

▪*Make time to invest in relationships and networks*

Extensive pre-project consultation regarding opportunities to communicate about the value of older people had taken place. Helen had made many visits, observing existing provision and organisations and exploring 'gaps'.

▪*Take time to reflect on your theology (your rationale).*

Several areas of focus for the work had emerged: the need to build Christian pastoral care; the basis of why and how to value older, vulnerable adults; the foundations for good church and community links.

▪*Take time out*

Self-care, praying and exploring all needed to continue alongside the work in order to keep going and developing. Helen had benefitted from time away in the shape of retreats and training opportunities.

Joanna Walker spoke on accompanying 'younger' older people on their transition into retirement as a time of change that could promote spiritual growth. She described a parish initiative based on '*Retiring Well*', a Christian course that could be run for the recently retired within an older congregational demographic.

Retiring Well had been piloted and subsequently run in many church settings and in various formats. Spiritual ideas running throughout the material included: finding your own personal calling in retirement; working out your unique jigsaw of a fruitful and balanced life.

A seven-week, weekly session format was enjoyed by a small but varied group in autumn 2024. Joanna described how participants were recruited, how the sessions were selected (from a range of options) and delivered, the nature of group life, and the course evaluation.

Katherine Froggatt spoke on chaplaincy as a means of developing spiritual care in communities, and started by reminding us of the overall mission of Anna Chaplaincy - an offering of spiritual care to older people

- Named after Anna in Luke's gospel - a wonderful role model
- Community based - going where people are

- No distinction between churchgoers and non-churchgoers (47% of older people served are not church members)
- Inclusion of relatives, carers and care professionals
- Person-centred and non-judgemental
- Ecumenical, wherever possible.

Anna Chaplaincy ministries include:

- Accompanying – walking alongside
- Listening to people's 'stories'
- Sensitive spiritual care
- Diverse contexts – to those who live alone, care homes, retirement facilities, community groups, dementia-friendly cafés ... and many more

Key principles of the role involve the chaplain being:

- Appointed and authorised by, and accountable to their local church, or group of 'Churches Together'
- Ecumenically and community based
- An advocate and champion of ageing in the wider community
- Reaching out to people of strong, little or no faith.

Katherine went on to describe the work of teams she is involved with - Kendal Anna Chaplaincy, established 2019 and Tarleton, Lancashire, established 2024. She had observed that to embed spiritual care in a community, an individual vision often starts things off, an outward looking church leadership gets involved, and a chaplaincy team is formed and supported.

christiansonageing.org.uk/agm-spring-conference/

The Caleb Pathway – A Third Age Calling to Ordination

**Rt Revd Peter Hancock, Simon Ward
and Dr Susan Tresman**

Editor: I asked Bishop Peter the following questions:

What is the Caleb pathway, and why this age group? Who was Caleb? Where is it available? What does it offer and require?

The name comes from Caleb in the Bible who, at the age of 85, but full of vigour and courage, committed himself to serving the Lord and undertaking fresh challenges (see Numbers 13 and 4, and Joshua 14). The Caleb course is therefore for 'seasoned saints'; those with years of walking with God, who have sensed that God may be calling them to ordained ministry. After a year of academic training, discernment and ministerial formation, those who are recommended are ordained to serve, usually in their home parish.

The Caleb course has been run in three training centres across the country, and Guildford is the first diocese to offer a Caleb pathway. This is a one-year programme of training for people over 60 and who will be under 70 at the time of ordination. During the course candidates go to national advisory panels for their calling to be tested.

This marks a new development in the church's ministry and several dioceses have developed similar training courses.

Indeed, the Ministry Division of the Church of England has recognised that many people across the country have received a 'nudge' from their parishes and clergy to offer themselves for training. It is exciting that behind these 'nudges' is the work of the Holy Spirit, calling, equipping and preparing people for ordination. So, the Church of England is now encouraging dioceses to bid for funding to run what will be known as the Elizabeth Pathway. This is a nationally approved training pathway which combines discernment and training over a part-time two-year course. This is for those who are aged 55 and over and are seeking ordination before they turn 70.

The Caleb course which I currently lead in Guildford is a learning community which is rooted in prayer, worship, mutual love and support. Together we learn more about God, his Word, the gospel and ways in which we can serve the Church and further God's mission in the world. Study and learning are combined with character development and being equipped for living out the Christian faith and ministering in our parishes and communities. The group I lead, when asked to describe Caleb in one word, said 'transformational'.

Rt Revd Peter Hancock



*Honorary Assistant
Bishop, Guildford
Diocese, leader of
the Caleb course*

Editor: I next asked two members of the Caleb pathway course, Simon and Susan:

1. *How did you hear about and first feel drawn to the Caleb ordination pathway?*

Simon

Simon retired early at 59 from the fashion industry, where he had been a leader / manager / promoter and had also made his mark as a Christian. He recalls saying to God, as he prepared to leave work, "OK Lord, what's next is up to you. Where you lead" What followed was a book on *Finding God in the Fashion Industry*, which led to an interaction with Premier Radio, which in turn led to Simon presenting a regular Sunday morning programme with them. In 2022, getting involved with the children's work during the day at the New Wine Christian festival found him spending evenings in the worship tent. Whilst receiving prayer ministry Simon was advised to "check out the Caleb stream".

From knowing nothing about this, Simon soon found that Caleb was a special pathway to ordination for those aged 60-70. Although family, friends and the 'seasoned saints' of his home church could see him in such a role, Simon couldn't. He put the idea to one side, but kept in touch with prayer partners and took up the role of church warden. In the summer of 2024, his new vicar independently enquired whether Simon had heard of the Caleb programme and he agreed to think about it. He wondered what difference a 'dog collar' would make to the kinds of volunteering he felt he was already called to do. The answer came that it would open doors. On the church's enquiry, there was just

one place left on the '24 intake and Simon found himself enrolling, now aged 68, following further discernment with diocesan officers and a suffragan bishop.

Simon describes the Caleb course experience as *“full on and challenging, but I loved it. It gives life and energy, as God wants for us all”*. On reflection, he feels that his discernment process about embracing this opportunity did not involve ‘voices from heaven’ but came about through trusted others. He has found the help of a spiritual director (accompanier) a new and valuable experience, especially in the use of the Examen to help reflect on how and where God is working in everyday life.

Susan

Susan is also at the upper end of the age group and is still working part-time in senior management roles in the public/voluntary sector. Unlike Simon, she has a long-standing sense of ministerial calling but had not seen a way to pursue her ordination hope. When she heard, through her Rector, about the Caleb path it was like a thunderbolt of *“what I had been waiting for”*. She was able to make an application fairly late in the recruitment process and says *“as ever, God’s meticulous timing meant that I found myself with a place on Caleb!”*

Like Simon, she arrived on course in September, to start the next ‘whirlwind’ phase of balancing the new demands of Caleb with work and church life. She feels she was able to respond quickly to the Caleb ordination pathway because it represented the route she hadn’t been able to find before.

Susan could trace the roots of her discernment to a 'nudge' she had felt to move mid-career from academic life into work with learning disability charities, and then into roles of strategic support in the NHS. The 'golden thread' she perceives is a ministry with / for the vulnerable and marginalised. This has lately crystallised into a heart for advocacy and protection, and where this might lead, within ordained ministry. She feels that later-life ministry can be "*characteristic of a lifetime*", by which she means that all experience, through which she has been accompanied by God, can be reflected and transferred into the ministry that God is calling her to at this time.

2. *What has the Caleb pathway experience offered and demanded of you?*

Simon

It's been more than a training; it's been a journey of continued exploration (discernment) and formation. The ministerial elements have "*asked you to consider what you will embody and represent*". Simon has enjoyed the theological studies, despite the unfamiliar experiences of prep, homework and writing essays! Learning the trade of 'vicaring' has introduced him to a wider Christian culture than his local churchmanship and provided a view on who you become in others' eyes, as well as the breadth of what is involved in a priestly role.

Simon says that he has been inspired by his fellow 'Calebs', who are very varied in their work and faith backgrounds and thus in what they bring and find challenging. He has also learned much from his placement in another parish about liturgy, music and other performative aspects, and

relationships within smaller congregations. He has valued reflective time away at Sarum College, which created balance in relation to other more pressurised times in the programme. His inner spiritual life has benefitted as he has explored his own love of story and narrative in the lives of others, in relation to his own developing identity. He feels he has been challenged to learn how to deal with difficulty and criticism, for example, and to discover what lies beneath and what you can fall back on for resilience.

Simon is already thinking ahead to the possibility of ordained ministry and what it could demand of him in his 70+ life – impacts on time, family, health etc. He has ideas about new forms of ministry he could offer to older people. Overall, he has a sense of immense privilege and new purpose, and he's willing for the path ahead to fork at this stage, to be open once more to the 'road less travelled'. And gratitude because it's *"not just me trusting God, but God trusting me, as in the parable of the talents"*.

Susan

Susan feels that, despite her extensive professional experience, the Caleb programme has stretched and developed her to the extent of being *"dismantled and put together"*. She has learned to *"listen and take time to explore and really test what God is saying"*. As a result of this unique opportunity she feels different, because she has been enabled to explicitly focus on God being in charge as opposed to making her own professional goals and decisions. She describes this as *"Not through me, but Christ in me"*, and says that we are steered through life to develop skills but now is the time that discipleship can really take form.

Susan reflects that she has learned from a big challenge undertaken by her son that she could get through the real spiritual and other challenges of the Caleb programme. She is now in calmer waters with the current finish line in sight. What will be the outcome of the final church selection process at the end of the programme, the formal testing of her long-practised discernment? She notes that the disciples/apostles were accomplished fishermen who were called to undergo a completely different challenge from their life experience so far.

There had been no particular highs or lows for Susan, but there was the ongoing challenge of keeping up a full and demanding programme over a short time – one academic year – that involved thinking, writing, responding to new ideas and practices in the context of one's work, life and family. Her anticipation of priestly life was very much focused on discipleship, which is one's primary calling. Also, for Susan, a strong part of representing God's church would be the prophetic role of challenging society concerning the vulnerable and marginalised.

Interviews by Joanna Walker



Photo: Diocese of Guildford

Hope – A Reflection

Revd Dr Joseph D. Cortis

There is a famous myth in Greek mythology about a girl named Pandora whose name means 'All Gifts'. She was the first woman created by the Greek gods. On her wedding day, Pandora received a mysterious box that she was told not to open. Driven by her curiosity, she opened the box and out flew all kinds of ills for humanity. Pandora quickly shut the lid but there remained in the box the last 'gift': hope.

Interpreters of the myth over the centuries have given different value to Pandora's 'lingering hope in the box'. Some have seen it as a consolation for humanity among all the woes, while others have seen it as the last ill: that which keeps a person from working hard to better his or her situation with the excuse of hope.

In the English language, the word 'hope' has various nuances in its meaning. Mostly, however, there is an underlying desire for something to happen in the near or later future. One semantic nuance, nowadays considered archaic, is that of trust: 'to trust' or 'to have confidence in'. Both nuances are important. 'Hope' can be used in a sentence like 'I hope that someday I will be able to have my own family and live happily'. The meaning of hope [as the desire for something to happen] helps us to keep going in life, even when things are tough. It motivates us to look

beyond our current obstacles and dream of a better future. It can motivate us to work for what we believe in.

But 'hope' can also be used in a sentence like: 'My hope is in my friends to support me'. The meaning of hope as trust helps me not to be closed within myself. It shows me that I am not meant to carry all the burden alone, that there are things beyond my control, and this is OK. It helps me to stay humble and to understand that it is fine to ask for help.

The risk of the first nuance is that it may lead me to rely solely on my own potential. It also puts me at the risk of trying to live only in the future and forgetting that the real moment is the present one. The risk of the second nuance is that it may lead me to rely too much on outer help and forget my own strength - not to mention the risk of putting my trust in the wrong place.

Both benefits and risks recall Pandora's story from Greek mythology, but what if we shift our gaze to the Christian story? Before the birth of Christ, the gods were seen as either neutral to humanity, or even opposed to it. With the birth of Christ, God is with, through and in humanity. In full circle, during Holy Mass, we give glory and honour to the Father and the Holy Spirit, with Christ - in Christ and through Christ.

Mythology from antiquity is important as it is full of stories that convey valuable lessons about life. Different figures from these stories teach us, among other things, that it is important to fight for what is good, even when you know that there can be no victory. We fight for what is good

simply because it is good and not for any egoistic reason. Moreover, in mythological stories of good against evil, we see that as humans, we have the same enemies, irrespective of what and who we believe in: chaos, unreason, destruction, violence, greed, hunger, sickness, death. These are all found in world myths and they are our enemies as well. No wonder that many of these stories, established before the advent of Christianity, end either in tragedy or in a tone of cynicism and banality - despite their poetic beauty. How can there be hope if all the forces of nature, the old gods, are against us?

The incarnation of God and the Resurrection of Christ show us that even if fallen nature, wounded by humanity's sin, has turned against us, God remains for us and with us. Nothing can separate us from Him. Christ is true God and true man: for us to be separated from God would mean that God is split within Himself, and that is an impossibility.

Following the advent of Christianity, even non-religious stories have changed such that a happy turn of events and ending is possible. It does not mean that tragedy and suffering are no longer a reality. On the contrary, these make the unexpected happy turn even stronger. When the princess lies dead in her coffin, the prince comes and kisses her back to life; when the 'Battle of the Five Armies' is about to end in catastrophe, Bilbo Baggins cries out: 'The Eagles are coming' and goodness triumphs.

J.R.R. Tolkien, the author to whom I owe a lot of this reflection on hope, believed that through such sudden joyous turns in stories, we can catch a glimmer of the joy

that lies beyond the world's confines. Our greatest desire - to escape death - has been expressed in stories but has become real in history, some two thousand years ago.

This, then, is the foundation of any possible hope. Each of our life stories, with our sufferings and victories, converges into the story of God who became human so that creation is redeemed. Humanity can truly become like God, not out of its natural strength, but out of Grace: *Our Hope is Christ*.

In this particular Jubilee year of 2025, Pope Francis has emphasised themes of *pilgrimage and hope*. The ancient tradition of pilgrimage symbolises our journey through life, following in the footsteps of Jesus. A spiritual pilgrimage is an opportunity to grow in faith and to seek spiritual renewal. The focus of 'Hope' in this Jubilee Year is taken from Romans 5:5, *'Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'* *The Jubilee is a call to embrace that hope and to allow it to transform our lives.*

When a Jubilee year is proclaimed by the Catholic Church in modern times, the context is *all that we have comes from God* and is given to us in trust, and for a limited time. It must be used responsibly, not only for our benefit but as far as possible for the common good. The same is true, above all, for our own life. It is given to us for a limited time and one day we will have to account for the use we have made of it.

Revd Dr Joseph D Cortis is Diocesan Assistant Director of Deacons, Diocese of Leeds and a trustee of CoA.

Culture Club Report: Marion Shoard, Trustee

At the last meeting of Culture Club, in May, we reflected on the ways in which the arts have depicted carers. Our first question: why do the arts focus on carers with evil intent? Fortunately, when they do, the results can be highly entertaining.

In the film *I Care A Lot*, smartly-dressed, convincingly empathetic Marla (played brilliantly by Rosamund Pike) turns up at the door of an older woman who has no children and lives alone in a large property. Marla informs Jennifer that doctors have decreed she is now incapable of living independently. Showing Jennifer a signed court order and pointing to two police officers with a car waiting outside, Marla persuades Jennifer to go with her to the Berkshire Oaks retirement home. Bewildered, Jennifer goes along to explain the mistake, but at the institution, staff relieve her of her phone, and use physical force and sedatives to thwart her escape. Meanwhile, Marla, as Jennifer's legal state guardian, milks her assets for all they are worth, as she and her collaborators have done for many others in a highly profitable scam. Fortunately, this old lady is not all she seems – Jennifer's wealth is linked to a ruthless Mafia drug trafficker, who intervenes.

Horried at the ease by which Jennifer was dispatched to a care home, we discussed the extent to which the UK system of attorneys, deputies, guardians and so on offers protection against malevolent carers (paid and unpaid), family members and friends. Are the connotations of the word 'care' unhelpful?

Yet a handful of films celebrate the kindness and sacrifice of carers – such as the Italian film *Mid-August Lunch* and the highly-acclaimed, highly-watchable British movie *Much Ado About Dying* - in which a young filmmaker returns to Britain from India to care for his thespian uncle. We will discuss the latter (just made available on streaming services) at a future meeting.

A common activity throughout history – painters JMW Turner and LS Lowry, for example, both cared for an older parent – today 8 per cent of the UK population are unpaid carers. In his book *The Reluctant Carer*, Michael Holden brilliantly captures the day-by-day comedies, joys, frustrations and miseries that pepper the lives of most carers. I highly recommend it.

For our get-together in the silly season, on August 8th, we shall share thoughts about just two works. *Conclave*, the highly acclaimed 2024 film, starring Ralph Fiennes and based on a political thriller by Robert Harrison, chronicles the election of a Pope by a conclave of ageing cardinals. *Gangsta Granny* is a fast-paced story for children by David Walliams about an apparently textbook granny and her relationship with her grandson. It should prompt a lively discussion about grandparent-grandchild relationships, as well as preconceptions held by the young and their parents about the older generation.

If you would like to book a place for August 8th (Zoom, 1.30pm) go to the Culture Club page of the Christians on Ageing website or contact secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk.

Marion Shoard is author of How to Handle Later Life.

A Prayer for Summer – Brian Draper

Circling Prayer

*Be blessed, Lord
as you bless to me*

*this air, this light, this earth, this sea -
I stand here in your family!*

*Encircle me, O Three in One,
in shining stars and rising sun;*

*within, beneath, around, above
please bind me in your boundless love. Amen*



Poem and picture courtesy of Brian Draper, www.briandraper.org

The Death of Us

Anne Richards, National Public Policy Adviser, Church of England

Turn on the TV these days and you will doubtless come across an advertisement for Direct Cremation. Grey-haired but lively actors discuss the importance of choosing a direct cremation after their death in a way which gives their mourning loved ones nothing to do and so avoids all the 'fuss', 'hassle' and 'upset' of a 'traditional' funeral. By which they mean a service of some kind, at when the family gathers to take leave of the person's body and say goodbye. The adverts stress the importance of affordability and the relative cheapness of direct cremation, because it cuts out the service, the hearse, the minister, and all the trappings of a religious (or non-religious) ceremony or rite of passage. Who needs a financial burden on top of all the grief anyway?

Life is for the living, say the adverts. Best to pay for the direct cremation in advance and get it all out of the way. When death occurs, there is nothing for the family to do except contact the provider and the body gets taken away and dealt with. The family can have a party or get together in their own time and their own way.

Choice is everything. Such adverts challenge the Church to examine our own practices and why we offer the 'traditional funeral'. Because there is no doubt, direct

cremations are cheaper, and even well-known firms of undertakers are offering these alongside all the usual options. But there are some significant questions around direct cremation and other 'no frills' services. One is about how we think about the dead body. We live in a modern western society in which, unlike in many other parts of the world, death is hidden, and bodies are removed from sight. Many people have never seen a dead body in reality, just the sanitised versions all over our popular culture in crime and action dramas.

Deaths occurring within families, where the body is kept at home for people to visit, care for, and mourn, is no longer a typical event. Yet the last acts of love a person can perform for a loved one have always had significance, along with, for example, the visit of a minister to pray, anoint or perform rites. This interaction between living and dead within the Christian context has seen the dead body as a sacred object, which provides a visible reminder of the Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life with Christ. In order to enter into this promise, we must die and our dead bodies must decay and return to the earth, as all God's creatures do and must. Our dead bodies are witnesses to this truth.

Direct cremation interrupts both this sacred understanding of the dead body and the sense that it has deep and powerful spiritual value. Whether offered overtly or not, such a no-fuss service undermines the sense that a dead body is worthy of respect, care, dignity and love. Why spend money on something worthless?

Looking to the future, we can see new technologies which buy into this sense that the dead body is insignificant in living people's journey of grief. Just as direct cremations leave the families to get on with grieving in their own way, so the 'grief tech' of the future may be configured to 'manage' grief by distracting from the messy matters of human death. Some forms of grief tech already exist, with online provision of practical advice, emotional support, and useful contacts so that you do not feel alone. There are also sites for children and teenagers struggling with loss of loved ones.

But we are already seeing the possibilities of grief bots, avatars, AI companions and re-creation of dead people, through access to the vast digital legacy we may create whilst alive. It is possible that the grief tech of the future will allow you to re-create your loved one digitally, talk to and hold conversations with them, ask their advice, or watch them grow and evolve as you get older.

There are all kinds of spiritual, pastoral, and ethical things to think about here. Not only does such tech make the body irrelevant, it puts the focus of learning to live with loss onto a relationship with technology. Significant questions arise. What if you could have a realistic avatar of your loved person? Would it be right for it to make decisions? What if you wanted to move on, perhaps to another relationship, and were faced with deleting the avatar? What if companies required money to keep your avatar 'alive'? What if the grief tech were hacked and you were faced with cybercrime or ransomware?

So, there are all kinds of challenges facing the Church as such innovations emerge. Can we offer more affordable funerals to people who are worried about the costs? Can we help people understand the value of the dead body to grief journeys and to faith? Do we have to focus more on what could happen to ashes after a direct cremation? Do we have to educate ourselves and others more about the generation and use of data, and our digital legacy and footprint? And do we have to journey more meaningfully alongside younger people as they grow up in a world of virtual reality, avatar creation, re-imagining and remaking the human body as a series of possibilities. Where does our understanding of rites of passage and saying goodbye fit into this welter of choice?

And finally, does grief extend into the digital world? Will avatars and grief companions also need pastoral care? Might these virtual creations be people too? The philosophical dimensions have yet to be fully explored.

Anne Richards is National Public Policy Adviser on modern society, popular culture, contemporary spirituality and apologetics for the Church of England, and Convenor of the Mission Theology Apologetics Group.

This article was originally published as a blog by Modern Church www.modernchurch.org.uk and reproduced in *plus* by permission. The blog's themes are explored in more depth in two webinars which can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#) jointly organised by *Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*, and the *Mission Theology Apologetics Group*. The speaker was Ann Richards and the sessions were chaired by Peter Colwell and Alison Webster.

Saint Jerome Writing, Caravaggio, 1608



St Jerome

On contemplating this picture, displayed in St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, I saw it as a portrait of late life spiritual learning.

Here is an old man who has relinquished his 'second age' (his employment) role of Cardinal, as illustrated by his cast-off robes and his modest surroundings. The skull on the table represents mortality. His writing task is the translation of the Scriptures into Latin Vulgate, a version that more people would be able to read. This represents his legacy of wisdom and experience being actively prepared. His ageing face and body appear beautifully illuminated, representing the light of spirituality.

Joanna Walker, Editor

Christians on Ageing News and Events

Change of CoA office address

Due to the owner's plans to sell the Depository, Christians on Ageing has moved lock, stock and not a few boxes of stuff to a new address: **147 High Street, Ryde, PO33 2RE.**

Please update your contacts list accordingly.

Annual Conference 24 September, 2025

Following our successful 2024 Conference, held online, we are sticking with that format for our 2025 Conference, in which we plan to **explore the place of hope** in supporting and nourishing later life. We are delighted to announce that our keynote speaker will be Revd Michael Jackson, formerly Director of St John's Winchester Charity and author of *Still Love Left: Faith and Hope in Later Life*. Do save the date and look out for further information in our newsletters.

Don't forget ... on our website, visit *In the News* Each month our Chair draws together a digest of stories relating to ageing, faith and public life which have featured in the media. See christiansonageing.org.uk/in-the-news-july-2025/

And our latest editions of CoA publications *Spirituality of Ageing* by Metropolitan Anthony and Peter Coleman, and *Light of Faith: Reflections on Growing Old* by Bishop George Appleton, are available for £5 printed or £2 e-version. Contact secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk or order online.

From the Editor's Desk - Learning Opportunities

A project of interest from the **US Fuller Seminary** is producing resources and courses from their *Third Third Research Project*. A survey carried out on Christians aged 55 and above was followed by two webinars: *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life* and *Uncommon Retirement*. You can watch recordings of these for free at depre.org/research-projects/test-third-third-research-project/ and read about an online course (fee payable) of the same name: *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life*. A free sample session from the course is downloadable from the address above.

Closer to home, **Sarum College in Salisbury** is offering a face-to-face day course entitled *What is Old Age For?* on 2nd October 2025. Their publicity notes that we all long for a good, purposeful and fulfilling life but that the lifespan is challenged by many factors, some of which we have no control over. We do, however, have some choice about how we think about, inhabit and live well in older age.

The day course will explore the nature of older age, its blessings and opportunities, as well as our vocations and legacies to be worked out. It will be of interest to all who are ageing and wish to reflect as well as to those who work with older people. Facilitators are Revd Canon James Woodward, Principal of Sarum College, and Julia Burton-Jones, Training and Development Lead for Anna Chaplaincy. For further course details, venue and fee, visit https://www.sarum.ac.uk/short-courses/old-age/?utm_source=Sarum+College or ring 01722 424800.

A Sonnet for Petertide

Malcolm Guite writes, on his blog:

"The 29th of June is St. Peter's day, when we remember the disciple who, for all his many mistakes, knew how to recover and hold on, who, for all his waverings was called by Jesus 'the rock', who learned the threefold lesson that every betrayal can ultimately be restored by love. It is fitting therefore that it is at Petertide that new priests and deacons are ordained, on the day they remember a man whose recovery from mistakes and openness to love can give them courage."

St Peter

Impulsive master of misunderstanding.
You comfort me with all your big mistakes;
Jumping the ship before you make the landing,
Placing the bet before you know the stakes.
I love the way you step out without knowing,
The way you sometimes speak before you think,
The way your broken faith is always growing,
The way he holds you even when you sink.
Born to a world that always tried to shame you,
Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,
I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,
Before you knew how to deserve that name.
And in the end your Saviour let you prove
That each denial is undone by love.

This poem comes from Malcolm Guite's collection *Sounding the Seasons* published by Canterbury Press.

malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2023/06/29/

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
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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
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The spirituality of ageing - Archbishop Anthony Bloom	£2.00
Through another's eyes – Ann Bowes, Sue Kennedy, John Lansley	£2.50
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Worship in residential care – Michael Butler (Ed.)	£2.50

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

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