

# A dream of shalom: community from the perspective of older people living in residential care homes

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Helen offered us a fascinating presentation and led a lively discussion based around her research into the lived experiences of older adults in care homes, focusing on community, belonging, spirituality, and well-being. She explored how residents perceive and experience community across multiple dimensions, including relationships within the care home, connections to the wider world, creation, and spirituality. Her slides are available alongside this summary

Her research methodology had involved four in-depth interviews with older adults in four different care homes. She had made use of mind mapping to explore personal community structures and adapted “talking mats” to help participants rate and discuss the importance and fulfillment of various community aspects. This led her to developing a concentric circle model of what she described as a **Community Landscape**. From the centre the circles she outlined were The Care Home itself, the view from the resident’s window, the local area, creation and the wider world and, finally, the “other dimension” embracing spirituality, past, future, and relationship with self.

Helen’s theological framework in all this was the concept of “shalom” (wholeness, completeness, well-being) and she used this to interpret her findings, emphasizing right relationships at all levels.

## Key Findings by Community Zone

### 1. Care Home as a Place of Hospitality

- **Relationships:** Residents valued friendship and reciprocity with staff and other residents.
- **Opportunities to Give:** The feeling of being able to contribute (e.g., welcoming newcomers, supporting others) fostered a sense of home and belonging.
- **Inclusion and Challenges:** Recognition of barriers for those with sensory or cognitive impairments, but proactive efforts by some staff and residents to foster inclusion helped. The importance of knowing and being known by name was clear as was the place of mealtimes to facilitate socialization.
- **Solitude:** The need for private space needs to be respected and fostered.
- **Theological Reflection:** Hospitality is clearly seen as reciprocal, it involves boundary-crossing and is rooted in the divine example – being both guest and host.

### 2. View from the Window: Connection to the Wider World

- **Natural World:** The view provides a connection to changing seasons and to daily life outside. It can also aid reminiscence.
- **External Connections:** Letters, cards, newspapers, and visits maintained ties to former communities and the world beyond. Many residents expressed a wish to go out more, especially for familiar activities (shopping, church).

- **Theological Reflection:** External relationships can be seen as a source of liberation and human flourishing, both of which help create a sense of shalom.

### 3. Creation as Community

- **Nature and Well-being:** Connection with nature brought peace and hope; multi-sensory experiences in gardens were valued. Residents enjoyed garden walks, touching and smelling plants and discussing their names.
- **Care for Creation:** Conversations around concerns about environmental issues (plastic, wildfires) led some residents to express a desire to protect nature.
- **Animals:** Resident pets, wildlife, and animal-related memories fostered well-being and conversation.
- **Spiritual Connection:** Some saw God in nature, and nurturing plants and celebrating harvests reinforced spiritual ties.

### 4. Another Dimension: Spirituality, Past, and Future

- **Spirituality and Faith:** Residents had varying relationships with faith, which had often evolved over time. Many expressed a desire for more opportunities to discuss faith and spiritual questions while some felt embarrassed or lacked forums for such conversations.
- **Rituals and Memories:** Communion services, hymns, and food memories (e.g., Christmas baking) were important for identity and hope.
- **Relationship with the Past:** This provoked mixed feelings – some preferred to let go of the past but others found comfort in reminiscing through photos and stories.
- **Facing Death:** Openness to discussing death varied – some welcomed the chance, others needed encouragement. Staff sometimes struggled to support these conversations.
- **Wisdom:** Growth in wisdom was seen as non-linear and communal. Wisdom helps navigate transitions and fosters right relationships.

## Discussion and Reflections

### Practical Implications

- **Belonging and Inclusion:** The importance of reciprocal relationships and enabling residents to contribute is clear, but there are challenges for those with cognitive impairment and a need therefore for proactive inclusion strategies.
- **Role of Environment:** Access to views and nature is crucial. Building design should consider proximity and visibility for all residents.
- **Staff and Management:** It is recognized that homes rated ‘Good’ by CQC are more likely to participate in research. The terminology used to refer to residents (family member, client, resident) can affect perceptions and identity. Staff training is needed to support conversations on sensitive topics like death.

## **Theological and Ethical Considerations**

- **Shalom as a Guiding Principle:** Right relationships within and beyond the care home foster wholeness.
- **Reciprocity and Agency:** Emphasis on giving as well as receiving, challenging purely service-based models.
- **Spiritual Needs:** There is a need for space and opportunity to discuss faith, doubts, and end-of-life issues. Chaplains and staff have great potential as “bearers of shalom,” but responsibility should be shared.

## **Broader Issues Raised**

- **Generational Continuity:** Many of the issues raised remain unchanged over decades, suggesting persistent, deep-rooted needs.
- **Community and Isolation:** For some, limited cognitive powers can lead to isolation, despite activity programmes being on offer. The concept of community must adapt to changing resident profiles and abilities.

## **Conclusion:**

The presentation and ensuing discussion highlighted the multifaceted nature of community in care homes, emphasizing the importance of relationships, environment, spirituality, and agency. Building true community requires intentional, reciprocal relationships, attention to physical and spiritual needs, and a commitment to seeing residents as whole persons whose stories and contributions matter.

Thanks to Helen for such a stimulating and thought-provoking presentation and to all participants for their contributions and input.