

## **In the News:**

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Chair of Christians on Ageing. Here is my look back at some of stories which have made the news during the month of December, and which seem relevant to the concerns of our members. Wherever possible I have included links to the original stories which will hopefully give you more information. As always, the comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

One of the stories which dominated the news reviews during 2025 is the progress, albeit slow, of Kim Leadbetter's bill to permit assisted dying in certain circumstances for those with a terminal diagnosis and approaching death. The bill is currently being examined in the House of Lords where many amendments have been proposed and are being debated. In the double issue of the Church Times, published just before Christmas, Francis Martin summarised the interventions in the debate made by various Bishops – most notably +Newcastle and +Gloucester. The former, who is a member of the select committee leading the scrutiny of the bill, was a signatory to an open letter which sought to defend the upper House, saying that proper scrutiny did not equate to being obstructive. The same letter said that they had heard “vital and often highly critical evidence” from several experts, including psychiatrists, coroners, and social workers”, adding that the majority of the experts “indicated that the Bill, as it stands, is not fit for purpose”; further scrutiny was needed.

Meanwhile the Bishop of Gloucester, who is the lead bishop for prisons, spoke in support of an amendment to prevent prisoners being eligible for an assisted death. She said that the “prison population is in worse health than the general population”, and that age-related illnesses started at an earlier age. Palliative and end-of-life care was inconsistent, she said, even though, under the law, prisoners were entitled to equal access. Incidents of self-harm were high. Given the issue of prison overcrowding, “the desire to remove people from the system is high,” she said. “I fear how the Bill could play out among the prison population.”

[https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/19-december/news/uk/experts-highly-critical-of-assisted-dying-bill-committee-hears?utm\\_campaign=church-times&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_edition=202512171100&utm\\_source=newsletter](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/19-december/news/uk/experts-highly-critical-of-assisted-dying-bill-committee-hears?utm_campaign=church-times&utm_medium=email&utm_edition=202512171100&utm_source=newsletter)

One of the factors which has encouraged many to seek a change to the current law has been the numbers of people making use of the Swiss clinic run by Dignitas. It is interesting to note that Ludwig Minelli, founder of Dignitas, whose work had lasting influence on Swiss law, chose to end his life at the clinic just days before his 93rd birthday.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/nov/30/dignitas-founder-ludwig-minelli-assisted-death>

The other story which rumbled through most of 2025 concerned the treatment of those who had received an over-payment of carer's allowance and were being pursued by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), sometimes for many thousands of pounds. In an interesting development this month, some finger-pointing seemed to criticise the claimants despite a report suggesting that the DWP had displayed “unacceptable shortcomings!” Writing in an internal blogpost, the senior civil servant at the DWP, Neil Couling, claimed that while one of the main causes of overpayments was as a result of the DWP's “rather byzantine” guidance on the averaging of carer's earnings, the overpayments ultimately occurred because individual carers failed to report fluctuations in their earnings that breached benefit rules.” This is at odds with the government's own position, which accepts the DWP itself was the main cause of overpayments

because of its confusing guidance and unclear reporting processes. Liz Sayce who led a scathing review of the carer's allowance scandal concluded that "the DWP needs a management and cultural overhaul if it is to restore public trust..." She told the Guardian she had been surprised by the DWP's "lack of organisational curiosity" about the impact of the problems with carer's allowance, as well as its reluctance to tackle the issue strategically, despite being aware of the issues for years.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/06/senior-dwp-civil-servant-blames-victims-for-carers-allowance-scandal>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/14/government-carers-allowance-scandal-liz-sayce-civil-service>

The funeral industry has seen several scandals over the past couple of years which have resulted in criminal prosecutions and significant public unease. Bereaved families called for a new investigatory body and rules governing professional qualifications after an official inquiry declared the sector an "unregulated free for all".

In Scotland, the industry is overseen by legislation and a mandatory code of practice introduced in March. In England, however, anyone can set up a funeral business without a licence, experience, qualifications or training. Ministers are said to be drawing up plans for tighter curbs after an official inquiry into the double killer David Fuller, who was found to have abused more than 100 bodies in an NHS mortuary over a 12-year period.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/dec/16/ministers-back-regulation-england-funeral-industry-scandals-inquiries>

The Centre for Ageing Better released its annual State of Ageing report in December, complete with a helpful set of infographics highlighting the key themes. The report includes participation from groups in Middlesbrough and Knowsley which add some lived experience to the statistics and data. The report begins by saying that "All of us deserve the best possible lives as we grow older, and our whole society reaps the rewards when people can age well. Our new analysis of the state of ageing in England in 2025 reveals millions more of us are living into our seventies, eighties, nineties and beyond, in good health, working for longer and supporting our communities through volunteering and caring. But this report also highlights that this rosy, positive picture of ageing is unobtainable for many, such as those who are living in poor housing, in poverty and poor health, and who are isolated from their communities and society. The report shows the impact of regional inequalities that determine the quality of people's later life. Quite simply, where you are born in England determines how you live and how well you age."

<https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/The-State-of-Ageing-2025-interactive-summary.pdf>

<https://ageing-better.us | .list-manage.com/track/click?u=148d006f4133eac09bdc78005&id=85710ab5a0&e=e2ba1dad52>

Meanwhile, in an editorial, the Guardian has reviewed a variety of recent reports on the processes of ageing and comes to the conclusion that "our lives have more distinct phases than we thought." One of the latest reports considered has received quite a lot of attention in the media, with the

suggestion that the human brain remains ‘adolescent’ into our early 30s! This editorial expands that to conclude that the process of ageing is complex rather than linear. However, of particular note is the concluding paragraph and the question it raises – “whether we even should prioritise interventions against ageing as such.” And the piece ends by suggesting that “As we head towards a more granular understanding of ageing, we may be able to better time and apply the anti-disease measures we already know about, from cancer tests to preventive medications. Prioritising wellness over raw longevity is the way to go – and if a longer life is the result, so be it.”

[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/dec/07/the-guardian-view-on-ageing-research-our-lives-have-more-distinct-phases-than-we-thought?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/dec/07/the-guardian-view-on-ageing-research-our-lives-have-more-distinct-phases-than-we-thought?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

Questions of longevity have political and economic implications, and a couple of stories around the rising cost of pensions are worth noting. At the heart of the reports is a YouGov poll conducted across six European nations which says on the one hand that many people consider the present system will be unaffordable in the medium term – affecting those who are currently in their 40s – but on the other hand it suggests that moves to change the system and/or raise the retirement age should be opposed! Strikingly, retirees across all countries were more optimistic than their younger cohorts about their country’s capacity to fund its state pension system. Pensioners in the UK were particularly upbeat, with 62% saying they think the UK state pension is affordable, against only 27% of their non-retired counterparts.

One article uses the language of ‘ticking timebomb’ to highlight the inevitable consequences of not addressing the pension issue, but it points out that “the median European voter is now in their mid-40s, and governments have a great deal to lose by penalising older generations. Only a few countries, including the Netherlands, have implemented major changes. Most face widening shortfalls. Meanwhile, retirement ages differ by up to eight years, pensions vary from €226 (£197) a month (Bulgaria) to €2,575 (Luxembourg), and for 80% of EU pensioners, a state pension is their only income. About 15% are at risk of poverty.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/29/most-europeans-think-state-pensions-will-become-unaffordable-polling-shows>

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2025/dec/29/pensions-timebomb-europe-social-contract-becoming-unsustainable>

Another insight into ageing from mainland Europe comes from Sweden, where the benefits of learning for pleasure in older years are outlined. In what looks very much like our own U3A, record numbers of Swedish retirees are enrolling in a university run “by pensioners for pensioners” amid increased loneliness and a growing appetite for learning and in-person interactions. Senioruniversitet, a national university that collaborates with Sweden’s adult education institution Folkuniversitetet, has about 30 independent branches around the country which run study circles, lecture series and university courses in subjects including languages, politics, medicine and architecture. The Stockholm branch, which is Sweden’s largest, has become so popular since it was founded in 1991 that it is now run across multiple venues across the capital by about 100 volunteers. Its most popular event, the Tuesday lectures, gets about 1,000 people each week.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/26/older-swedes-reap-benefits-late-life-education>

During the pandemic Chris Whitty's face was rarely absent from our TV screens. Now England's chief medic, Professor Whitty is claiming that preventing infections in older people is hit and miss, contrasting it with the systematic approach in children and calling for more research into managing infections in older people. In his annual report Whitty says the issue of infections among elderly people did not only relate to hospitalisation and severe disease. "Even quite apparently moderately important diseases like cellulitis can lead to very significant quality of life issues for older people," he said, noting that such infections could lead to people becoming trapped in their homes and unable to socialise. In addition, he said, older people could face an increased risk of stroke after bacterial or viral infections, while some evidence suggested infections could also increase the risk of heart attack or other heart problems.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/04/preventing-managing-infections-older-people-chris-whitty>

As I have often said in these reviews, knowing when to get excited about reports of 'exciting breakthroughs' is not easy. I tend to simply note what is said and wait for a few more studies to back them up, or not! In that spirit I note that studies into Multiple Sclerosis have identified two new sub-types of MS using AI which, they hope, could "revolutionise treatment."

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/30/two-new-subtypes-of-ms-found-in-exciting-breakthrough>

Elsewhere a study of over 70s in the UK has suggested that 10% of this cohort could have "Alzheimer's-like changes in their brain." The implication of the findings is that "more than 1 million over-70s would meet Nice's clinical criteria for anti-amyloid therapy – a stark contrast to the 70,000 people the NHS has estimated could be eligible if funding were available."

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/dec/17/10-per-cent-over-70s-uk-alzheimers-changes-brain-study>

Let me end with three stories which focus on some specific older people. First comes the update on the Austrian nuns in their eighties who fled the care home they were moved to and broke back into their convent. They have been given permission to stay "until further notice" — but only if they stop posting on social media. Sister Bernadette, 88, Sister Regina, 86, and Sister Rita, 82, are the last remaining members of Kloster Goldenstein in Elsbethen, near Salzburg. They had lived in the convent for 60 years, the last 20 of which they were the only nuns in residence, and they say they were taken away against their will in December 2023. They were put into the home, but won volunteer local support from a locksmith, builders, electricians, plumbers and domestic help, enabling them to get back into the convent in September this year, angering local church officials. The nuns' superior, Provost Markus Grasl from Reichersberg Abbey, called on them to return to the care home, saying their decision to return to the convent was "completely incomprehensible". In a statement, they described the Church's offer as having "the character of a gagging contract".

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c019z176lnlo>

Secondly comes news of the death of Cecilia Giménez at the age of 94. Her attempted restoration of a church artwork was widely mocked but became lucrative tourist attraction, known as the 'Monkey Christ'.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/30/cecilia-gimenez-monkey-christ-mural-dies-spain>

And finally, the Church Times recently included a review of Bishop Richard Holloway's recent book, *Last Words*. I am not sure how many 'last books' Richard has published, but in a wide-ranging interview it is clear that at 91 he is still engaged with life, God and theology. The interviewer, Michael Doney, concludes with a summary of Holloway's understanding of being a follower of Jesus. "The parables of Jesus — especially the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son — reach something very deep about the way religion can make us dangerous persecutors of others. I think that the Good Samaritan, in particular, because the Samaritan . . . would have been hated as a heretic. . . That challenge to persecutory thinking is something that I think was profoundly there in Jesus, especially in his parables: something we can still read and get benefit from, without necessarily transcendentalising them."

He sees Jesus as "an artist, a prophet". He says: "It takes prophets to nudge humanity on. It's prophets who say 'Well, why shouldn't women have the vote? Why should there be slaves? Why are black people considered to be less human than white people?' It takes these extraordinary moral artists that we called prophets to make us ask these dangerous questions that can maybe get us to move."

*Last Words* by Richard Holloway is published by Swift Press at £16.99; 978-1-80075-533-8. See review [here](#).

[https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/28-november/features/features/interview-with-richard-holloway-holding-to-things-with-a-kind-of-lightness?utm\\_campaign=church-times](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/28-november/features/features/interview-with-richard-holloway-holding-to-things-with-a-kind-of-lightness?utm_campaign=church-times)