

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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Contents



Editorial	2-3
A Humanist Celebrant Reflects.....	4-7
Our Spiritual Journey,	8-13
Transcendence and Frailty in Later Life	
The State of Ageing: Conference Call Report	14-20
A Blessing for Easter	20
Book Review: The Wisdom Years:.....	21-23
The Final Reel: Culture Club Report.....	24-26
AGM and Conference Call.....	27
Love Is Come Again	28
Publications	29

Editorial

Welcome to our Spring issue, at the start of a new season, new term and lighter days. In Easter-tide we reflect on the great transition from death to life, and celebrate the outpouring of grace and mercy at the heart of the Easter story of God's love.

We start by continuing our look at the changing face of funeral practice. Professor Tom Schuller retired from an academic career and, through personal family experience, has developed a new role – that of a

humanist funeral celebrant. He describes how and why he feels this to be a valuable service that he can offer. You can view Tom's further work on his substack:



<https://tomschuller661483.substack.com/publish/posts/published>

If you have been following the International Conference series of Encore Webinars, you might have enjoyed hearing one of the best-known scholars of ageing and spirituality. Professor Liz MacKinlay has been a nurse, a priest and an academic pioneering how we think about spirituality and faith in later life. Now in her eighties, she reflects on her own ageing in the light of what she has researched and inspired others to follow. I'm delighted that she's been able to write for us. To access Encore webinars: <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/spirituality-aging-conferences-seminars>

When planning our Conference Calls for the new year, we wanted to highlight and share the excellent work done by the Centre for Ageing Better. Their annual reports on the state of ageing present key data that are invaluable to working with and for older people today if we wish to remain relevant. Our Chairman was able to lead a COA

Conference Call, which I'm pleased to report on here for a wider audience. What are the trends that churches need to take greater account of?

Do join us for our AGM on Wednesday 29th April, this year returning to its online format, which will be followed by guest speaker Tina English. Her contribution, *Responding to Changing Landscapes*, follows well by considering how ageing is changing in today's society, as are the responses to older people from churches and other organisations. Not to be missed if you are involved in any sort of senior ministry.

Joanna Walker, Editor



Wolfgang Weiser on Pexels

A Humanist Celebrant Reflects

Tom Schuller

A decade and a half ago I took the coach regularly from London to Oxford to visit my mother in her care home. The journeys provided good reading time but, not surprisingly, I had occasion to think about her approaching end and about death and dying more generally. Mum was very well looked after, with the bonus of a daily visit from her faithful friend June. She was not demented. But at 98 she had completely run out of puff; for the last two or three years, she would respond briefly if you talked to her but could not initiate anything herself.

My brother and I ran her funeral ourselves, and shortly after that I enrolled with Humanists UK to train as a funeral celebrant. Obviously, Mum's death was a prompt and as I was now semi-retired I wanted to develop other activities, but there was no more specific motive for this, just that I had begun thinking about death, dying and the process and rituals surrounding it. I found the training provided by the HUK (now the British Humanist Association) excellent: a good mix of the philosophical and the practical, from discussions on the nature of humanism to reminders not to step too close to the grave if the ground is greasy.

Since then I've taken maybe 40 or 50 funerals and a few memorials. The main challenge – and reward – has been quite practical: to help co-design a personal ceremony which meets the individual requirements of the family, and to manage the service so that the right mood is struck and good memories ensue. Some are very much celebrations of a life well lived, whilst others are more sombre occasions replete with grief. As an adult educator I've taught students in the past, but never had to deliver such precisely personalised service. It's been a challenge but also a definite privilege.

An initial step is always to be clear with the client what values I represent. It's rare to have an extended discussion with the family on what humanism means, but sometimes we do need to explain the humanist belief that our moral codes come from how we behave towards

each other, and not from any external authority. This does not exclude reference to feelings and beliefs which go beyond rational explanation, and we often include poems or quotations which stress the essential mystery of life. Humanist celebrants vary in how strictly they interpret their role: most obviously in relation to including items such as poems which might have religious overtones, or other content which have a broader spiritual component.

So, on the one hand I sometimes include this from the sociologist Norbert Elias:

“Death hides no secret; it opens no door; it is the end of a person. What survives is that he or she has given to other people – what stays in the memory.”

Yet, I also occasionally quote from William Wordsworth's poem *The Excursion*:

“And when the stream that overflows has passed,
A consciousness remains upon the silent shore of memory;
Images and precious thoughts that shall not be and cannot
be destroyed.”

Other celebrants will exercise their judgement differently on what is appropriate or not for a humanist service.

Independently of my celebrant role – but not entirely unrelated to it - I have just completed a book arguing for a triple helix as a new model of the life course as a whole, up to and including dying and death. The three strands of the helix are the biological, the psychological and the socio-cultural. The model is intended to help show how we think about ages and stages once we loosen the linear grip of chronological age.

Among the questions I put to the 50 or so people I interviewed were ‘When did/will you become adult?’, ‘When will/did you become old?’ and ‘At what point do you start dying?’. The focus of their answers varied hugely. Some people relied on one strand – for example they might define ageing in terms of physical decline, or when the state told them they were pensioners, or on how they felt in themselves.

Others gave more nuanced or complex answers, reflecting interactions between the different strands.

Let me develop a possible connection to spirituality. Writing the book has prompted me to think we need Facts of Death (FoD) conversations, just as – in principle at least – young people have Facts of Life (FoL) conversations. Start with the biological strand of the helix: just as FoL covers puberty and related changes in the body, so FoD might cover the probable physiological changes involved in ageing and our final phase. This might refer to likely decline in some capacities, whether these are inevitable or just possible, and how they can be managed.

The psychological strand asks how we as individuals feel about any changes and transitions that are occurring in our sense of ourselves. The FoL might cover feelings about becoming an adult – fears and hopes. The FoD might also cover fears and hopes, especially in how entering the later phases of life affect our outlook and our personal relationships. Are there relationships which need mending, acknowledging or celebrating before it is too late?

The triple helix's third strand covers socio-cultural aspects. How do society's rules, rituals, policies and practices guide us in understanding where we are in the life course? Do they constrain us, or do they enable us to manage transitions more comfortably? For FoL this refers to how the state begins to define us as adults, for example by giving us the vote or allowing us to drive or to enlist in the armed forces. For the FoD it might cover how we are implicitly or explicitly told that we are now 'old', but also reminders about helping to make our final transition a smooth one. Will-making is one such item on the agenda, but there are many others.

Arguably, spiritual issues are much more likely to figure in FoD than in FoL. I have no intention of prescribing the content for the suggested FoD conversations, but my idea is that such conversations are about enabling people to grasp and discuss issues which they are likely to encounter as they approach the end of their lives. Talking about spirituality could enable people to explore what they do or do not believe in this domain. Some can do this on their own, but for many it would be helpful to listen to others and join with them in order to understand it

better. There will obviously be much variation in how people understand it, but exploring these differences might open up new avenues, and should help them to feel more secure in their eventual position.

Some might say that such matters fall under the psychological strand, or a mix of that and the socio-cultural; or that they require a separate strand. I'm not very concerned about the labelling. Nor do I intend to draw up a FoD curriculum – far from it. What does interest me is what should be included in the conversations, and how they could be introduced and managed.

Let me link back to my celebrant experience. Boundaries are important. Sometimes the death causes serious grief, but my role is to make sure that the ceremony is as appropriate as possible and will remain a treasured memory, not to offer counselling or psychological or spiritual comfort. Personally, I've never had a serious issue about this, but colleagues tell me that there are occasions when the celebrant is implicitly called on to offer support beyond the ceremony. It can be a difficult line to draw.

For many people this is the first time they've had to think about a funeral, or indeed about death itself. The figures for how many people aged 60+ who have not even made a will are quite extraordinary. They are not necessarily 'thanatophobes' (fearful of thinking about death) – though I have met some of these – but they perennially postpone the relevance of death's eventual presence. There are now some excellent providers of services which help people think about and plan for their death – my friend [Ann Kenrick](#) being one such.

As populations include increasing numbers of older people, it becomes more urgent that we should rethink our understanding of the life course as a whole; its component ages and stages and how they interact with each other; and how we manage the final transitions – our own and those of others.

*Professor Tom Schuller was formerly Dean of Continuing Education at Birkbeck University of London. His book on *The Triple Helix* should be published in 2027.*

Our Spiritual Journey, Transcendence and Frailty in Later Life

Revd Dr Elizabeth MacKinlay

There are some important questions which are open for exploring with friends, family and work colleagues concerning our ageing selves and older people we meet. These questions go beyond the surface, and in a world that is currently beset with growing inequalities, wars and deprivations affecting many millions of people, I acknowledge that we are indeed privileged to have the time and space to consider these questions.

The questions I raise here go to the very core of who we are as human beings and how we live with each other – our hopes, beliefs, values and dreams. We may ask, ‘what is longer life for?’ Some say it is a blessing, others, a curse, your answer depending on many factors. An underlying question may provide answers: ‘How can I still find meaning even in the face of losses and uncertainties that may come with growing older?’ Thus, if I can find meaning *in* my current existence, then I will probably be able to see why I am still on this earth, and the very meaning and purpose *of* my life.

The following sub-questions may also come into the mix: Am I fearful of growing older? What sort of life do I look forward to as an older person? Is retirement a ‘social construction’ (just a social arrangement) and, if so, what does that mean for me? Ideas of retirement have changed enormously over the past few decades with many older people now continuing to work. I suspect that many societies have lost the structures that clearly defined the ‘working’ years from the ‘retirement’ years – for which there are implications.

The crucial perspective for us to understand is that **how** we look at ageing may make a difference to our outlook on life. To be able to see that we have choices in our view of our own ageing is empowering.

The spiritual dimension

While the process of ageing is complex and affected by many factors, I am going to focus on the spiritual dimension of ageing and the associated changes that may be experienced. The spiritual dimension is mediated/ recognised in four main arenas: *Depth of relationship* or connecting with others, which presupposes self-awareness; *Creativity and environment* which includes the wonders and stresses experienced through the natural environment, and the inherent human capacity for imagination and creativity. The remaining two ways of mediating the spiritual dimension are *through the arts and through religion*, whether of sacred or secular.

There are also spiritual themes within ageing, common across humanity, forming a continuum across the life cycle. We may tend to become more aware of the spiritual as we grow older. In my research, these spiritual themes were identified from analysis of the stories on the search for meaning among a sample of older people living independently in the community, in Canberra and rural NSW, Australia in the 1990s. This study formed the central part of my doctoral studies on the search for meaning in later life (MacKinlay 1998, 2001, 2017).

The themes drawn from the stories were continuums along which people's sense of ageing could be located; *self-sufficiency to vulnerability*, *provisional to final life meaning (story)*, *relationship to isolation*, and *hope to despair*. Two further themes came into play later: *moving towards final or ultimate life meaning* (which could be revisited and revised until death); *response to final life meaning* as perceived by the individual.

Set against these themes are four spiritual 'tasks' of ageing which people could be engaging with: *transcending loss and disability*; *a search for meaning (story)*; *search for relationship/connectedness*, such as intimacy with God and/or others; and the search for hope.

Transitioning – third age to fourth age

There are many ways of categorising the later years and one helpful way is the move from third to fourth age. Third age can be seen as still in control, can do almost anything – travel, work, sport, hobbies, joy in relationships and many activities. But at the same time another question is taking shape, if we have time to pause and reflect – what is it all for?

The fourth age features frailty and dependency. What projects us into fourth age? Changes in health and/or relationship are most common but not inevitable reasons. The season of the fourth age has the sense of less control. I first became aware of this when older people I had known for years would apologise, and need to cancel an activity with little notice. Often they would say: *'life is becoming more precarious'*.

Finding meaning in the final life career

As we move into the fourth age of life, and journey towards death, our vision of life may change. I like to call it the final life career – perhaps the most important life career we have. This may be consciously engaged in the processes of ageing and what it means for us and, almost intuitively, we may catch ourselves engaging in the spiritual tasks of ageing (MacKinlay 2017). Some people, however, deny that they are on this pathway. We can best illustrate these changes through story, for instance, Oliver Sacks, neurologist and author, reported in the NY Times (SMH 2015 digital edition) on his forthcoming death (within months of writing):

“Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life. On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.”

It seems the need to find meaning in each and every situation of life rises to the surface. We have choices as to how to deal with these questions of life, and our existence.

A key to transcendence is meaning

Through personal experiences, Viktor Frankl (1997) wrote that meaning is not lost in the face of trauma, or deprivation (at his lowest point having contracted typhus in a concentration camp during World War II) but that people need to be able to find meaning in these and any other circumstances of life. Clive James, older and dying of leukaemia (ob. 2019), in a TV interview (2015) said: “*my decline has been the making of me.*”

A critical factor arises out of these examples of transcendence (or perhaps transformation would be a better word). Real meta-changes are possible at the very depths of the person’s being, and such changes are essentially spiritually driven. These changes enable the individual to experience new life and light on situations of their current life perspective, relying on reflections, reminiscence and review of life meaning.

Finding *meaning in life* leads to *inner strength*, and this is the way that the participants of another study – this time, of frail older people in residential aged care homes – described their lived experiences of self-transcendence or transformation (MacKinlay et al 2023). Inner strength produces freedom, hope, love, peace and joy and increases the likelihood that the person will be able to face any life circumstance. Not everyone understands the word ‘spirituality’ in the same way, but they do understand the term ‘inner strength’. It is interesting that this is not a new expression: inner strength has been used and understood for at least a couple of thousand years, and was used by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, in his prayer for them to God that:

“He may grant that you may be strengthened in your *inner being with power through his Spirit*” (Eph. 3:16)

Conclusion

This life cycle of ours is, in essence, a sacred cycle. Each child is born with a wonderful inheritance and potential. This is the spark of life, the human spirit that each has, and the potential to connect with the Holy Spirit, as described by John V Taylor (2021). We are connected inevitably with those who have gone before us, and those who follow.

We may ponder where meaning falls for each of us, and the meaning of these later years that may be marked by ill health and disability. However, they may also become the fulfilment of our whole lives in a final life career, as we realise our growing inner strength and learn to connect across the lifespan with those who come after us.



Photo: Aska Abayev on Pexels

Further reading

Frankl, V. (1997) *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. New York: Perseus Books.

MacKinlay E.B. (2006) *Spiritual Growth and Care in the Fourth Age of Life*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

MacKinlay, E.B. (2017) *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing, second edition*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

MacKinlay, E.B., Burns, R., & Mordike, L. (2023): The Lived Experience of Frailty: What Does it Mean to be Frail? *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*,

DOI: 10.1080/15528030.2023.2223156

John V. Taylor (third edition) (2021) *The Go-between God*. London: SCM Press.



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This article is based on a Webinar presentation, (January 2026) in the Encore Series of the International Conference on Ageing and Spirituality.

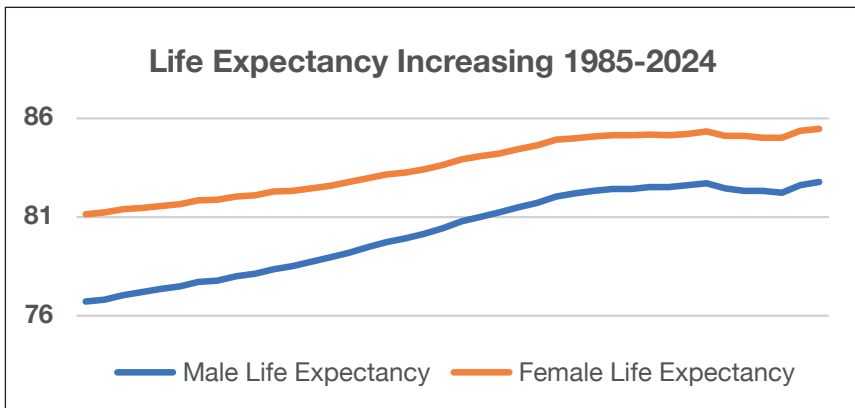
The State of Ageing

Statistics and Stories behind the 2025 *State of Ageing Report* and how Christians on Ageing might respond

Revd Dr Keith Albans

We are all familiar with the fact that the numbers of older people living in the UK continues to increase, but what other changes and issues lie behind this headline? In our February 2026 Conference Call, we focused on the annual *State of Ageing* report, which is produced by the Centre for Ageing Better, as well as looking at some other population data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to explore some trends and challenges.

Office for National Statistics (www.ons.gov.uk)



To begin with the basic data, Figure 1 illustrates the average life expectancy of those who have reached the age of 60. While the rate of change appears to be levelling out, the increase for males is almost 8% and for females over 5%. Interestingly, some are concerned that the graphs are plateauing, and while it is too early to know if the post-

pandemic recovery will continue, the figures for the next decade will be anticipated with interest.

As well as producing regular commentaries and data sets the ONS has published a series of reports based on the censuses carried out in England and Wales.

I began working for MHA in 2001 and have attempted over the years to track some of the trends relating to older people which the censuses reveal. Two that interest me in particular are the increases in the older population and the changing gender balance among the oldest old.

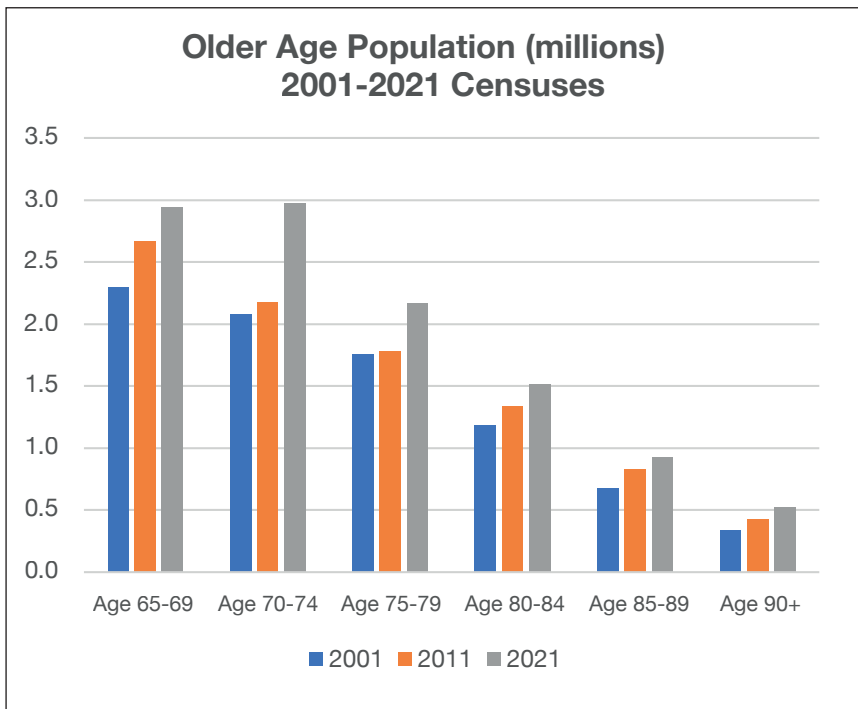
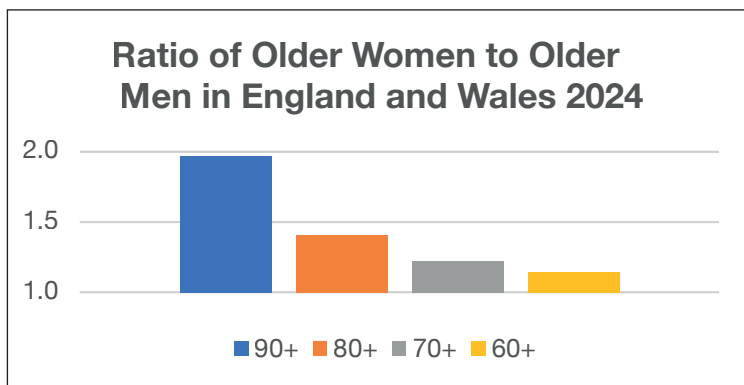


Figure 2 shows the population of those aged 65 and over, grouped into 5-year cohorts. It can be clearly seen that population in each cohort has risen significantly, and it is interesting to note that the post-2nd-World-War baby boom is particularly apparent. The overall increase among those aged 85+ is around 43%.

One of the astonishing insights that I remember from the 2001 census data was the imbalance between the numbers of older men and women. In our care homes this was most certainly the case, with some homes only having a handful of male residents, but by the time I left in 2017 the overall percentage of male residents had crept past 25%! According to the 2001 census, for every 100 women aged 85 and over there were just 38 men. By the time of the 2011 census that figure had grown to 48 and by 2021 the figure is almost 60. Figure 3 shows some more recent data from 2024 which suggests that amongst those aged 90 and over, the ratio of females to males is dropping toward 2:1.



The implications of these data would seem to be clear, if not easy to quantify. The increase in the older population shows no sign of slowing down, with the bow wave of the high birth rates from 1947 feeding into the 80+ age group. The current crisis affecting health and social care is urgent, but politically intractable, yet the need to find a solution is clear and obvious.

State of Ageing 2025 Report

This report is available to download from their website (<https://ageing-better.org.uk/>) together with a helpful set of slides featuring infographics based on the data.

The first part of the report backs up the ONS data above but adds some important texture. The growing older population is not spread evenly around the country, with the larger numbers and concentrations found in rural and coastal areas. Given what is known about levels of deprivation and lack of access to health and support services, this should be a matter for concern.

The 2025 Report also indicates that the older population is growing more diverse, and while currently the percentage of people from ethnic minority group backgrounds aged 50 to 64 is more than that of people aged 65 and over, clearly as those 50 to 64-year-olds age, diversity will increase among the older population.

Another section of the Report looks at how older people are viewed within society, with some evidence emerging that they can be seen as ‘lightning rods’ for some of society’s inequalities, leading to a rise in inter-generational ill-feeling. Nevertheless, the vital role played by older volunteers in supporting local communities should not be underestimated given that people aged 65 to 74 are consistently the most likely to volunteer.

Much informal volunteering, such as doing shopping for a neighbour or simply ‘dropping in’ is invaluable in addressing a major concern – namely social isolation. Evidence is cited in the report that people being unable to leave their homes – perhaps due to accessibility issues in their homes or communities – leads to worse health outcomes. Furthermore, living alone is a known risk factor for social isolation, and the numbers doing so are increasing. In 2023, 4.2 million people aged 65 and over lived alone, and while the majority of these are women, the number of older men living alone is increasing fastest.

The isolating effects of ageism also feature in the section on Society. The Centre for Ageing Better are currently engaged in *Age Without Limits* – a three-year advertising campaign – and this is already highlighting the issue of self-directed ageism wherein behaviours are changed in response to repeated exposure to ageist messages. This

can include limiting physical activity and not seeking help for a health complaint – thus exacerbating isolation and having a detrimental effect on wellbeing.

Finally, in this section, mention is made of digital isolation. The gap in internet use between people aged 55 to 64 and those aged 65 and over is widening. The percentage of people aged 55 to 64 who don't use the internet at home has fallen by four percentage points in the past year, from 12% to 8%. However, the percentage of people aged 65 and over has only fallen by two percentage points (from 31% to 29%), despite access to the internet for this age group rising from 75% to 81%.

Another area of life highlighted by the Centre for Ageing Better is the world of work, where the data again illustrates great diversity and inequality, especially when the data relating to financial security is included. With increased numbers of older people and the rise in state retirement age, the issue of older workers is becoming increasingly part of political discourse.

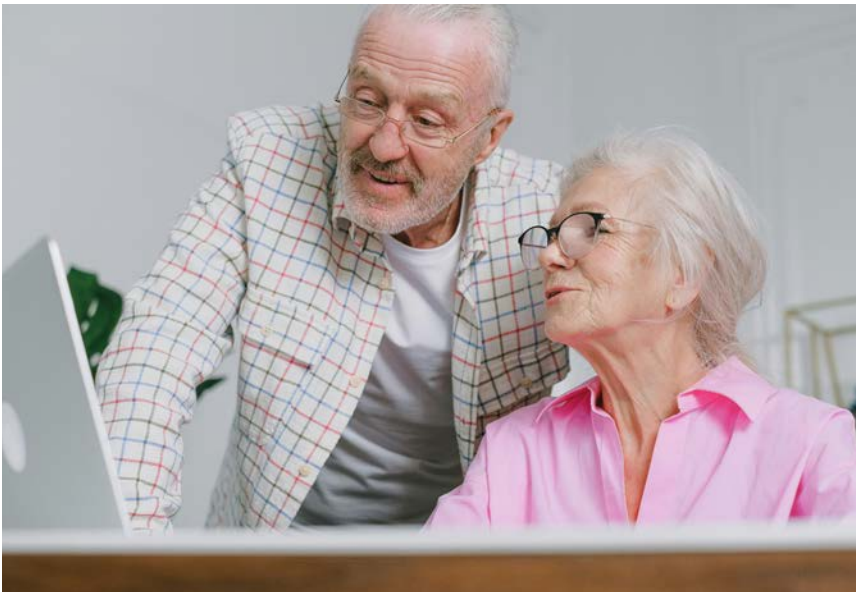


Photo: Shevets Production on Pexels

For example, in the UK, the government has an aspiration to reach an overall employment rate of 80% (it is currently 75%), and countries that have already achieved that level have a much higher percentage of people aged 55 to 64 in employment than the UK (75% in the Netherlands and Switzerland and 81% in Iceland compared with 65% in the UK). Employment rates fall sharply after the age of 55 in the UK and while health and caring responsibilities may be factors in this, it may be another area where ageist attitudes mean employers look to younger age groups when recruiting.

The relationship between unemployment and poor financial security in later life is clear – being in work allows you to pay National Insurance contributions that entitle you to your State Pension, and you can contribute to an occupational pension and accrue other savings. The Report suggests that 1 million pensioners are living in material deprivation – that is they don't have enough money or resources to afford basics such as a warm coat and at least one filling meal a day. And while we are rightly often reminded that the State Pension remains subject to the so-called triple lock, those for whom this is their only source of income, even when topped up with Pension Credit, cannot reach the Minimum Income Standard. One particularly stark graphic from the Report says that among the least well off 20% of pensioners, weekly income from occupational pensions averages £15 for a single person and £37 for a couple; among the most well off the equivalent figures are £369 and £748.

The final sections of the Report look at data around Housing and Health, and again they highlight inequalities across the country and challenge some cherished assumptions. There are a total of 1.7 million homes headed by someone aged 55 and over that are classified as non-decent and 1.3 million of them are owner-occupied. These are homes to around 2.3 million people, while almost one in five people aged 50 and over who own their homes outright are living in poverty. Turning to health, and the Report backs up the graphs in Figure 1 with the finding that life expectancy up to 2022 had decreased and healthy life expectancy continues to decline. What is more, how long you live in good health varies across the country – there is a difference of 7 years for men and 6 years for women between the North East and South East.

Our Conference Call moved into a wide-ranging discussion based on the presentation, and while we recognised that addressing many of the underlying issues is beyond *Christians on Ageing* as well as churches and individuals, nevertheless there are issues which we can and must address. The growing numbers of older men is likely to change the landscape of ageing and challenge a care sector which has been used to a mainly female population. The spirituality of older men, which may or may not differ from that of older women, is something worthy of study and research. Janet Eldred conducted a pilot study for MHA some 20 years ago and *Christians on Ageing* are looking to work with partners in revisiting this.

Revd Dr Keith Albans is chair of Christians on Ageing and made this presentation at our Conference Call on The State of Ageing.

A Blessing for Easter

Photo: Leeloo The First on Pexels



Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you.
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ,
of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.

A Gaelic Blessing, John Rutter

BOOK REVIEW

The Wisdom Years: A Spirituality of Ageing – Reflection and Ripening, Harvest and Homecoming

Margaret Silf

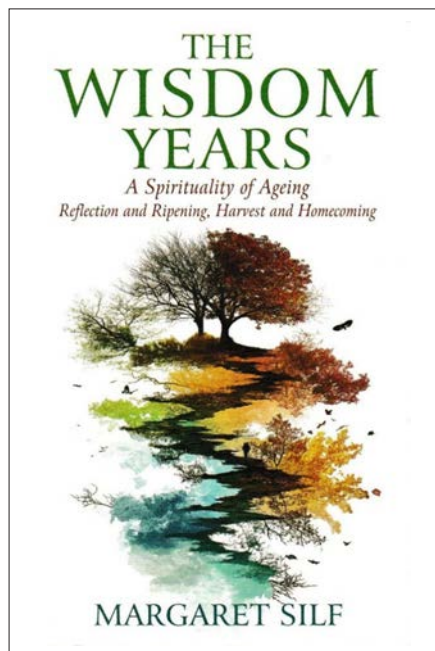
Darton Longman Todd (DLT) 2025 £14.99
ISBN 978-1-915412-76-8 Paperback, 160 pages

For anyone familiar with the writings of Margaret Silf, this latest offering will contain few surprises. There are many line drawings, plenty of quotations and Wisdom stories from around the world, and each chapter ends with a list of bullet points summarising what has gone before and seeking to embed actions that might be undertaken.

What might be surprising is that the book has not appeared until now. As a leader of retreats in the Ignatian tradition Margaret Silf says she has often been asked to address the subject of ageing but has preferred to leave it to '*an older person*'. This eminently readable book suggests that she has now arrived at a point in her life where applying the spiritual insights she has gleaned to the later years of living is a natural extension of her work.

The opening chapter introduces the idea of the *Wisdom Country* – a time of life where the practice of reflective living can reveal inner resources to enable us to see the landscape of ageing through fresh eyes. The use of the motifs of ripening and harvest in her subtitle is significant, and she sees later life alongside childhood and youth as seasons of spiritual growth and awareness. Her second chapter, *Amber Lights*, begins with Jung's famous dictum that "*we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning.*" Themes of slowing down, diminishment, contemplation and the need for stillness underline the idea of focusing on what has been learned and absorbed in earlier life and discovering resources for sustaining whatever lies ahead.

The main body of the book in Chapters 3 to 9 focuses on two of the major themes in ageing. First, attention is given to what might be summarised as diminishment – not necessarily in terms of physical capacity but rather in terms of reductions in the spheres in which one lives and in the footprints which one leaves. Letting Go involves more than simply getting rid of possessions – certainties, illusions and resentments are on the list too – and the appeal to ‘*learn from the trees*’ in their losing of leaves leads to a chapter entitled *Winter Gifts*. These, Silf suggests, are fruits that only become visible once the blossom and leaves have passed. The gifts of *holy forgetting* and *bridge-building* underline the need for resolution, while the gifts of *simplification, tolerance and empathy* suggest a reappraisal of priorities more suited to our later years.



A chapter entitled *Independence* explores the tension between dependency and independence before outlining the virtuous reality of inter-dependence.

The second principal focus of these chapters is an exploration of our approach to the end of life. Two chapters continue the reflections around diminishment but now focusing on descending the status mountain and seeing ourselves in the context of what Silf calls the bigger picture. She writes, “*When you can see the bigger picture, everything changes. Many of the things that once caused you so much anguish are now seen to have been transient irritants that you can hardly remember.*”

The final two chapters continue with the harvesting theme with one entitled *When the seed dies*, echoing Jesus' words in John 12, and the other inviting reflection around legacy. The questions which we are encouraged to address here are among the most profound, exploring as they do feelings about death, what may come afterwards and reflections about whether we feel our life has been significant.

She uses Isaiah as a helpful anchor to assist readers, reminding us of how *"the rain and the snow fall from heaven and do not return without giving life-giving water to the earth, making seeds sprout and plants grow."*
(Is 55:10).

This is a gently paced book, and the writing style reflects Silf's role as a retreat leader. Sometimes the stories and anecdotes can feel a little twee, and her approach is the absolute antithesis to a call to 'grow old disgracefully!' Nevertheless, it is an excellent introduction to the syllabus of later life and readers will benefit from its wisdom, both as individuals and through sharing with others in book groups or house groups.

Reviewed by Revd Dr Keith Albans, Chair of Christians on Ageing

Final Reel:

Report of Culture Club

Marion Shoard, COA Trustee

Death today is, of course, as common as ever. Yet for most of us, it occurs at more of a distance than it did for our forebears. Rather than happening in our own living rooms and bedrooms, people's last weeks and days are now largely outsourced to hospitals and care homes.

What has been lost is a lot of practical wisdom of how best to support people who are dying. Might the arts portray death and dying in a way that could help us re-engage? This was the subject of discussion at Culture Club's February meeting.

The dramatic end is a central staple of the soap opera: Coronation Street has featured 249 since its inception in 1960, including explosions, helter-skelter mishaps and someone being trapped in a faulty freezer. In the real world, most of the 126,000 older and disabled people living in care homes die there each year – yet we couldn't recall witnessing any depiction of a care home death in a soap. Deaths do feature in hospital dramas, but they too tend to be sudden – inevitably so perhaps, as the responses by individuals and the community to a death often matter more to the storyline than the event itself.

Step aside for Kate Winslet's directorial debut in December 2025, *Goodbye June*, scripted by her son and loosely based on the death of Winslet's own mother. She stars as one of the four children of June (Helen Mirren), who is gradually dying of advanced cancer in a hospital ward.

Culture Clubbers applauded the depiction of the interplay between June, her husband (played by Timothy Spall) and her children during the couple of weeks leading up to June's death. The final scene in the movie – a family Christmas meal one year after June's death – showed how fruitful that pre-death period had been. Two warring sisters

whom June had urged to resolve their differences now chatted easily, while her son, who had seemed unsure of himself was now happy and relaxed in a long-term relationship with the male nurse who had tended his mother. How would those sisters have felt post-death had they not tried to reach out, as their dying mother had urged?

So, we applauded this focus on the opportunities before the death, with psychotherapist and counsellor Adela Austin, a founder member of the Kent and Medway Death Café, pointing out that death spurs us to resolve unfinished business – she advises clients to consider whether they will have any if-onlys after a death and, if so, to act now. June’s family enjoyed the luxury of knowing that their mother’s death was imminent. We explored the anguish of unexpected death, when family members and friends would have been at the bedside offering comfort and support, had they known what lay ahead. Absence alongside the dying person can torment the bereaved for the remainder of their own lives.

While we applauded exploration of the way in which family members dealt with June’s death before the event (including her husband who, after appearing in denial, was liberated to behave more lovingly after tearfully singing a tribute song to his wife, mic in hand, at his local pub), how helpful was the film’s portrayal of June’s hospital care? While pain care and pain relief might have been managed well in an NHS hospital, we doubted other aspects were realistic. Wouldn’t nursing care have been provided by a succession of nurses (including bank nurses), rather than one, apparently always on hand? Could a typical NHS hospital throw open a space for a torrent of young grandchildren to perform a nativity play? In fact, Winslet’s own mother had actually spent her final couple of weeks not in an NHS but a private ward, as Catherine Shoard the film editor at The Guardian, revealed to us.

‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ is perhaps the most famous poem about dying, but what of Dylan Thomas’ repeated exhortation to the dying person to “rage, rage against the dying of the light”? Opinions were divided. Some felt this was a useful reminder to do all you can to follow your dreams while you still have breath: others to relax, pointing out that causes and activities to which we have

contributed will probably continue after our demise. But shouldn't we feel cross when someone who had the energy and the appetite to achieve great things died?

In the multi-award-winning 2012 French film *Amour*, directed by Michael Haneke, accomplished pianist Anne has a stroke, which leads first to great difficulty in walking and soon afterwards rapid dementia-like mental decline. Devoted and equally musical and cultured husband Georges lovingly cares for his wife, doing all he can to relieve her suffering and provide emotional support.

Corrinne Mulhall, also a member of the Kent and Medway Death Café who has worked as both a carer and a nursing assistant, found the film moving and harrowing, singling out the outstanding dynamics between the two leading actors. She also praised the realistic portrayal of the attempts Georges made, with mixed success, to secure some paid care for Anne.

We concluded that there remains a long way for the arts to go in portraying the sort of dying and death that faces most people, though there may be grounds for hope: Catherine told us of *Queen at Sea*, recently premiered at the Berlin Film Festival and likely to be released in the UK in the autumn, whose director was meticulous in ensuring his portrayal of the handling of someone with advanced dementia was correct. In the meantime, we took comfort from the handling of the death in 1988 of Walter Gabriel in the radio drama *The Archers*, of which COA Chair, Keith Albans, played us a recording. Sobriety was the order of the day and the pace slow, with Gabriel's son choosing to spend a little time with his dead father before the undertaker was called.

At our next meeting, on 8th May, we will explore the arts' depiction of dementia. Look for details in the March and April Newsletters and on the CoA website.

Christians on Ageing AGM and Conference Call

This year's AGM will be held online on **Wednesday 29th April at 10.30am**. As well as receiving the Annual Report and Accounts, this is the time when we elect trustees who form the Executive Committee to steer the work of COA during the year. Two trustees are due to stand for re-election, but we also have up to three vacancies and welcome nominations of people who are able and willing to stand. If you are interested and want to find out more, contact the Chair, Keith Albans on chair@christiansonageing.org.uk

Following the AGM we will move into the Conference Call and it will be a delight to welcome Tina English as our speaker. Tina is well-known to many as the founder and former CEO of *Embracing Age* and although she remains as a trustee, she is now a self-supporting minister within the Church of England. The title of her talk is **Responding to Changing Landscapes** exploring her own experiences of working with older generations, especially in the context of church and Christian charities, and reflecting on the changing landscape – both in terms of how older people are changing and how there are now more Christian charities working in that space, and what that might mean for charities and churches.

While voting at the AGM is restricted to members, everyone is welcome to be part of the event, which will run until around 12.30pm – to register to attend, please email secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk

Love Is Come Again

Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

In the grave they laid Him, Love who had been slain,
Thinking that He never would awake again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Forth He came at Easter, like the risen grain,
Jesus who for three days in the grave had lain;
Quick from the dead the risen One is seen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Revd John M.C. Crum, 1872-1958, Priest and hymn writer



Petr Ganaj on Pexels

Christians On Ageing Publications

Dying and Death – Gerry Burke. New edition 2024.
£5 print, £2 digital

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Growing Dementia Friendly Churches – Revd Gaynor Hammond.
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