

Notes on a *Christians on Ageing* Conference Call

Self-isolation in the community

This was Zoom conference held on **28 July 2020**. We were: Marion Shoard, Mike Monaghan, Sally Richards, Susan Kilbride, Lucia Sullivan, Amanda Gafford, Helen McCormack, Susan Duffy, Rosemary Davies, John Portman, Shirley Pearce, Joanna Cox, Albert Jewell, Debbie Thrower and David Jolley.

This was an impressive gathering of exceptional people and proved to be a stimulating, informative and humbling experience:

Introductions took us around the UK – From Orkney to Wales, to Kent, parts of London, Yorkshire and elsewhere.

Marion introduced the subject area.

She said that we are now seeing a partial relaxation of the restrictions on behaviour introduced to curb the spread of the coronavirus at the start of lockdown on March 23rd. Faced with the choice of protecting health or protecting the economy, the government could have opened up the economy but at the same time increased protection for particularly vulnerable groups. Instead, it has done the opposite.

Thus it has told people in England who had been shielding as they fall into the ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ group that each can return to their workplace from August 1st if it has taken steps to ensure it is “Covid-secure” (explained at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>).

If clinically extremely vulnerable people decline to go back to work and are employed, they will lose their entitlement to statutory sick pay. Whether working or not, they will cease from August 1st to receive free food parcels, medicine deliveries and basic care from the National Shielding Service; they may be able to access volunteer delivery schemes. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

Many older people are vulnerable to developing serious illness as a result of Covid infection not because they fall into the clinically extremely vulnerable group (because they have lung disease or cancer, for example) but on grounds of age alone – the risk of serious illness increases markedly over the age of 70. For some, additional factors such as their weight and membership of an ethnic group will increase their vulnerability. Eighty per cent of deaths in the UK of people with a Covid-19 diagnosis have occurred to people in their 70s and over. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/discover/2020/06/coronavirus-risk-for-older-people-updated/>

However, the situation on the virus remains unchanged in that there is no vaccine and no curative treatment. So older people (and younger people in the clinically especially vulnerable group) face the challenge of trying to keep themselves safe in an increasingly dangerous post-lockdown world. Anecdotally she observed that many people in England

seem to be failing to wear a mask even when in close proximity to other people, whether on trains or in the queue for a public toilet.

How is this new situation affecting older people? Marion reported on her recent visit to beaches in east Kent, which were busy with younger people and children, but on which older people were noticeable by their absence.

She asked:

- *Are many older people too anxious about their physical health to mix with the rest of society and enjoy trips to the beach and other places?*
- *Are they becoming marginalised from society?*
- *What could churches do to help older people who wish to continue to self isolate as much as possible?*
- *Are certain groups in special need of support – perhaps those without access to greenspace close at hand, family carers, and people with dementia? Any others?*

The digital world

The digital world has made the pandemic much easier for many people and organisations to cope with than would otherwise have been the case. Questions do remain:

- *How can churches make the digital world work as well as possible for older people?*
- *Do we have examples of good practice, for instance, in the online streaming of services?*
- *Who is left out of the world of digital communication?*
- *Which activities or resources are thereby denied to them, particularly any offered by churches and church-based groups?*

Marion pointed to the dearth of official advice about ways in which people can cope with the pandemic in their everyday lives which do not involve a digital alternative. Most of the NHS's suggestions for ways of coping with loneliness involve the digital world, such as joining online clubs and playing Scrabble or having dinner with other people online.

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coping-loneliness-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

She asked:

- *Can we think of ways in which digital communication could include people who would otherwise be excluded from church-based digital communication, because they lack the necessary equipment, broadband connection, digital skills or as a result of limitations in their dexterity, cognitive ability, sight or hearing?*
- *Should church ministers as well as pastoral workers place greater emphasis on telephone ministry?*
- *How can the ways in which older people interact socially be made safer? Official guidance focusses on what people should not do, rather than also explaining how they can carry out ordinary activities safely, such as playing board games.*
- *What are the practical steps we could take to make sure that home group meetings outdoors, for example, can take place safely?*

- *Are self-isolating older people receiving their deliveries satisfactorily?*
- *How can churches reach out to people who are off their radar and that of other organisations but would nonetheless benefit from support during the pandemic?*
- *What can be accomplished using the telephone or digital technology?*

The **response to this introduction and the many questions raised** was a vigorous, committed, highly informative and moving discussion:

- **We heard of people feeling like lepers** when walking away from home – identifiably over 70 – but otherwise fit and independent – busy helping others.
- **Mixed messages from doctors and government** have not helped: ‘stay at home and save the NHS’, ‘keep active’. Messages have been clearer and certainly respected in Scotland: ‘The Nicola Factor’
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=nicola+sturgeon&docid=608012076019942866&mid=B7325E6BC991603E4E71B7325E6BC991603E4E71&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>
- **Fearful at first**, some would cross the road and avoid eye contact. But with persistence, we find that maintaining eye contact is possible, important and makes people feel better. Conversations can occur even across roadways, and within the social distancing guidelines.
- **It is important to think of techniques which might work:** leaving a gift of a flower or plant, making use of gardens and gardening. Meetings in gardens are blossoming – We heard of Knickerbocker Glory afternoons, with ice-cream provided by a local company which could not otherwise dispose of all its production
- **Helping people** get about often requires a lift by car. This can be potentially hazardous – but can be managed with sensible precautions
- Much joy when the local post office opened. Only one customer allowed in at a time – but a return to contact, information and things you need.
- **Debbie, in Sussex**, reported that her church has reopened for services at 10.15am on Sundays – Disciplined – with social distancing and masks, no singing but words on a screen. So good to have the service, including Communion.
- She gave us the story of a lady taxi driver who took a job in a care home because she had no trade in lockdown. She found the loneliness being inflicted on the residents because of lockdown, precautionary isolation too hard to bear. All kept in their rooms day after day with no outside contact – many unable to understand why, and feeling abandoned and punished. She resigned her post with six weeks.

*Marion explained that the **plight of people in care homes**, cut off from their loved ones and other valued contacts such as pastoral workers, was one in which Christian on Ageing is deeply concerned; the first of our Conference Calls concentrated on this area. She considered that the guidance the government had issued on visiting in care homes in England on July 22 would be unlikely to improve the situation very much, especially as relatives continued to lack any means of appeal against homes which restrict visiting in a way which contravenes the official guidance or is unnecessarily restrictive or unkind. She has written an article for the current issue of Christians on Ageing’s journal, **plus**, on this subject.*

<http://www.marionshoard.co.uk//articles/care-homes-how-we-could-make-amends.pdf>

Anna Chaplaincy

Debbie shared pointers to activities by Anna Chaplaincy which can be helpful in supporting people at home:

- A review of what is known about loneliness:
<https://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/post/top-concern-for-churches-right-now-loneliness>
- The use of masks with windows to help people with problems of hearing or understanding without the visual cues of lips and facial expressions
<https://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/post/window-face-masks>

More information was given about the growing network of 147 Anna Chaplains, and those in equivalent roles, and the dozens of volunteer Anna Friends who work with them, can be found at www.annachaplaincy.org.uk The movement has grown exponentially since 2014 because of the expanding need in this field of ministry (especially as a result of Covid-19 more recently) and the greater appreciation of the importance of the spirituality of ageing..

The 'Carer's Guide' series of five booklets for care assistants:

- Debbie has blogged about them here <https://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/post/new-booklets-to-give-your-care-staff> and <https://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/post/sample-the-pages-of-our-new-guides-for-care-staff>
- They cost £2.50 each, or ten pounds for a pack of five – either for one of each title, or for a pack of five of each single title.

(They are flying off the shelves as churches buy them in bulk to give to their local care home managers to distribute to care staff as a way of thanking key workers. They have been road-tested by people with experience of care home working so that they hit the right note and contain genuinely useful information. They are a way of equipping staff to give emotional and spiritual support while visiting restrictions are in place for church pastoral teams and Anna Chaplains.)

Everyone was invited to subscribe to the blog for regular updates www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/blog

Topics covered include

- Cream Teas in a Bag,
- Top tips for making the most of phone calls in lockdown,
- How to conduct church services over the phone,
- Guidelines for safe doorstep pop rounds,
- Making gifts of goodie bags for care staff to show appreciation for their efforts during the pandemic,
- Reaching out to the non-digital community,
- Music sessions for people living with dementia and their carers,
- Messy Vintage online services and for those without internet access by making craft packs available and delivering them,
- How to make Psalm 23 bracelets in care home settings and for the housebound

Loneliness

Amanda has kindly supplied a number of links which address the issue of loneliness:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/loneliness-resource-pack>

<https://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/OD701-loneliness-book.pdf>

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf

<https://archwayfoundation.org.uk/>

<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/useful-reports-and-publications/>

Others gave examples of ***meetings in outdoor sites***

Special groups who need extra consideration.

Anxiety and depression have risen amongst many people during this time. People who are known to be vulnerable to emotional disorders may need seeking out and given encouragement to have help of practical and emotional forms.

- Our previous Conference Call had paid particular attention to people who have been **recently bereaved** – all the discussion from that day is relevant here. There have been many deaths, many have found themselves gripped by grief and the return of grief from earlier losses.
- In the absence of major psychiatric disorder, people have become at risk of **agoraphobia** – fearful about going out – as they have not been practising going out
- People who have no one within easy reach
- People with multiple impairments – more vulnerable to the virus and other illnesses and more challenged and challenging in efforts to continue in contact and meaningful communication
- **Contact and communication** can be encouraged with treats: flowers, cupcakes, cream teas, special events – Garden celebrations of VE Day and similar

We heard of a man with dementia who lives in a sheltered housing block. He simply cannot understand or remember the new rule which requires him to stay in his flat. He comes out and wanders the corridors, knocking on doors seeking the comfort of friendship and a few words.

We heard of a Local Preacher who is not allowed to hold services, so has taken to visiting vulnerable members of the congregation and holding conversations from the end of the garden path. This is greatly appreciated

Holiday at Home

Lucia told us about running *Holiday at Home* in lockdown/ coming out of lockdown

- *We have chosen as our theme: Kings and Queens in the Bible. So we are looking at Saul (from hero to zero), Esther and David or Solomon*
- *We are going to prepare bags which we are going to drop at each person's home on three Thursdays in August. These bags will contain quizzes, an easy recipe, a craft activity, the talk and Bible passage in written form as well as on a CD. The CD will also include a joke, greetings, a 20 questions 'Who am I?' guessing-game (which Bible person are we looking at/), as well as a piece of music connected to the king or queen. There will also be pens, brushes, paints, a card with a scripture verse to colour, a poem. One week the bag will contain a cream tea and one week a mug with the church logo on. There may also be a small posy of flowers and instructions on doing an easy scientific experiment.*

We are hoping to recruit some volunteers to help us pack the bags, deliver the bags, and contribute poems.

On each of the Thursdays, the person who has received a bag will get a phone call from one of the volunteers based in the church building, asking how they are getting on with the activities, the quizzes, if they have any questions or feedback. The recipient will be asked if they want to feed anything back or contribute anything.

*One of the volunteers, who has experience of the London City Mission, has suggested these packs be called '**Summer Surprise' packs***

Modes of communication

We turned to look at the strengths and weaknesses of modes of communication with isolated older people within the constraints of lockdown:

- The idea of sharing services via CDs was strongly supported
- Packs delivered by post are a tried and tested method
- Local radio will sometimes be helpful – with services, phone-in, request programmes. Radio 4 programmes are appreciated but may be too early in the day for some

It is felt that the main TV channels have not been as helpful as might be. We had heard that Sunday morning services, provided in response to lockdown have been discontinued (even though much appreciated) as soon as it became possible for churches to reopen. In practice many churches are still closed and worrying about making safe arrangements

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/religion-coronavirus>

- More advanced technology is used by some. Many churches have made services available live and as recordings via the internet. We heard of a project on Orkney which has purchased and reconditioned tablet devices and taught people how to use them

- We were introduced to KOMP – an innovative, simplified version of computer communication designed to be usable by people who find the technology daunting: <https://www.noisolation.com/uk/komp/>

The telephone

We turned to recognise how valuable the telephone is as a mode of communication: long established and trusted. Almost everyone possesses the equipment and knows how to use it; podcasts can be played down it, but mostly it finds power and favour as a form of one to one conversation – without the visual cues, but with time and clarity to share worries, ideas, hopes and fears at depth.

People who might otherwise be ‘at the periphery’ of church can find themselves with the undivided attention of the minister or lay worker. Prayers can be shared, as well as readings and reflections suggested by the individual.

Perhaps the most powerful story of the session told of an attempt to communicate with an individual with dementia by telephone. Deprived of all the other cues, the telephone visitor’s voice was not recognised and the lady with advanced dementia was getting more and more distressed and disturbed. We could see the anxiety rising in the eyes of the telephone visitor – What to do? What to say? Then came The Lord’s Prayer – and the lady with advanced dementia received peace. Those with her at the care home could be heard asking: ‘What is she saying to her?’

What indeed!

Early in the day Shirley had spoken about her frustrations with mainstream NHS and charity agencies in the way they approach the needs of patients and carers – hence her move to recommend ‘Contented Dementia’

<http://www.contenteddementiastrust.org/2012/02/11/contented-dementia-book/> and her own work <http://understandingdementia.co.uk>

But not to confuse people with too much detail and technicality, she will say:

‘What is important is the way you are with people’.

And we say: Amen.

This was a simply wonderful gathering and sharing of thoughts and experiences, conducted with caring and respectful spirit, helping us to hold the realities up to the light – and to encourage determination in the face of such a fearful threat

David Jolley