

Evangelism Toolkit

By Ian Knox



Sharing your faith with Older People

When I surveyed 200 people on 'the person with whom I would most like to share my faith' only one mentioned the older generations. I find very few churches think about reaching out to older people. This is a huge mistake to make! The world is filling up with older people. This may be the last time we will have people around who have a background knowledge of the Bible: in 1955 over 80 per cent of the population had been to Sunday school. 'Older people' is better than 'elderly' as a term. When does it begin? Some say in the 50s (Saga holidays start at 50). When you were 21, when did you think 'old' started? I put it, when I was 21, at 40. Only when I reached that age did I realise how young 40 was. This is not a 'debate of the age', but about faith-sharing. Having made your hackles rise if you are 55, let's look at sharing our faith with older people.



The problems

- It is hard to change as you grow old. We may want continuity, not a radical change of lifestyle
- It is hard to admit that a lifetime of beliefs (or non-beliefs) was wrong. This is the generation that says, 'I did my best', 'I did it my way', 'I never did anybody any harm, 'I'm as good as the next.'
- It is hard to live with an increasing lack of mobility, an increase in loneliness, bereavement and ageing itself
- It is hard to face death, and easier to avoid thinking about it.

The pitfalls

There are three things to remember when getting involved with older people:

- Don't try to show you 'understand'. How can you, if you are much younger? On the other hand, if you are older yourself, you are the ideal person to share your faith with your peers: that's why evangelism has no retirement date.
- Don't underestimate an older person's intelligence. They probably know more than you do. They may even know more of the Bible, with a Sunday school and church background.
- Don't patronise. We tend to speak to very old people as if they were children, which is insulting.

The potential

With nearly a quarter of the population over 60, here is a potential army of older followers of Jesus Christ. Their lives could influence and even change, the whole nation. Robert Browning, in his poem 'Rabbi ben Ezra' wrote:

*Grow old along with me
The best is yet to be
The last of life, for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand
Who saith 'A whole I planned.
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all nor be afraid'*



Browning is right: the older years should be ones of fulfilment, and the prospect of growing older with Jesus is wonderful. Link this with a life forgiven, peace with God and a future in heaven and don't you get excited about sharing this future with an older person?

The plan

More than with almost anyone else, friendship is the answer here. Love and respect are vital. Even family members sometimes have little time for older members.

Here are four suggestions on how to approach faith sharing with an older person:

- Speak of their potential. When David says 'I was young and now I am old' (Psalm 37:25), his words are interpreted today to mean 'I'm useless', 'I'm forgotten', 'I'm hopeless'. God says otherwise. He speaks of being with us in our 'old age' and with our 'grey hairs' (Isaiah 46:4), helping and keeping us. His plan is for us to 'still bear fruit in old age', staying 'fresh and green' (Psalm 92: 14), echoed in Browning's words.
- Speak of God's love for older ones and his respect for old age. The Bible is full of amazing stories of God using older people in his plans: Moses, Caleb, Anna and Simeon, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth -the list goes on.
- John 3 is a passage for older people: Nicodemus is, on his own admission, 'old' (verse 4). John 3:16 is for older people! Jesus gives new lives for old.
- Eternity, and its answer to death, is a great subject for an older person. They may well know the first few verses of John 14 by heart. I sat with an old man, a neighbour, and started to read, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled...' (verse 1). I was amazed as he recited along with me right up to verse 6. It was so easy to talk about heaven with him. He trusted Christ as a result - and died a fortnight later.

In all your faith-sharing, do include the older ones.

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Sharing your faith with people who are sick

I was sick and you looked after me,' Jesus said in Matthew 25:36 when encouraging us to care for others. I love the style of Jesus, going out of his way to be with people who are ill. The man lying by the pool in John 5: 1-15 is a splendid example. Of all our neighbours, perhaps this last group needs us most.



Helping

People who are ill are unlikely to phone and say, 'Come and see me.' You will have to take the initiative to show concern. This may prove time-consuming. Are you willing to keep on with your contact after they are discharged from hospital and then have a long period of recuperation, or as they fail to make a reasonable recovery from a stroke? Picking people up and then metaphorically dropping them does not speak well of our faith. As with people who don't leave the house, your faith will be seen in the practical help you give. You may be the scribe in writing to family and friends, or the shopper for necessities. Transport to and from hospital, and doctors' appointments could feature.

Sharing

It is my experience that times of illness are very special opportunities to take the initiative in speaking of our faith and of the help Jesus longs to give. Without needing to be all pushy, here is what may prove to be a unique opening to share God's love and concern for the one who is ill, whatever is wrong. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that, unless it seems a positively bad idea, I would always offer to pray with and for someone I was visiting who was ill. I cannot understand an ordained minister ever failing to do this. People have said to me, after a minister has visited, 'I wish he'd prayed for me.' I have done some research into those suffering from strokes and living with dementia, and also have had personal experience of friends and family with these conditions. Who knows what they can understand? My stepmother suffered for several years from a serious stroke. She could hardly complete a sentence on many occasions, yet she prayed beautifully and fluently. She taught me that we can share deep spiritual matters, albeit in an uncomplicated language, and cut through the physical and mental barriers right into the depths of the heart and soul. Speak of God's love to them because he can work where no one else can. Those who suffer from mental illness should be treated in a similar way. My only caveat is to be careful if others are present. Otherwise, speak of Jesus and his willingness to be right there in the suffering. I hold hands with a sick person - male or female, young or old - unless it seems inappropriate. I almost always hold their hand, or gently place a hand on their shoulder, when praying.

Visiting those in institutional care

If your neighbour or friend is ill or frail enough to be in a hospital, nursing home or hospice, there could well be others around, so particular sensitivity is needed. I always phone first, to see if my visit is convenient both for the staff and the person I wish to see. If I say I am 'from the church', that sometimes opens doors, especially to get me in when others (including family) may not be there.

I try to ignore the medical paraphernalia! I chat about the happenings in the world, especially those which will interest my sick neighbour. I keep the conversation light and happy. My aim is to find out how my sick neighbour really is, now they are in this place. They are clearly poorly enough to be in a hospital or hospice, or not strong enough to go to their own home, hence the nursing home. It is obvious they are physically unwell. But what about their spiritual health? I trust God for an opening in the conversation to talk about God, his love and his concern. After that, it is simply a case of following the leading of the Holy Spirit and sharing Jesus in a naturally easy-going way. If the nurse walks in with the tablets, we suspend the chat until medication time is over then we go on~ It would be wholly exceptional for me to leave without praying. In any bigger institution there is almost certainly a chaplain. I would encourage my sick neighbour to make contact, if I could not do so myself. They also could have a real role to play in helping with spiritual matters. I do believe that these visits - when a person is ill enough to be in a hospital, hospice or nursing home - are very special opportunities for sharing in a positive way the love of Jesus. It is another of those situations here I would aim to 'go for it'. The following story sums up how I feel.

My dying neighbour

A neighbour of mine was extremely ill in hospital. I knew him well. I went to see him one morning and asked him directly how his faith was helping him. Tears ran down his face. 'It's all in my head,' he said. 'It doesn't make any difference now'. I held his hand and read the first few verses of John 14, where Jesus speaks of being the only way to the Father and says that he has prepared a place for us. I asked my dying neighbour if he would trust Jesus. We prayed together. A fortnight later I went to his funeral, but my sorrow was not filled with hopelessness. God gave me that one opportunity. I am so glad I took it. Your sick neighbour may not be in such dire straits, but their illness may still be the open door for positive faith-sharing. Let God take you through that door.



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Sharing your faith with bereaved people

Billy Graham once said 'as I grow older I seem to go to more funerals'. Often those who are bereaved are older. Bereavement is very often life changing. These reactions are typical and normal:

- Shock and disbelief – especially if unexpected
- Anger and darkness – why has God let this happen? This is the dark valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23: 4)
- Depression – a feeling of being down
- Loneliness – this is very hard, because the person is not coming back to relieve the loneliness
- Lostness – what is the point of living now they are going? Where am I going now?
- Guilt – bereavement often brings 'if only'. If only I'd said sorry, if only I'd said goodbye, if only I'd said 'I love you' .

This is a very sensitive time, and helping someone who is bereaved needs to be handled with great care, or faith-sharing will produce a negative response. Here are four areas to watch:

- Beware the danger of avoidance. It is easier to keep away from a bereaved person because we do not know what to say. A friend of mine gave birth to a daughter who was born with severe physical abnormalities, and so was 'bereaved' of the child she wanted. She told me the most hurtful thing was to see a Christian friend cross over the road to avoid meeting her. Company was what she wanted.
- Do not say too much. A bereaved person is very vulnerable, and does not need a sermon.
- Avoid over-spirituality. Trite 'spiritual' answers will be very counter-productive. Practical help is much to be preferred (what about making a hot meal, or going with the a bereaved person when they have to register the death, or helping with the shopping?).
- Most of all, there is the danger of no 'heart' concern. Love, care and even tears are needed. Don't force the latter but don't be too big to cry when the bereaved person does, if you are so moved.



However, here is the chance for you to share the burden and see it handed over to Jesus, who cares (1 Peter 5:7).

There is God's help and hope in the midst of bereavement: in the valley of death 'I will fear no evil, for you are with me' (Psalm 23:4).

Jesus is the light both in and at the end of the tunnel: 'I am the light of the world,' he said. 'Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). According to some research, 13 per cent of all those who become Christians say they did so at a time of bereavement or loss. Bereaved people are not all waving their fists at God; some are looking to him for help.

Faith-sharing can, therefore, lead to that lovely word 'salvation', with its meaning of health, wholeness and completeness in Jesus. It was to a bereaved person (Martha) that Jesus said the opening words of the funeral service: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die' (John 11:25). Jesus then immediately asked this just-bereaved woman, 'Do you believe this?' And she did!

When I share my faith with a bereaved person, I am keenly aware of finding the right time and being enormously sensitive. I would have three things in mind, which may be mutually inclusive of each other.

First, I would want to take a bereaved person to what God says in the Bible, perhaps sooner than any other person. We have already touched on Psalm 23, perhaps the ideal scripture here. Martha's experience is followed by the Bible's shortest verse, 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35). Wherever you have found comfort in God's word, use that to show how God has helped you at times of sorrow and crisis.



Next, I would want to take a bereaved person to the cross of Jesus Christ. It was there that God the Father was himself bereaved, and the very sky turned dark at noon (Luke 23:44-45) with heaven's sorrow and grief. Isaiah 53 is the greatest Old Testament passage on the cross and includes those wonderful words of comfort and hope about Jesus. 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows' (verse 4). God both understands our bereavements and has carried the pain of them.

Finally, I would (with great gentleness) show how it is at this time especially that Jesus makes his invitation for us to respond to him. Look at his remarkable words: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest ... you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). Don't back away from the bereaved. They are precious people with whom we can share our faith.

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Sharing your faith with those who don't leave the house

Giving time

An early decision needs to be made here: if you're going to build a relationship with those who don't leave the house, can you commit to this in the long term? A one-off visit will always be appreciated, but anything meaningful will mean an ongoing relationship. Is this a commitment you can undertake? Your faith-sharing will have a major practical element here. There is shopping to be done. You may be able to arrange transport for outings, trips to church, the countryside, the shops, the pub or wherever. In so doing, make sure you don't usurp what the person's family members feel is their domain. Nor should you try to upstage the social services and health services or put yourself in a compromising situation. However, your loving, caring attitude will enable your faith to shine through. Make the chores seem fun and, where possible, do things with the person you're visiting, rather than for them.



Chatting

There will be very many opportunities for talking about a host of subjects. Chat naturally about anything and everything. Reminiscing will be a regular feature. Talk about you and your story. Share about your personal relationship with Jesus quite naturally as the opportunity arises. What has happened in your personal life does matter and is interesting, even if you don't think so.

Equally, listen to their story. Knowing your Christian connections, they may well speak of spiritual influences and events in their life. Don't be afraid to ask kind questions: a conversational style is much better than a series of monologues. It shows you are listening and have a keen interest. Let the Holy Spirit help your moving forward here.

As long and ongoing conversations progress, you could volunteer to read to your friend. Would they like to hear from the Bible? You could say how you enjoy a daily time with God, and see if that leads to sharing that time with them. Suggest sensitively that you would be happy to pray with them and for them, perhaps as you are about to leave.

Those unable to leave home often have periods of being on their own. An offer of an easy-going Christian book or music might go down well. This is certainly one of those situations where you can be gently proactive. If there is a genuinely sympathetic reaction, move forward with them. Who knows? You may be the one to help them find their one faith.



Other help

What is your church's policy regarding people who are housebound? Does it have one? Are there visitors appointed by the church? Does your church take Holy Communion to people in their homes? Is there a transport coordinator? When you have answers to these questions you can offer extra help that may be needed. Similarly, would your friend appreciate being taken to your church's service or mid-week meeting? Does your church hold events for those who don't leave home, or give them access to digital services? Would you be willing to help with this? The potential for faith-sharing here is very great indeed. It is worth all the time and effort. The old prayer says that 'it is in giving that we receive'. You can give and receive a blessing in your faith-sharing with those who don't leave the house.

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Sharing your faith with your grandparents

If your grandparents are alive, have you ever shared your faith with them?

Grandparents are brilliant. A large part of the reason for this is that they think you are so special. You have no idea how excited they were about your birth. You have elevated their very status. 'We are a grandmother' was one of the most famous things Margaret Thatcher ever said. You are one of the most favourite people in their lives. They may love you even more (don't tell this to anyone) than your parents. They are willing to forgive almost anything you do wrong and will indulge you and spoil you rotten. It's tough being a grandchild, but you can do it! If you were to phone, that would be welcome. If you visit, they will really enjoy your company, your stories, and especially your time and love. Whatever your age, and whatever their age, you can have an amazing bond of love and togetherness and a unique rapport. If they are unable to travel because of mobility problems or lack of transport, go and get them. They will enjoy your simple family prayers and coming to church with you. Faith-sharing in the context of your family life will be natural and genuine.



You have a huge advantage when it comes to sharing your faith with them: they are almost certain to have a background of knowledge of Christianity, however long ago it was. Many of their generation went to church or Sunday school. Even now your grandparents may have a real interest in spiritual things and enjoy programmes like Songs of Praise. Church is not an alien place, either. If you stay with them, or they with you, include a Sunday service. They will enjoy a traditional style. However, they might also appreciate a newer type of service if you explain what is going on, and if it is both 'real' and friendly. This is an excellent way to share your faith, and a chat over lunch afterwards may be very fruitful. The grandparental age group has time to enjoy reading and listening to music. Think of good books as gifts.

But it is you who are the key. Grandparents do have time to read and listen, but they would rather talk. Sit down and chat. They want to hear about your life. Enthuse about what you do. Your faith should fit into this quite naturally. They will hear it from you better than almost anyone else. You could be the ideal person to talk with them about Jesus, his love for them and his longing that they should know him in their older days. Love them to bits! Encourage them to be ready for heaven. Should you share your faith with your grandparents? Yes. Do it with huge love and care, but do it. You could be the one who helps them, more than anyone else.