



Coronavirus- How can I help?

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Unless you have been in hibernation you won't have failed to notice the world appears to be in the grip of the Coronavirus. There are differing views on severity, but over 119,000 people worldwide have caught the virus, and over 4,300 people have died. And what the experts are clear about is that those most at risk are older people, and/or with underlying health conditions.

Much has been written and is being written daily, about government responses (for official guidance visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/), and everyone will have their thoughts on what should have been done, and what should be done moving forward- but what can churches communities and Christians do, for those older people who may be reluctant to leave their home or who may be self-isolating?

There are 11.9 million older people in the UK, and churches often have a large proportion of older people. There is a separate debate to be had as to whether the conversation around Coronavirus would be different if the largest at 'risk group' were younger- but they aren't younger, and so we are left with a situation where an often vulnerable (older) demographic may be left feeling at worst very scared, or at best uncertain about how to proceed in the coming weeks. Should we go out? What if someone coughs? Should we even go to church?

With over 45,000 churches across the UK, Christians are ideally placed to speak hope into their community. What an example and Christian witness it would be if Christians everywhere mobilised, in their churches and in their wider communities, serving and supporting older people as we face this virus together. How can we send a message to all, that older people (as with all people) are utterly precious to our Lord Jesus Christ?

Below are some practical ways in which Christians can help older people in their church as well as in their wider community, at a time of more pronounced fear and risk for many in later life:

In Church

Where health permits, and church leadership guidance is in line, let's continue to encourage all to meet together, as our churches will not be complete if the older members are not involved in their weekly worshipping community. We mustn't be overrun with fear. However, we must also be realistic about the disruption that will be caused as the virus becomes more prevalent, and we must understand the concerns of older people who may feel safer staying at home. But when members do stay at home, often alone, the church must continue to engage actively with them.



As a church, compile a list of all your older members who live alone, and who may feel more isolated in the current climate. Set up a rota, whereby those people are called regularly, to see how they are, to enjoy phone fellowship, and to see if they need anything (food, household items etc). Maintained regular communication can go a long way in reducing feelings of isolation; and practical support with buying supplies will reduce anxiety.

Encourage church members to take ownership of this too. 'FaceTime' or other video messaging (as well as a phone call) will be most encouraging for the housebound/self-isolating. They may not have the technical capability but don't assume they don't, as many grandchildren have "educated" their grandparents on how to use a smartphone!

Ensure church communications are across all channels (online, email, telephone, even by post if needed!) so all church members know if there are changes at church – for example where people are being asked to stay away if exhibiting flu like symptoms.

Explore "live-streaming" church services, or ensuring services are recorded and are immediately available for members at home.

In your community

Where you are friends with older people in your street, who may feel isolated or vulnerable because of Coronavirus, keep lines of communication open (phone calls etc), in fact increase them! **Some of the above 'In Church' section applies.** For an isolated older person (or indeed any person), it is reassuring and a powerful witness, when they feel like they matter, and aren't alone- because someone like you shows that you care, by engaging with them.

Without wanting to encourage "panic buying", when you are doing your weekly shop, maybe you could buy a few extras, for an older person you know of who may now be reluctant to leave their home, but who needs some food etc.

Maybe you could post a card through letterboxes on your road offering practical help with shopping, in line with the above. Shopping can always be left on the doorstep or in the porch. Safeguarding needs to be considered if entering someone's home if you don't have a prior relationship to them (and I'm not suggesting you do that here)- but buying some extra food or household bits to leave outside someone's front door (at their request) could be a wonderful witness, as well as practically being very helpful indeed.

And we can pray. Pray that the older people in our lives and wider communities, whether we know them or not, would have a sense of God's love for them- and as we reach out to provide support, however small the gesture may be, we can pray that the recipient senses that our actions are driven from a place of love- a overwhelming love that comes because we received it first from the Lord Jesus.