



## Ministries amongst older people

With the ageing population changing the demographics of our communities and our churches, it is important that Christian faith organisations focus now on those people living in the fourth age; that the spiritual, pastoral and faith needs of older people are acknowledged and supported. It is time to realise the real potential for kingdom growth through ministry and mission to older people - to those who do not yet know Christ, and grasp the opportunity to show the love of Jesus to those older people in need.

Whether people in the fourth age have strong, little or no faith – they matter to God and they should matter to the church. There is no room for ageism, discrimination or exclusion of people on the basis of their age, disability or frailty; it is not acceptable for people to be overlooked, ignored or forgotten because they are unable to attend church, don't like the modern music or do not feel able to take a physically active role in the life of the church. Churches need to acknowledge the 'Gift of years' – and recognise the experience, skill and wisdom of those in the fourth age; they need to not only engage with older people in their membership and communities, but embrace and celebrate their involvement.

Historically, churches would often provide care, support and sanctuary for older and frail people in their communities. Organisations such as Pilgrims' Friends Society, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Alms houses, etc. had church roots and served older people in society, with housing, care and support. With a rise in cases of social isolation and loneliness, pressures on public funding leading to reduced social services and increasing numbers of older people being at risk of abuse, neglect or exploitation – churches and other Christian faith organisations have both an opportunity and a moral duty to focus on supporting people living in the fourth age.

**The Covid pandemic has taught us a great deal about some of the needs of older people:**

- **The impact of lock-down has opened the eyes of many to the plight of thousands of older people who normally live alone and struggle with social isolation.**
- **The crisis in many care homes has highlighted the lack of funding, resources, training and value for the provision of care in these settings.**
- **The disastrous and illegal decision-making of some medical practitioners and agencies, regarding resuscitation and hospital admission decisions, have been exposed and addressed, with improved understanding for the need for Advance Care Planning.**
- **The difficulties and dilemmas facing the families of those living with Dementia have finally been recognised and the challenge of caring for someone who lacks the cognitive function to understand what is going is better understood.**
- **The risks of people living in the fourth age to abuse, neglect and exploitation have been realised, with some older people being left with no care and support, others**

## **experiencing financial fraud or psychological abuse fuelled by a fear of the virus.**

In many communities, Christian faith organisations became the mainstay of help and support to older people, providing shopping, meals, shelter, advice, befriending and regular contact– at a time when the country was immobilised, not only by the lock-down measures but the threat and fear of the impact of the **Covid-19** virus.

Whether older people are living alone, with family members or in a care home – churches are ideally placed to offer spiritual and pastoral care. Many churches and Christian faith organisations work with other agencies to offer practical support, mealtime services and social activities. It is important that such Christian services don't overlook the spiritual and pastoral needs of older people – that coffee and cake is accompanied by a listening ear, open mind and a heart for sharing the love of Jesus. There are many opportunities to help the spiritual growth of an older person – whatever their faith – and we should not be shy in sharing the good news of the Gospel, introducing an older person to Jesus or helping their faith to develop and grow.

Ministry and mission to older people are not achieved without clear commitment, strong leadership and careful consideration. Churches should work with others in their area and with other agencies, to understand what is needed in their community in terms of ministries among older people. People living in the fourth age usually know how they could be supported with spiritual and pastoral needs – but sometimes they feel overlooked or forgotten by a busy church focused on children's work and other worthwhile ministries and outreach. Some older people feel frustrated that they are not included in the active ministry of the church – with assumptions made that they would be too tired or too frail – when they could play a less physical role, or provide the important prayer support for the work of the church.

There are many opportunities for intergenerational learning and serving in churches, involving those in the fourth age working with younger generations. The older person has so much to offer younger adults – in terms of experience, knowledge, skills and wisdom. The younger person has a great deal to offer the older person - with their energy, new ideas, technological skills and modern forms of communication. Working together, the generations can learn from each other, develop more understanding and respect for each other and be stronger with the things they have in common. Younger people can help those living in the fourth age to feel positive, respected and valued – help them have the confidence to contribute to church life and kingdom service.

Now is the time for all churches to review how they currently value and involve those in the fourth age; how they currently support the needs of older people – those in their membership, those in local care homes and those living in their community. Many churches will already be providing outreach activities such as coffee mornings, luncheon clubs, quiz nights, film clubs, etc. without a mention of the gospel, an offer of prayer or an opportunity for pastoral support. There is a sense of urgency in mission work to older people, in order to ensure that everyone has the chance to hear the gospel and respond to the message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Churches need to realise this, and focus on how they can best outreach and support the spiritual and pastoral needs of those people living in the fourth age in their community.

There are many national organisations who work and provide services for older people. Churches can partner with other agencies who may have the knowledge and expertise in supporting older people. There are also many Christian organisations who offer guidance, training and resources to churches in establishing services and support for older people. There is no need to re-invent the wheel – as there is considerable expertise and experience in the support for and ministry among older people. What is needed, is a commitment to change – to focus on what is needed for local older people, within the church family and community; to take every opportunity to share the gospel message to those who do not yet know Jesus and to grow the faith of older Christians; to be prepared to work with other churches and agencies, to reach out to offer spiritual and pastoral support to those living in the fourth age.

## **What churches CAN do towards establishing ministries among older people**

- Identify someone within the leadership/membership to lead for ministries among older people.
- Include specific ministries for older people in the church strategic plan.
- Involve people living in the fourth age in planning for outreach activities and church services.
- Include and involve older people in leading aspects of worship, teaching and discipleship.
- Ensure all housebound older members or those in care homes have regular pastoral visits.
- Encourage people in the fourth age to remain active and involved in a range of church life.
- Make contact/links with local care homes.
- Commit to becoming a Dementia-friendly church and part of local Dementia-friendly community. Update safeguarding policies and training to include safeguarding adults at risk.
- Provide opportunities for intergenerational learning and serving – within the church and outreach. Create opportunities for older people to be supported in discussions about their own future, their care needs and support for future treatments/care.
- Make contact and engage with local and national Christian ministries among older people – for guidance, resources and training.

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