



Marion Shoard

How churches can help older people during the Covid pandemic

Take a train ride or visit a popular beach and you are likely to find older people noticeable for their absence. Many are presumably too fearful of mixing in the wider community while Covid continues to evade attempts at a vaccine or curative treatment. How can churches support these millions of older people, enabling them to make the most of life and preventing them becoming marginalized and losing both their friends and their faith?

Help the digitally-excluded

The start of lockdown saw many churches maximising their use of digital technology. Acts of worship have been live-streamed – enabling not only regular attenders to remain in touch, but also people who had been unable in the past to attend church in person because of illness, disability or location, perhaps in a care home. Après-church coffee and mid-week get-togethers have also gone online. Since churches have begun to re-open, many have been live streaming their services on their website, thus providing continuing access for people unable to return to church in person, as well as the wider world.

However, digital inclusion is possible only for people who have access to a computer or smartphone, and older people are one of the most digitally excluded in our society: they make up most of the five million people (10 per cent) of the adult UK population who do not use the internet, according to the Office of National Statistics. Responding to this reality, some churches have been recording live Sunday services onto CDs and delivering these to individuals, while others have encouraged those without access to the internet to phone in to video discussions and social gatherings.

Not that the government has provided much practical guidance to help. On coping with loneliness during the pandemic, the NHS advises us all to move activities from playing Scrabble to having dinner with friends online, to message old friends on social media and join an online club or a peer-support group. Only one of the NHS' seven tips (become a volunteer) does not involve using digital communication.

Covid has also thrown up new practical challenges for older people, more daunting for those without use of the internet. People in churches could do much to help, such as finding online delivery services and online advice, as well as key information. For example, whether a patient has Covid or not, visiting them in hospital is much more difficult than in the past. Having at your fingertips precisely what government has advised about visiting and a particular hospital's visiting policy can be hugely empowering when confronted by a ward manager being more restrictive than necessary. Without internet access, people often struggle to obtain such information or are unaware of its existence, and thus may miss opportunities to engage with their loved ones at some of the most important moments in their lives. Key too can be internet access to Care Quality Commission inspection reports on care homes; without it, older people can find themselves placed in low-quality homes where they might die.

Lift the phone

Helen McCormack is the pastoral and development worker for older people in the Northallerton and Thirsk Methodist Circuit and Northallerton United Reformed Church. She considers that telephone ministry, often in the past thought of as an optional extra, is invaluable. Easy to use



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and almost universally available, the phone invites spontaneity – you don't need to pre-plan the encounter or look presentable, as with a video call. Since the start of lockdown, Helen has been phoning the people whom previously she would have chatted to at coffee mornings and found they engage in far more in-depth, meaningful conversations over the phone than they would have at a coffee morning.

Helen McCormack's experience was echoed by other delegates at an online discussion in July hosted by the ecumenical group Christians on Ageing. Amanda Gafford, an Anglican pastoral worker in north Oxfordshire, said she had been having difficulty talking on the phone to a lady with dementia. "But I just said to her: 'Shall we just say the Lord's Prayer together?' We did and she just calmed down, to the amazement of her carer. It was a very special spiritual experience." Amanda and Helen were reporting to delegates in an ongoing Christians on Ageing series of discussions called Conference Call, which tackles current issues involving the church and older people. Sessions have attracted participants from Orkney to Southwark and Neath to Rochester; reports of the discussions can be found on the Christians on Ageing website.

Elizabeth Bryson is one of nearly 150 lay people and ordained ministers dotted over England who have received training in the spiritual support of older people and are known as Anna Chaplains. At one care home in Maidstone in Kent, Elizabeth provides a twice-monthly video service for residents gathered together in the lounge, but at two others she leads short services one-to-one down the phone. Each week, the activities organiser passes a disinfected phone to many individual residents with whom Elizabeth sings, prays, talks and reads the Bible, as well as leading those who used to receive Communion in an act of spiritual communion with the words, 'O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee'. Helping to compensate for the bleakness of socially-distanced funerals is one of the many other situations in which the phone could provide a means of ministry in the world of Covid-related restrictions.

Think outdoors

Government rules allow up to six people from different households to meet together and David Cooke, an Anna Chaplain in Chichester, has been holding monthly prayer meetings for a small group of the older people he supports in a church garden;

these socially-distanced gatherings will move indoors as winter approaches. David also leads services on the front lawn of a care home in the city for up to eight residents (whom the home treats as a single social bubble) every week.

Become a nominated visitor

Government has told care homes that they should be facilitating visits for each resident by a nominated visitor, but this leaves out the large numbers of residents whom nobody is seeking to visit. Church members could ask a care home manager to ask these people whether they would like them to become their nominated visitor.

Re-engage with the world

Professor of Evolutionary Psychology at Oxford University Robin Dunbar pointed out on Radio 4's Today programme on August 26th that, "Digital media are extremely good at slowing down the rate of decay when you're not able to physically meet up with somebody. But they really are only a sticking plaster. If you don't actually have the opportunity to sit across the table and stare into someone's eyes, a relationship is never going to sustain itself in the long run".

Rather than meeting in a domestic setting, church members and clergy could invite older people who hitherto have not ventured out much for a more apparently ambitious outing, say, at a town park, bench with a view or café in which they are confident of safety precautions. A meeting there could combat the boredom and frustration many older people feel after long periods within their own four walls and help them to feel part of the wider world again.

Marion Shoard is the author of How to Handle Later Life.

