

Spiritual Needs of Older People in Care Homes - Thinking it Through

(Derby Diocese 3 June 2003)

Session Two

Practical suggestions and ideas

Where are our Hidden Congregations?

Hidden Congregations - easily lost - often forgotten - when members move into care in other areas do we refer them on like we do with students?

Begin with finding our hidden congregations - may be those already known to us from our churches or those who've come from elsewhere. We could start by mapping homes in our area - easy using Derbyshire Care Homes Directory. Not a task for a single church - better ecumenically through Churches Together?

Where do we start when we've found them?

Ask the residents and staff what they would like - don't treat them as though you know best. Make sure your approach to staff isn't critical. Remember how busy they are. Earlier we spoke of the Crabbit woman. Less well known is the nurse's reply:

"To the 'Crabbit Old Woman"

What do we see, you ask, what do we see?

Yes, we are thinking when looking at thee!

We may seem to be hard when we hurry and fuss,

But there's many of you, and too few of us.

We would like far more time to sit by you and talk,

To bath you and feed you and help you to walk.

To hear of your lives and the things you have done;

Your childhood, your husband, your daughter, your son.

But time is against us, there's too much to do -

Patients too many, and nurses too few.

We grieve when we see you so sad and alone,

With nobody near you, no friends of your own.

We feel all your pain, and know of your fear

That nobody cares now your end is so near.

But nurses are people with feelings as well,

And when we're together you'll often hear tell

Of the dearest old Gran in the very end bed,

And the lovely old Dad, and the things that he said,

We speak with compassion and love, and feel sad

When we think of your lives and the joy that you've had,

When the time has arrived for you to depart,

You leave us behind with an ache in our heart.

**When you sleep the long sleep, no more worry or care,
There are other old people, and we must be there.
So please understand if we hurry and fuss -
There are many of you, And so few of us.**

What answers may we receive?

- We'd like a regular service. This is the answer you may be expecting and is often the only thing people think about. CCOA has published two useful resources - Worship in Residential Care and Worship for People with Dementia. Not time to talk in detail about this. Just a few pointers - don't come in your time, in a hurry and infantilise. Not something to do at different times every week because of problems with dementia and the need for routine. Nurture relationships, bring members of the congregation too. Parche scheme in Eastbourne. Ashbourne pilot being developed by Graham Hunt.
- We'd like an opportunity for just chatting - frequently residents most miss people simply being there to talk to them and listen to them. A resident said:

Hardly see the staff. Ideally it would be nice to have ten minutes sit down and proper talk
- We'd like someone simply to come alongside us, to show love and respect and unconditional love. This probably develops from the 'just chatting' Maybe simply sit and hold a hand. Maybe listening and helping people to make sense of their lives - to pull together the strands of their lives and come to terms with successes and failures, with good times and bad.
- We want the opportunity of talking about sensitive issues - talk about concerns about family and friends, need for reconciliation, multiple bereavements (home, friends, new friends, moving to another home) Can we help older people to die at peace - with themselves, with others or with God? When people want to recall past hurts inflicted or received or to talk about broken relationships with family or friends we can listen. It is no good saying 'it really doesn't matter now' because it clearly does to some older people. Sometimes listening is enough. At other times we may be able with permission to facilitate a meeting where reconciliation may take place.
- We're worried about the approach of death. Old age is for some a time of serene faith and confident assurance of a life to come. But for many it is the opposite - a time of doubting or the discarding of previously held assurance. Many old people in the Fourth Age have suffered multiple bereavements and are preoccupied with the questions 'Why all this suffering? Is there really a God? Is there a life beyond death where I shall meet my loved one again or is everything in the end meaningless? Again we need to be prepared to listen and where we have one to share our faith.

- Could you help with reminiscence activities? Nothing older people enjoy more than talking about the past. Can be very therapeutic but sometimes risky. Memory boxes.
- We wish we were still more involved in the life of the church. Could we collect residents and take them to worship with us? Could we take a tape of the Sunday worship? Could we hold meetings of the sisterhood or whatever at the home so that we come in and share with them.
- We'd like to feel needed by being able to offer something to others - residents still have much to offer - prayer, time to listen to others, relationships with children and young people (help with projects, especially those involving the past?)
- Could you come in and share activities with us? Work of First Taste, NAPA, sewing, art, pottery, collections, reading the newspaper, taking animals or children to visit, uniformed organisations or junior church could adopt a home. Psalm project in London diocese.
- How about entertaining us sometimes - and not just at Christmas - we still enjoy music, singing and dancing
- Could you help take us on outings? Take a lonely resident home for a meal, out to see the spring countryside, to a party at church or to have tea in a summer garden. A resident said:

'Going out gives you conversation for days. We are fulfilled for our age because we keep active and see others.'

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