



“Faithful, but Forgotten”

by Marion Shoard

published in *The Tablet*

11 March, 2006

It is easy to assume that those approaching the end of their lives will have resolved the spiritual crises that beset many of the rest of us. Understandably perhaps, churches concentrate their efforts on the young, who seemed more obvious prey for doubt, temptation and despair. Yet there have been indications that all may not be as well with the souls of the grey-haired people forming the mainstay of so many congregations as might have been imagined, and that their churches may not be providing them with the spiritual succour they need.

For example, a team of researchers who followed 342 over-65s from 1977 until 2002 as part of Southampton University’s Ageing Project found 26 per cent saying that religion had come to mean less to them over the years in question. Only two per cent said it had come to mean more.

A recent conference in Welwyn Garden City on “The Spiritual Needs of Older People” was therefore welcome. Organized by the Catholic movement Focolare, the event provided dramatic evidence of the role spirituality can play in the lives not just of elderly people but also of those on whom they depend.

Retired Anglican priest Ian Cuthbert and his wife Rosemary Paxton gave a real sense of the way in which their Christianity has empowered them not only to cope with cancer but to enrich their spiritual lives as a result. Mary Christiansen, who cares for her husband, who is blind, can barely lift his arms and cannot walk unaided, derives great comfort from Scripture. “God is the strength of my heart”, she said. Although increasing frailty and disability seem solely negative to most of us, for Mrs. Christiansen this has not been the case. She explained that, “as his body fails, I can see more of the real person”.

Professor Flavia Coretta specializes in the care of elderly people at the Gemelli hospital in Rome (where Pope John Paul II was a patient). She told the conference that she has learned much from her patients, whom she calls “experts in life”. She believes that society as a whole can be much enhanced by values which frail, older people can transmit – “accepting the limits that are part of human life, the value of being rather than having and producing”.

Professor Coretta also offered insights from her own experience to explain the marked variation in the extent to which individuals can cope with physical ailments in later life. She said that people who manage to place their focus of attention outside themselves, on other people and on the community in which they live, and contribute to that world outside, tend to live longer and enjoy better overall health than those who, perhaps with identical physical ailments, focus on themselves.

Another speaker, Marie Friery, who is a member of Focolare, spoke about the importance of intergenerational contact. She and fellow residents in a sheltered housing scheme near Hereford have forged links with children at a local junior school. They invited the children to come and talk to them about life during the Second World War for a school project. After the children had painted pictures on silk of the experiences they had found particularly striking, which their older friends stitched into cushions, and staged a play called "Vaccies", the two communities jointly threw a street party to show how the end of the war had been celebrated. Now the elderly people regularly teach the children cookery and gardening, while the children are developing Mrs. Friery's and her friends' IT skills.

Amin Ullah Khan, the coordinator and events organizer of the Welwyn and Hatfield Islamic Society, pointed out that Muslims need to keep up their devotions wherever they are living, even in hospital. They need to be able to pray five times a day, in comfort and quiet, with a prayer mat. Beforehand, they need to be able to wash and to ensure their clothes are clean. They need to know the direction of Mecca, so that they can face that way, and they need a timetable so that they can find out at which times they should pray.

R T N (Tap) Bali, a leading member of the Hindu community in Hertfordshire and a trustee of the Watford Indian Association, explained that Hinduism requires individuals to do good deeds throughout their lives. Mr. Bali and his daughter regularly visit a local care home not for religious reasons but simply to break the inmates' isolation and provide a friendly listening ear.

Gerry Burke of Age Concern England explained that he is examining ways in which local Age Concern organizations can help meet older people's spiritual needs, whether these involve religion or the fulfilment of some other deep-seated longing, casting the definition of spirituality widely also to embrace what many would consider a string of separate psychological and emotional needs.

Stimulating though the conference was, it unwittingly shed some light on the limitations of churches' handling of their elderly members' needs. Blind delegates had to shout out their protests when the moderator pointed the way to the dining-room and when speakers failed to read out overheads projected on to a screen.

Our churches can show similar lack of awareness of the needs of elderly people. Nearly 40 per cent of people over 75 have significant hearing loss, but amplification is still far from universal at services. The eye of an 80-year-old needs four times as much light as that of a 20-year-old, but church buildings often remain dimly lit and large-print handouts are rarely offered.

Mobility is the most common area of disability in old age, but church premises continue to lack sufficient grab rails, ramps and sound surfaces for walking, both inside and out. Older people need to visit the lavatory more often than the young, while three million Britons, the vast majority elderly, have to cope with continence problems. The absence of lavatories (disabled-friendly or not), or their location in an embarrassing location, can thus present real difficulties. The provision of comfortable seating and an equable temperature (since temperature regulation mechanisms become less efficient as we age) would also help.

Do we in the Christian churches do enough to ensure that older people receive all the help they need to pray and worship when they are removed by circumstances from their normal environment? Could we do more to ensure that the hand of friendship continues to reach all 450,000 of the elderly citizens living in Britain's care homes? Are churches sufficiently welcoming to those who uproot themselves to move in with relatives miles from their former homes?

Even if they live at home, older people may need special attention after events such as bereavement or during periods of chronic as well as acute illness. If they develop mobility difficulties or stop driving, getting to and from church may suddenly become impossible. Are lifts automatically offered? Could we hold more church meetings in the homes of frail, elderly people?

Confronting such practical questions might prepare us to cope with the faith issues facing older people more troubled than those who gave witness at Welwyn. The widespread idea that elderly churchgoers have put spiritual turmoil behind them is entirely misplaced.

When today's 80-year-olds were learning about Christianity in the early decades of the last century, they were expected to accept what they were told. For the past 20 or 30 years, however, they have been living in a very different world, one in which beliefs, ideas - even facts - are all subjected to a constant barrage of questioning. And long-suppressed doubts and questions suddenly come up to the surface. For example, is there a life after death and, if there is, will I see my loved ones there? If somebody's been married twice, who will be their consort in Heaven? Will my new Muslim, Hindu or Sikh neighbours be saved?

The experiences that come with old age can pose more traumatic questions. Suffering protracted pain and indignity, or watching a loved one do so, can shatter life-long faith and leave elderly people facing the agonizing suspicion that the God on whom they have relied is either cruel or non-existent.

After writing up a study of 1,363 older churchgoers from the five main Christian denominations, the Reverend Albert Jewell (then senior chaplain of Methodist Homes for the Aged) told a conference in 2001: "We assume that older people in the Church have a blissful faith and an unwavering hope for the life to come. In fact, many of them wrestle with the dark night of the soul".

Ian Knox, who interviewed hundreds of people for a book entitled *Older People and the Church*, wrote in 2003: "I found it significant that no church leader or member spoke of helping older people to face their own death". He concluded, "Older people would, as my research shows, value a genuine spiritual base and basis. Unless the church provides this for them, and sees this as of paramount importance, it may become an active accessory to its own demise."

An effort to construct such a base and basis might begin with consulting elderly parishioners about forms of worship and other needs. Serious discussion groups permitting rigorous examination of faith issues might prove surprisingly popular.

Currently, the churches employ about 6,000 youth workers. There are very few for old people. It's time that the balance shifted.

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Why is it that we take time and effort to conserve old churches, but pay little attention to the comfort of the old people who use them? Why do church mission statements so often speak of increasing the numbers of children and young people in congregations but not older people? Why does ministerial training provide so little guidance in the basic physical needs, not to speak of the psychological and spiritual needs, of older people? Ministers will not know what it is like to be old in the way that they know what it is like to have been a teenager or the parent of young children. They will have faced the stress of sitting examinations, but not the practical and emotional challenges of losing a life-long partner.

There are of course exceptions. In one church I know the minister's wife runs a monthly meeting for older carers, which she sees as an important part of her pastoral work. Religious buildings (and these can be ancient country churches or rambling Victorian chapels) which have refitted their interiors with comfortable cushioned seating and adequate heating and lighting simply to make their premises more comfortable and welcoming for everybody are often best in terms of physical comfort for older people.

In his book *Older People and the Church*, based on a large number of interviews, Ian Knox commented, "I found it significant that no church leader or member spoke of helping older people to face their own death". In old age, the quest for meaning in life can become more urgent as we are reminded of our own mortality. Today's older citizens face the additional challenge that though in their youth they were expected to accept what they were told, they now live in a world in which beliefs, ideas and even facts are subjected to a constant barrage of questioning. Hilda Ashton, a Methodist in her eighties, asked me: "Everybody these days is talking about dinosaurs, so why don't they figure in the Genesis account of creation?" The Reverend Albert Jewell, then senior chaplain to the MHA Group, told a conference on the Church and Older People in London in 2001, "We assume that older people in the church have a blissful faith and an unwavering hope for the life to come. In fact, many of them wrestle with the dark night of the soul".

Of course the church has a responsibility to the young, but the real reason why churches put so much effort into youth work often seems to be the desire to increase church membership. Though deployed for several decades, this strategy plainly has not worked. It might be far more fruitful to set out to attract older people, for whom impending demise often provides a persuasive reason to look again at a religion rejected in youth. Older people have the time to make the most of mission with like-minded people. They are up for useful tasks like selling second-hand books to help pay for a new church premises kitchen or joining committees, and can benefit from the sense of belonging and community which comes with such activities. Encouraging them to make the most of such opportunities can only strengthen faith groups. If they can provide a better deal for their older members, they might benefit at least as much as the elderly congregationalists they are currently letting down.

Reference:

Ian Knox (2003) *Older People and the Church*, London: T and T Clark