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***by Marion Shoard
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Marion Shoard's book *A Survival Guide to Later Life* (Constable and Robinson, price £9.99) was reviewed in the last issue of *Plus*. Its 640 pages contain sections on the spiritual needs of older people and also on how they can make the most of faith groups. In the following article, Marion Shoard considers the challenge posed to the church by the needs of older people.

As a Methodist, earlier this year I attended a Love Feast, a service of testimony introduced by John Wesley. It was presided over by three well-meaning clergy who opted to group the congregation of perhaps 60, a good number of them grey-haired, not in the nave of the large, lofty Victorian church in question but in the choir stalls and on chairs placed in the chancel. Positioned at the far end of the choir, in front of the altar, none of the clergy used a microphone, as they would have had they been standing in the pulpit. Did they realise that nearly 40 per cent of people aged 75 and over have significant hearing loss? One minister sang an unfamiliar hymn from Wesley's day one line at a time, inviting the congregation to repeat it. Sitting a few feet from the source, I found distinguishing these sung words a major challenge, and soon gave up. I am 55; how much more difficult would the task have proved for somebody much older and fifty feet or more away?

It would have been far better to provide a large-print song sheet or a large-type illuminated overhead. This church is not well-lit, and several of the light bulbs needed replacing; were the clergy aware of the fact that even without the eyesight ailments common in old age, the ageing process means that the eyes of an 80-year-old need four times as much light as those of a 20-year-old?

Changes to the kidneys and bladder which accompany ageing mean that elderly people need to visit the lavatory more frequently, while urinary incontinence affects a fifth of older men and nearly a third of older women. Yet no lavatories were available at this service. Ageing is often accompanied by the loss of subcutaneous fat that provides padding when we sit. This means that the wooden, unyielding choir stalls on which some of this elderly congregation were forced to lower themselves would have been decidedly uncomfortable. Those sitting on chairs were more fortunate, but had nowhere to put their walking sticks, spectacle cases, emergency medication and so on.

Encountering difficulties like these can make older people feel marginalised and even alienated where they should feel welcome.

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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