

A Theological Reflection on Dementia

The Salvation Army's mission statement is to 'Love God and Love Others'. Therefore there will be times when we are called to help and protect those in our care. In this reflection, we will consider scriptural truths that lead us as an organisation to reach out and serve those who are living with dementia, their loved ones and carers. We hope this reflection will help you consider your place in this world and your personal response to caring for those living with dementia.

What does the Bible say about Dementia?

'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.' *2 Corinthians 4:18*

This is a reminder that the human trials of this life and the failings of the body are temporary.

'We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves'

Romans 15:1 (KJV)

You can tell what kind of community you belong to when you carefully look at how they treat their most vulnerable members. We will not overlook those whose lives have been changed through disease.

'My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you ... Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls ... By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me.' *Psalms 42:6-8*

This is an acknowledgment that our spirits may feel battered and weary, but the deep love of God calls to the depths of our inner being and this is a connection that cannot be broken, not by disease, nor by dementia.

One in three people born in the UK this year will develop dementia in their lifetime. There are approximately 944,000 people living with dementia in the UK and a further 55,000 people living with dementia in Ireland.^[1] Globally more than 55 million people live with dementia, with nearly 10 million new cases worldwide every year. Therefore if we are called to 'Love God and Love Others' and take the Great Commission of Jesus Christ out to the nations, what does this mean in relation to serving those who are living with dementia, their loved ones and carers?



'Through prayer and study, so not to violate scriptural integrity, I discovered that the "deep calling unto deep" are the deep things of God calling to the deep things of man; you and I (sic). In essence, this is the Spirit of God reaching deep into the spirit of his children, bypassing all that which would attempt to impede that sweet communion and fellowship God so passionately desires to have with us.'

Don Sturiano

[1] <https://dementiastatistics.org/>

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The Bible is quite specific about the care we show to those struggling with weakness and disability of some form. Romans 15:1 is a reminder that as a community of believers we are called to 'bear with' those living with dementia. Many people living with dementia can feel isolated, marginalised, forgotten and excluded – not just within our communities but in our churches also. There have been stories of those who are too embarrassed to continue going to church because of their diagnosis and who then sadly spend years away from their church family. We must ask ourselves as church why this is and what we can do to change this.



Perhaps a consideration of the frailty and vulnerability of each one of us may be a good starting point. None of us is immune to suffering and health issues. 1 Peter 5:10 says that *'the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.'* This is an assurance, as is 2 Corinthians 4:18 (outlined previously), that there is more to our eternal perspective of life than the 'here and now', which is fantastic news for all believers including those living with dementia. However, what does the Bible say about supporting people through their journey of dementia? And what can we do as a church family to wade through the waves with those who are walking a difficult, treacherous and tiring path?

Matthew 10:29-31 is a visual reminder of our importance to God with no exceptions. *'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.'* Jesus' own words here remind us of the importance of each of God's children and their value to God our Father. Therefore we place Jesus' words alongside the words of Paul in Philippians 2:5 where we are urged to remember that we must *'have the same mindset as Christ Jesus'*, as there is no ambiguity in what we are called to do: to care, respect, honour and love all mankind, no matter the diagnosis, challenges or issues that come about for individuals living with dementia.

The Salvation Army's Safeguarding Policy outlines that *'convinced of the truth that every human being is uniquely created in the image of God and belongs to him, The Salvation Army is committed to the spiritual, mental and social welfare of each individual'* without exception.

Our biblical mandate is to see beyond the dementia. We can be assured and comforted that Christian faith is not undermined or destroyed by a loss of mental cognition. God is mindful of us, not the other way around, as the psalmist exclaims with gratitude and wonder in Psalm 8. Since our memory of God is so much more than a matter of chemistry, the realities of neuroscience will never threaten our faith. Romans 8:26-27 also reminds us of this reality as *'the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans'*. Dementia can never separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:37-39).

We are called to work for the wellbeing of those in our care and understand more about what they may be experiencing. To find out how you can access resources and information sessions around dementia and our ministry to those living with dementia, please contact olderpeoplesministries@salvationarmy.org.uk