

Practical and Pastoral Responses to Ageing

It may feel a little strange to think about ageing in our response to others in pastoral care. However, ageing brings about transitions in the later stages of our lives, and understanding the practicalities of this will aid our pastoral and practical response to others.

Transitions of Ageing

Firstly let us consider the different stages and transitions of ageing:

- Retirement is a transition of ageing and you can find more information around this under 'A Closer look at Retirement'. Acknowledging that retirement is a transition that people have to live through is a good start in supporting others and acknowledging the changing seasons that come with age. Follow the link below for help and support around retirement.

www.salvationist.org.uk/resources/discipleship/closer-look-retirement



- Another transition in ageing may be frailty. It can be a very difficult time for many people as they come to the realisation that their body (and sometimes their mind) no longer works the way it once did. Difficulties with even the most regular, everyday tasks can become harder, with the body becoming more tired and people becoming more at risk of trips and falls. Our pastoral response to this stage for our older people needs to be dealt with sensitively. It takes a bold person to acknowledge that the transition into frailty is difficult – both for the person experiencing this stage of life and the family/friends who are caring and playing a supportive role in that person's life.

In '*Finding meaning in the lived experience of frailty*', a study carried out in 2020, researchers spoke about hope in the midst of adversity stating: 'Hope springs from the heart. It is not something that is necessarily found just when everything is going well; in fact, hope may be absent in the midst of abundance of material benefits. In the face of frailty, hope may be found through a multitude of factors. Hope is the outcome of finding meaning in the face of the hard times, in the midst of loss and of disability.'

Taking time to consider that frailty can bring grief and loss for many people means that we may be the conduits of hope. Our pastoral and practical response to someone experiencing frailty may be simply about making a way for that person still to be able to join in activities, to the best of their ability – therefore bringing hope. Organising transport for someone unable to use public transport, supporting them to a doctor / hospital appointment and regular visits in their home to assure them they are not forgotten are just a few ways of being a conduit of hope to someone experiencing 'profound loss'.

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- The last transition is facing the end of life. For some this can be more difficult than for others depending on personal circumstances. Please look at the documents found under 'A Closer Look at Death and Dying' using the link below:

www.salvationist.org.uk/resources/discipleship/closer-look-death-and-dying

Talking about death with people, not just at the later stages of their lives but all the way through, is imperative. The 'Journeying Home' resource can be very helpful in helping you navigate through pastoral conversations around preparing for death. The resource is sensitive and creative. If you would like support with running a Journeying Home session at your corps/church please email: olderpeoplesministries@salvationarmy.org.uk.

Remember, acknowledging and understanding the different transitions of ageing is vital to how you pastorally care for your people.

Intersectionality brought about by Ageing

Although the concept of intersectionality has affected most people since time began, the term was coined by Kimberley Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality argues that people experience multiple oppression because of different aspects of their lives and 'the whole is greater than the sum of their parts' (Kimberley Crenshaw).

Issues such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability and gender do not live in isolation from each other but are interwoven. Intersectionality experienced in older age does not discriminate; however, due to issues like living longer and wage inequality, older women are more likely to experience poverty. If one adds a diagnosis of physical or mental illness, the type of disadvantage experienced is compounded.

We recognise that both older men and woman can become carers, but Carers UK statistics show that women were more likely to provide unpaid care than men in every age group, up to 75 to 79 years old. However, from the age of 80 years onwards, men were statistically significantly more likely to provide unpaid care. Therefore, an example of intersectionality in older age may be a man of 80+ years, living on state pension (lower income), caring for his disabled partner, with a diagnosis of cancer. This then starts to build a picture for us of how some of our congregations will be coping with life behind closed doors.



So how does this impact our ministry with older people on the ground? Well, firstly, it allows us to be aware of intersectionality in the terms of what older people may be facing. So we don't just see one issue, for example age with health-related issues. We look deeper. Does that older person have a family to care for them or are they isolated with no care? Where do they live? Are they in a rural setting, away from shops for example, or are they living in accommodation which is no longer suitable for them (eg a flat with no lift facilities)?

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Understanding the potential issues for those who are ageing is the first step to good pastoral care. But what can we do practically to alleviate the stress and strain that so many older people face? As mentioned in the Theological Reflection on Ageing, relationships are so important to ageing well: ensuring that people know we have services and support for them that they may be unaware of; advising them of other services and providers of support in the local community, whether that be via the NHS, community-based services, dementia-friendly groups, carers groups, etc.

Explore Age UK's mental health page, which lists useful information about talking therapy options: www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/mind-body/mental-wellbeing/talking-helps

Perhaps consider making your regular coffee morning into a 'Chatty Café', where those who are experiencing times of loneliness and isolation can find a table with someone to talk to. To find out more visit the organisation's Chatty Café scheme: www.thechattycafescheme.co.uk

A change in our pastoral and practical response to others' ageing can often come from a change in the way we personally think about and view life. Be brave and learn about your own personal perspective on ageing. To grow older is a gift, but it can have its challenges – seeing and accepting this can make a massive difference not only to yourself but to those around you too. Remember, an older person was once a young person and they are still that same person. They just might need some reassurance, understanding and hope – and you might just be the person to bring it.