

Growing Old Grace-fully Gathering: Loving our Older Neighbour - Christian Community Responses to 21st Century Demographics.

The Conference opened with an Introduction by **Mgr John Wilson, Administrator of the Diocese of Leeds.**

He was welcomed by Paul Grafton, Chair of the Growing Old Grace-fully (GOG) Steering Group.

Mgr Wilson studied at Leeds and Durham Universities and taught at the Seminary at Ushaw. He came to the Leeds Diocese in 2005 and was appointed Administrator when Bishop Roche went to Rome in 2012.

1)

Mgr Wilson gave us a handout which contained

- An Address from Pope Benedict given at St Peter's Residence for Older People in London during his visit to the UK in 2010.
- Rublev's Icon of *The Hospitality of Abraham* often referred to as Rublev's Trinity.
- A Prayer: *Praying for our Older Friends.*

Mgr Wilson thanked the organisations and supporters who were present at the GOG Gathering. He remarked that we all have a vested interest in ageing as we are all growing older. He affirmed the work of GOG.

- He drew our attention to Pope Benedict's words on the Handout. He also mentioned Pope Benedict's 2005 Encyclical: "Deus Caritas Est." and said "Love can be commanded because first it has been given." He suggested this could be a State of the Nation address for the GOG Gathering.
- Mgr. Wilson then said that loving an older neighbour is about hospitality. Rublev's Icon, on the Handout, is about the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah (both older people) to three Visitors. He spoke of the Genesis 18 story and the promise made by the Visitors that the couple would have a son. Their son would become an ancestor of the Son of God. He suggested we turn to the Scriptures for affirmations of older age. He said he was very attached to the Icon and interpreted some of it briefly: the tree represents the cross; the three Visitors the Trinity; the round table is like an altar with a space for relics and a space is at the front for you and me. This is our destiny, and not just for the future but also a celebration for today.
- Mgr Wilson concluded with the Prayer on the Handout.

2)

Talk by Prof. Graham Mulley, Emeritus Professor of Elderly Care, University of Leeds:

"An Overview of Issues Affecting Older People."

Prof. Mulley challenged the myth that 'it is just your age' and recommended that for successful ageing, we should

- Eat less and walk more

- Take moderate exercise which is better for us than vigorous exercise
- And never start stopping, and never stop starting.

He introduced us to a range of artistic representations of old age, many negative but some which represent older people, such as Nelson Mandela, in a very positive way.

In some societies such as Okinawa, Japan and Ikaria, Greece, people live longer and healthier lives than here. In Okinawa, people remain relatively free of heart disease and cancers, stay active into advanced old age, enjoying mutual support and a spiritual life. Their diet contains little red meat, dairy or processed foods, instead using fish, vegetables and soya. The diet in Ikaria is also based on vegetables, fruit, fish and olive oil and contains little meat, dairy, alcohol or coffee. The life style includes daily physical activity, social activities and membership of religious groups.

Current concerns about ageing focus on immobility, instability, incontinence, intellectual impairment, and problems caused by medication taken for other conditions. Prof Mulley advised that older people should have an annual blood pressure check, a flu jab, shingles vaccination, a check on pulse rate to avoid atrial fibrillation, should protect their bones, get hearing, vision and stool tests and be aware of the dangers of alcohol and smoking. He told us that exercise brings benefits to our cognition, blood pressure, bones, weight, sleep, well-being and provides social contact. We need 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on 6 days of the week, such as walking, swimming, cycling, gardening and some resistance work will help to maintain muscle strength.

In our society, if we want to promote successful ageing we need to pay attention to isolation among older people, including those who are housebound or living in care homes; to making our environment more age-friendly through having toilets, seating and transport in public spaces; and houses which are appropriate throughout our lives. People need their dignity to be respected and their worth recognised.

There is a positive dividend to people living longer: 10% of people aged over 65 years are in paid work. Many volunteer, are informal carers who save the state a huge amount, care for grandchildren, and contribute wisdom, experience, skills and knowledge to society. Many artists, musicians, scientists, writers and politicians continued to create and contribute into old age and provide us with positive models of ageing.

3)

Talk by Tracey Robbins, Programme Manager, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: “Neighbourhood Approaches to Loneliness.” The free Loneliness Resource pack can be downloaded from <http://www.jrf.org/publications/loneliness-resource-pack>

Tracey told us about the three year action-research project which JRF had run with local people in four neighbourhoods in Bradford and York.

They described loneliness as

- ‘A mismatch of the relationships we have and those we want’
- ‘an internal trigger telling us to seek company as thirst tells us to drink and hunger tells us to eat and tiredness tells us to sleep.’
- ‘Loneliness describes the pain of being alone as solitude describes the joy of being alone.’
- ‘Isolation is often where there is no choice but to be alone.’
- Some people seek solitude but few choose to be lonely primarily because it isn’t good for us.

Loneliness has an effect on mortality – twice as likely to die prematurely – and is associated with poor mental health, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and dementia. The risk factor of loneliness is similar to smoking and worse than obesity.

The ‘Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness’ worked with people in their neighbourhood to explore what contributes to feelings of problematic loneliness, explored factors such as location, health and wellbeing, safety, independence and life transitions, developed and put into practice local ideas and activities to reduce the effects of loneliness, and made every contact and conversation count.

The project recruited 32 community researchers from the neighbourhoods; they talked to more than 2000 people and gathered 7667 individual comments to identify the issues affecting people in their neighbourhoods and people’s ideas to reduce loneliness. These ideas for action were reduced to five priorities for each neighbourhood which are now being implemented by the community researchers/activists in partnership with other local people and stakeholders. The actions include pop-up cafes and Big Lunches, supporting families with after-school fun and holiday activities, targeted support for single parents, intergenerational projects such as local history and cooking, welcome packs to the area, making the most of community facilities and making them more user-friendly, better local information and signposting, peer support around bereavement, isolation, carers, young people, depression, community growing spaces, phone service for people who can’t get out, community champions who are aware of what’s on and can refer people through word of mouth.

The key messages from the work are

- Loneliness kills people and communities
- Regulation kills kindness and reduces action
- Lonely people are vulnerable, this is a safeguarding issue
- Building personal and community confidence builds resilience
- And we can all do something.

4)

Talks from local organisations who are working with older people, and their plans for future work.

Carol Hill, Director, Catholic Care, Leeds.

Catholic Care (CC) was founded 150 years ago and cared for children. In the 1980s it expanded its services to look after all vulnerable members of society and this included older people. Its mission is Christian love, charity and justice and takes the caring Church into the community caring for vulnerable people regardless of their faith. It connects with the Catholic Social Action Network.

Catholic Care has three groups of Older People's Services:

1 Community Groups

For the last 19 years it has worked in the Huddersfield Deanery specifically with the concerns of older people including loneliness and isolation. It supports friendships, new skills and is welcoming. Happy Wednesdays has 25 members and includes aerobics. Thursday Friends has about 20 members, holds a lunch club: activities include gentle exercise, raffle and bingo. Friday Friends has lunch and a book stall. There is a Credit Union point, walking, craft and prayer groups and outings. There are volunteering opportunities and for some older people who volunteer it can help to boost their confidence. For unemployed young people who become volunteers there are training opportunities which can help towards working life.

Carol spoke of an Intergenerational Group which benefits all. Older people are learning IT skills. CC is researching provision of community groups around the Leeds Diocese. There are 3 in Wakefield with a 4th planned. CC supports an existing group in Bradford. It is moving to the Harrogate Deanery with 4 new groups. It believes in local services with the aims of social inclusion, independence and healthy living.

2 Outreach in the home.

CC makes a positive contribution to wellbeing in older people's homes. It offers personal care, practical support and a sitting service.

Carol spoke of a retired person who asks to receive a phone call at the same time every day as he wishes 'someone to care about him, not for him.'

3. Accommodation based services.

There has been a shift in the care sector to the apartment style setting. CC has applied for extra care housing in central Harrogate. CC offers spiritual care and a buy/rent// via benefits schemes for residents. It offers a basic support package, and as needs change, gives a flexible increase/ decrease of services in the short term. CC has cards offering positive images of 1 and 2.

Sister Marie Antoinette from the Little Sisters of the Poor, Headingley

The Little Sisters of the Poor Congregation was founded by Jeanne Jugan in 1839 after she cared for a dying lady. The Order arrived in Belle Vue Road, Leeds in 1869.

- The Order has a Mission and a Vision. Over the years the Mission has partly changed, but the Vision of showing compassion, mercy and the love of God does not alter. Style and people's needs change. Their Home has reduced in size from 300 to 70.
- Old age is not an illness, it is a stage of life. Most people stay in their own homes. The Little Sisters try to provide "a home from home".
- Laws and regulations have changed and qualifications are needed so the Sisters share their Mission with qualified staff. The Sisters are free to "go closer to the heart." They recognise the importance of dignity, respect and privacy, and the older person's need to feel useful.
- 'We never stop learning from older people.'
- Reminiscence work done is helpful, a way of seeing the whole person, the past of that person and a chance to deal with past issues.
- The older person is 'accompanied to their last day.'
- They are given lots of affirmation.
- Communication is important: verbal and non-verbal.
- A Pre-Admission Assessment is made of a person's needs, likes and dislikes and the family may contribute to this.
- Counselling is available.
- There are Affiliate Members of the Little Sisters: The Association of Jeanne Jugan.
- Lay people give voluntary service. The programme is for young and old and healing goes both ways.
- There are lots of positive images: activities, Shows. (The Home is preparing a Show for a 100th birthday celebration.)
- Time and listening are important. Sister gave an example of someone who had stopped speaking in hospital but began talking once s/he came to the Home.

Albert Maher, President, Leeds Diocese St Vincent de Paul Society

Albert told us the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) was founded by Frederic Ozanam. The first UK Conference (each area SVP group is called a Conference) was founded in London in 1844.

- There are now c. 10,000 members in England and Wales, across all dioceses.
- In the Leeds Diocese there are 116 churches, 86 parishes. There are 550 SVP members and 55 Conferences.
- In 2012-13 26,000 home visits were made. The majority of these were to older people in their own homes. SVP always visit in pairs.
- All SVP members have a DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service Check) which is replacing CRB :(Criminal Record Bureau Checks.)
- Transport is offered to hundreds of people to church, shops, hospitals, hospices and care homes.

- SVP addresses isolation for older people.
- Many SVP Conferences offer Christmas Parties with Mass, Masses for the Sick followed by a tea.
- In some parishes there are weekly/monthly lunches, prayer groups, social events and trips and the SVP may be involved.
- St Vincent Support Centre on York Road offers debt counselling. Half a million pounds of debt has been written off. The Service also helps people to manage their resources. It offers counselling, and Teaching English as a Second Language and computer skills.
- St Vincent's also has a catering social enterprise. **(It provided the lunch for the GOG Gathering which was commented on very favourably by many attenders. They are interested in taking catering orders, so please consider them when you want to cater for a gathering.)**
- 550 food parcels and other essentials have been distributed.
- St Jude's Furniture Store "turns a house into a home."
- SVP work is done by volunteers.

John O'Dwyer, Team Leader Outreach Services, Leeds Irish Health and Homes.

Irish Health and Homes started with a Steering Committee in 1992. This arose as it was known that in Leeds there were

- Single homeless Irish people, particularly older men.
- Admissions under the Mental Health Act.
- Lack of appropriate cultural services
- People were living in rooms.
- There were a lot of health inequalities and problems.

Two Support Teams were set up: Housing Support
Outreach Support.

These are part of the Mental Health Consortium.

Outreach Support:

- The Services make home visits, address housing issues, isolation, mental health and alcohol issues.
- There are 2 Luncheon Groups in Harehills, at the Montague Burton Centre. These also encourage exercise, trips and celebrate holidays like St Patrick's Day.
- South Leeds Group in Beeston. This encourages chat, looking at problems and listening to music.
- There is a weekly Men's Group in Harehills. The men play cards and listen to music. Health Promotion is part of the programme.
- The men have an allotment in Oakwood. John compared it with the Men's Shed Network in Ireland. It is known that with creativity and a sense of purpose, groups can help to counter high rates of depression and suicide.
- There is an Irish Services Memory Group at the Irish Centre.
- Holidays, outings and other social events are part of the Service.

We heard that:

1.6 million pensioners are in poverty in the UK.

1 in 10 often or always feel lonely.

Outreach to Elders is important to try and counter these factors.

5) Professor John Wattis summarised the day. He is Visiting Professor of Old Age Psychiatry at the University of Huddersfield and has a special interest in old age and spirituality. He has been a Medical Director of an NHS Trust, part time support in medical management to people in Trusts and a Life and Business Coach. He was brought up a Catholic and is now a Quaker.

He read the poem *When I am an old woman I shall wear purple* by Jenny Joseph. His wife had sent it to him on his phone this morning as he was travelling to Leeds.

Mgr. John Wilson. Professor Wattis said he reminded us of the wisdom of older people. Also, that our reaching out to older people is not so much an act of generosity but a repayment of a debt of gratitude.

Professor Graham Mulley Professors Wattis and Mulley are friends and colleagues. He commented favourably on his artistic review. Prof. Mulley also gave us useful advice about diet and health and the importance of community and connectedness.

Tracey Robbins Prof. Wattis remarked on Tracey's exciting talk about loneliness. She had reminded us about not doing things to powerless people but doing things their way. Also that regulation and fear can strangle initiatives and Prof. Wattis does not know if generally we have the balance right there.

Prof. Wattis commented on the four specific projects in the afternoon. He spoke of **Catholic Care**'s history and involvement in running services for older people. He thought accommodation based care is an exciting model. He lives in the Ackworth area where there are 2 sheltered housing complexes. The Council are running their complex down. He regrets that, commenting that a complex is more economical than 'a dotted around service.'

Little Sisters of the Poor. He remarked that though their Mission has partly changed, their Vision has not. Reciprocity between people is important as is the need to treat people as individuals.

SVP. Prof. Wattis told us his father was in the SVP and a Eucharistic Minister so was familiar with their work. He spoke of younger people connecting with the SVP. In his mother's community the Catholic Church has closed and the big impact this has had for her and the community.

Irish Health and Homes Prof Wattis spoke of the special needs of first generation immigrants. He commented on the figure of 40% of Irish born people being over 65 when the UK average is 15%.

Key words of the Day

- The importance and centrality of Christian compassion
- The importance of community
- The importance of connectedness
- People grow from being connected.

Churches Together helps local connectedness. He suggests that whatever we take forward, we take to our parishes and ecumenically to our local Churches Together. Jesus Christ prayed, we would be one. In work like this we can be one. ‘People would know we were disciples by our love for each other.’

Themes (collected from older people at GOG events)

- Health education, disability, dementia.
- Isolation, loneliness.
- Benefits, funding.
- Lack of care for older people and celebration of their value.
- Religions: the support of religious practice and special needs for people in their religious practice.
- Contact at home and contact at church.
- The individual’s response to ageing.
- Adapting and learning as we get older.
- How do ageing/spirituality/wisdom interact?
- End of life issues: “why have we been?”

6) ACTIONS – suggested by participants

Individual actions for our neighbours

Listen attentively and be more prepared to give of our own time. Engage with people where they are.

Listening. Observing. Looking for hidden messages – body language.

Look out for neighbours e.g. signs that something is not quite right e.g lights left on or newspapers.

Make a meal for a neighbor.

Make time to visit and talk to people on my street or call on phone.

Arrange to phone a person daily/weekly

Say hello to people I meet with a smile on my face

Look out for your neighbours and share knowledge about services

Be aware of friends and neighbours around and act when needed

How to be a good listener

How to be a good visitor

No clock watching

Welcome the stranger

Smile

Be friendly

Find out what is available in the area

Ask older people what they would like.

Invite elders to functions, parties etc

Car drivers could offer more lifts
Help to pay bills by offering to set up direct debits
Technology can diminish and help create loneliness ie. Lack person to person communication, therefore attempt to speak to people rather than solely relying on text, email etc
Communicate with other 'similar' volunteers to ensure you are up to speed with someone you visit.

Individual actions for ourselves

Look after yourself – physical and mental health. It's not your age!
Keep yourself well so that 1) Not a burden to others; 2) Able to help others – volunteer

Top tips from Prof Mulley:

- Positive attitude towards suffering (pain/physical)
- Do not focus too much on age numbers
- Do not be upset by failure – move on
- Keep active. Accept invitations to avoid isolation. Smile.
- Recall past events

Other questions and comments

How do we acknowledge and deal with the concern some young people feel at budget decisions etc benefitting older people when there seems little investment in their future? Can we dialogue about the real choices we need to make about our social spending and social capital?

How do we offer support to carers (of all ages) who are faced with very difficult situations?

We have to try to give hope to people for the future.

Actions by parishes

SVP and other practical help

Encourage others to join eg. SVP, volunteers, skills store etc

SVP excellent for keeping tabs; inform them of people who may fall through the net.

Suggest a nominated parishioner who people can give names to of people they feel would benefit from contact eg. SVP

Looking out for elderly people missing at Mass

Assist with transport to enable people to attend parish functions/spirituality events

Offer lifts to functions – rather than waiting to be asked

Offer a lift to church

Invite elderly priests to home

SVP in parish- organise rota to take people to church. Speak at Mass about it.

Day trips

As an SVP group, maintain enthusiasm/being prepared to listen/giving them your full attention

If unable to visit, contact by phone
Encourage younger members to join the society to give their talents
Announcements on the bulletin about how to contact people if they need help
– lifts etc

Activities for older people/using church facilities

Use the church halls for coffee mornings to fund projects for helping the elderly
Churches with church hall could have coffee mornings to encourage community to work together
No charge for use of parish hall for elderly events
More trips out
Older people's social, lunch and healing at church
IT training – silver surfers group. Young people to help train
Organise a social event for the elderly
Prayer groups – transport older people to venue
Gentle exercise sessions
Bingo/raffle afternoons
Luncheon – monthly during summer
Tai chi classes
Singing sessions – music amazing
Organise trips to theatre or cinema – see what's coming up and advertise it to older people
Transport – rota to take people
Coffee/tea after weekday Masses offer social interaction
Table-top sales for elderly to get rid rather than hoard
Offer halls free
Special Mass for older people with confessions
Interesting speakers with topics relevant to elderly
Organise gentle exercise in hall (Ballantine's Health Club)
Organise coffee mornings after Mass and afternoons for social events eg. scrabble, bingo for the elderly

Parish ethos and building community

Make ourselves known
Introduce ourselves
Befriend
Engage
Bridge the gaps
Greeting, offering a kind word
Creating a culture of 'warmth' in the parish
Offering lifts to services
Visiting / befriending
Visit a parishioner
Try to develop more intergenerational events – social and spiritual
Capitalise on the confirmation candidates being involved
Family gathering groups eg. family BBQ
Parish seminars – awareness and info and social
Coffee club / Coffee mornings after church

Arrange parish fish and chip suppers and cinema visits to facilitate social meeting

'Letting go' – intergenerational involvement of the older and younger person
Encourage others to pick up the reins

Parishes should support and be aware of what is going on in groups around them

Finding out what exists in our parish and tell others about it
More publicity about what is going on/events/social groups

Devise a creative and sensitive way of assessing individual and collective needs, especially at a time of loss, communicate the needs widely, act on the findings

Other comments

Some parishes are further on the road of meeting the needs of the elderly
Old age does not equate with bad temper

Church Actions

Leadership in our parishes

A recognition of the spiritual needs of the older person

Diocese and parish – improved awareness of what is available

Improved communication in the diocese

Make others aware eg. via the website, bulletins, notices. Diocesan diary

Models of excellence – publicise via internet and Catholic Voice (??)

Produce a booklet of what is going on/available in the community/diocese eg. website addresses, telephone numbers

Bereavement group co-ordinated from the diocese eg. Cruse

Public Sector Actions

Keeping the Access bus (in Leeds) – its potential

Lobbying for public transport systems to continue especially in remote areas

Campaign for retention of the bus pass

Campaign to keep the neighbourhood network schemes in existence eg. Maecare

Commercial Sector Actions

More sitting places in shops and supermarkets

Food bags of healthy food with recipes for 1-2 people to make at home

Supermarkets to sell off food nearing end of shelf life to poor, elderly, parishes, organisations at a certain time of day.

Charity/Voluntary Sector Action

Funding / sponsorship

Publicise their work more widely
Why not an overarching forum for all the groups meeting here today?
Churches Together Groups could unite like-minded people in action
How about a 'Bright Ideas' publication?
Affirmation! Affirmation! Affirmation!
Volunteer

PB and CM April 2014

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