



Equality Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit

Module 2

Age

REMINDER

Theological reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

A *Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* document is provided separately. All participants should have a copy of this when they attend their first session. It does not need to be considered in detail every time, but participants should be introduced to it at least once, and made aware that this is the starting point for all our work on EDI issues in the Methodist Church.

Module 2

Age

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Opening worship

One more step along the world I go
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Jeremiah 1:4-8
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Prayer

God of love, help us today
to watch for you carefully,
work for you simply,
and rest in you gratefully,
through Jesus Christ,

Amen.

(Christina Le Moignan)

EXPLORE

1 Introduction

The aim of this module is to consider how ageism and assumptions about age affect people in everyday life and in the life of the Church. There is also opportunity to consider the gifts and insights that people have at various stages of life. The approach is through people's stories and thinking about our own experiences of ageism and those points in church life where we need to be particularly aware of ageism and the impact it has.

2 The journey to date

Thinking back to the mid-twentieth century, life expectancy was considerably shorter than today. Children were expected to 'be seen and not heard', the term teenager was not widely used and (as a result of extended families living closer together) both Church and society were generally more intergenerational.

Many positive changes have taken place, including legal protection against age discrimination in the workplace (Equality Act 2006) and in the provision of goods and services (Equality Act 2010). However, for reasons of safety and protection, the law still has minimum age limits on tobacco, alcohol, gambling etc. Employers may still set a company retirement age, but the state retirement age is gradually rising. This reflects both the increase in life expectancy and the degree to which older people are more physically active than previous generations.

However, in church life, we have seen a decline in the numbers of younger people (especially young families) regularly attending churches. We often speak of the 'missing generations', including people in middle age. Modern life, technology and working patterns impact very significantly on families (and the generations within a family) and Church, which presents both opportunities and challenges.

Today, the Methodist Church is committed to the full participation of all age groups and the use of people's skills and talents. The reality, however, does not always match the ambition. This is often because of age-related assumptions by individuals, and/or the traditional ways of doing things not respecting and meeting the needs of different generations.

3Generate is part of the Methodist Church's commitment to the involvement of children and young people in church life. It includes an annual weekend planned and shaped by children and young people – and their workers – for children and young people. It offers a chance for them to meet up with friends and make new ones – from other Methodist churches all over the country. It offers conversation, debate, indoor and outdoor activities, games, music, sport, crafts and challenges. Children and young people are encouraged to take the opportunity to talk about the issues that matter to them, the world and the Church – and to listen to each other and to God.

3 Introductory activity – Guess who?

In this activity (on pages 28-29) we give you the names and ages of eight people. Below them are 14 statements, each of which applies to at least one person. Working on your own, or with a facilitator or in a group, try to match the statements to the person. The answers are on the following page – but no peeking.

Think about your *reasons* for matching the statements to the person.

Then look at the answer page, which gives you a paragraph of further information on each person.

Does this new information challenge or confirm what you thought?

Consider:

- What surprised you?
- How do you think people's assumptions about age might have affected those eight people?
- Has anyone made assumptions about you because of your age? How did that feel?

Learning point

This exercise is to help you explore the assumptions that are made about people based on their age. Some of the personal profiles may come as a surprise. As a Church (like society) we sometimes underuse people's talents because of what we assume people can or can't do.

APPLY and REFLECT

1 Case studies

This section contains case studies for your consideration.

In small groups, consider at least two of the following stories, but as many as time will allow.

Each of these is a true story, although names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity.

At the end of each story, there are questions for you to consider. It may be helpful to refer back to the SCIP classification in the Introductory Module. Here is a headline reminder of the SCIP classification:

- **Structural** – eg legal and political structures, policies, committees
- **Cultural** – the cultural norms of a group or society, commonly-held views
- **Institutional** – practices, how things are done
- **Personal** – personal behaviours and practices.

Consider the questions that follow each story. As you do so, reflect on what the key words, emotions and issues are for the people in those stories.

Francesca's story

Francesca has recently moved to a new area, having started her first job after leaving university. The church she has joined does not have many young members, although the leadership of the church are keen to change this. As soon as Francesca was accepted into the church community, members and stewards started coming up to her and asking if she was interested in working with the children and young people in the church. Francesca has been politely refusing, as she doesn't believe that to be where her talents lie. Despite mentioning to the minister and members of the church that she has a passion for outreach and that she would be very happy to be involved in this area of the church's ministry, people continue only to consider her for children and youth work.

Recently Francesca has started to hear comments about how young people are selfish and won't give their time to the church. This has left Francesca frustrated and hurt, and she is considering moving to another church.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions have been made about Francesca?
- Why do you think people have those assumptions?
- Have you noticed or experienced people making similar assumptions?

Learning

- What could be the consequences of Francesca's experience – both for her and the local church?
- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?

Action

- What could the people in this story have done differently?
- Now thinking about the situations you have experienced or noticed personally, what would you do differently?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church?
- Who can help them?
- What would you do?

Jim's story

Jim works full-time and has two children. Having recently gone through a divorce, he is greatly thankful to his church and its members, and feels that he wants to give something back and help the church. The church recently established a mission committee to try to help it be more of a presence in the community and attract a broader demographic of people. Jim saw this as the perfect opportunity and was gratefully accepted into the group. When Jim received the notice of the first meeting, he saw that it was scheduled for during the working day and he would be unable to attend.

When he pointed this out to the chair of the group, he was told that almost everyone who volunteers to be on committees is retired and that they do not like to be out in the evenings. Jim then raised the problem with the minister. Although she was sympathetic, she told him that church meetings had always been held during the day and they couldn't afford to lose the support of the older members. Jim was forced to withdraw from the committee and now gives his time volunteering with a local charity.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions have been made in this story, and about whom?
- Has anything similar happened in your experience?

Learning

- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?
- How could a situation like this, or others that you can think of, impact people like Jim?
- How would it impact on the mission of the church? eg what has the church lost by not having Jim involved?

Action

- What could have been done differently?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church?
- Who can help them?
- What would you do?

Sarah's story

Sarah is a young lawyer, recently qualified and working for a large law firm. She has attended the church of which she is a member since childhood, and many members of the church have known her since she was very young. Despite a very busy working life, Sarah has volunteered her services to the church and sits on two church committees. Although she has tried to be patient and understanding, Sarah has grown increasingly frustrated by the attitudes of those around her in the church. She is frequently ignored during committee meetings. There is an attitude that the older you are the more you know about the church. She has even been ignored on matters relating to property law, her professional expertise.

The attitudes towards her are particularly difficult from those who have known her the longest. She often feels patronised and that those members especially are still treating her as a child.

Although she didn't initially want to mention it, worrying that people would point to it as evidence of childish behaviour, Sarah has recently spoken to the minister. At Sarah's request he has agreed not to confront people directly. However, he will ensure that during meetings at which he is present, Sarah will have the opportunity to speak and contribute. They have agreed that the best way to address the situation is to give Sarah the opportunity to demonstrate her abilities.

Questions

Experience

- Why do you think Sarah is being treated the way she is?
- Have you ever had a similar experience to Sarah's?

Learning

- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?
- Who has the power (authority and/or skills) to change the situation?

Action

- What should happen next in this story?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church?
- Who can help them?
- What would you do?

Doreen's story

Doreen has been looking for a church where she feels she belongs – this has involved moving to other churches on more than one occasion. She has felt that many of the churches she has attended, of different denominations, have had nothing aimed at her, a single person in her 30s. The last church Doreen attended was attempting to modernise and had recently introduced a projector for prayers and hymn words. Doreen enjoyed and felt fulfilled by her first service there and looked forward to attending again. When sitting in the congregation before the next service, a steward who Doreen hadn't met came up to her. He explained that there was a problem with the audio-visual (AV) equipment and that as a 'young person' Doreen would be able to help them.

Without being asked her name or whether she had any experience with AV equipment, she was dragged to the projector and left to fix it. Despite little expertise with technology, and unhelpful and disparaging comments from members of the congregation while she was having difficulty, she eventually got the projector to work. Rather than being thanked, she was informed that she would be expected to run the AV from that point onwards. Frustrated, Doreen felt that she could no longer attend the church.

Doreen has now started attending a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP), where she feels people have not prejudged her, but are really getting to know her.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions have been made about Doreen, and why?
- Has anything similar happened in your experience?

Learning

- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?
- Whilst Doreen has moved on to the LEP, what are the consequences for the church she left?

Action

- What should happen next in this story?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church?
- Who can help them?
- What would you do?

Desmond's story

Desmond has noticed that a residential care home for older people has opened near to his church. He feels that the church has a pastoral care responsibility to the residents, and that this presents a good opportunity for mission to the older generation.

Desmond mentioned this at church and suggested that some time and effort be expended in building relationships with the residents of the care home. He was told that "the church does enough for the elderly already", and that it was focused on young people and the 'missing generation'. When pressed, one church leader argued that young people are "more important, because there are jobs in the church which need doing". These kinds of comments have led Desmond to question the motivation for evangelism and mission in the church, as well as its attitude to those unable to come to the church building.

Questions

Experience

- From your experience, how do people feel about being defined by their age?

Learning

- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?
- How could a situation like this, or others that you can think of, impact on the mission of the Church? Is Desmond right about questioning this church's motivation for mission?

Action

- What could have been done differently?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church?
- Who can help them?
- What would you do?

2 Summary and learning points

- Age discrimination affects people at all stages of life.
- People are often pigeonholed (stereotyped) by age.
- People's gifts, talents, interests and energy are NOT dictated by their age.
- The culture and practices of churches (eg what they focus on and customary practices) can make the church unwelcoming to people.
- By getting to know people and finding out what their gifts, talents and interests are, churches can make people feel more welcome and useful.
- Using the talents that people actually have – not what we assume they have – is good for the life and mission of the Church.
- Ageism is not inevitable. It is possible to change attitudes, culture and practice to make all ages feel welcome.

Thinking about your answers to the questions and issues raised in the case studies, you should now reflect on:

- **What you have learnt**
- **What the stories might mean in your church**
- **What you will do.**

EXTEND

For further study or personal reflection. Keep for use with other modules.

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 - Charter 95
 - 3Generate
 - For reflection and further consideration
2. Third age discipleship

1 Resources to research and reflect

1.1 The Theological Underpinning for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

This resource is for all of the modules.

Theological Underpinning and Theological Resources for Reflection is provided as a separate document. All participants should receive a copy of this when they attend their first session. It does not need to be considered in detail every time, but participants should be introduced to it at least once, and made aware that it has been approved by both the EDI Committee and the Faith and Order Committee.

From the Theological Underpinning of EDI:

Human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and are loved by God. Each one of us is unique and valued by God, and thus the intrinsic worth of every human being is to be upheld. Such worth is afforded through the act of being created and is not related to the behaviour of human beings, nor to their stage in life from birth to death (Paragraph 4).

1.2 Charter 95

In 1995 MAYC (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs) produced Charter 95 (*Conference Agenda 1995*, pp.428-431). It represented 'the commitment and hope of thousands of young people offering themselves for the hope of the Gospel' (*Conference Agenda 1995*, p. 424). It was a vision document which included ways that young people could be more involved in the work and witness of the Methodist Church.

1.3 3Generate

Current resources on priorities for younger adults and children in the Methodist Church can be found on the 3Generate pages of the Methodist Church website: www.methodist.org.uk/mission/3generate.

1.4 For reflection and further consideration

Along with others in your church/circuit consider:

- What could your church and circuit do to find out what the vision and hope of different age groups are, in your context?
- How does each age group see the mission of the local church to other people in their own age group?
- How could these different aspirations be turned into a vision for your church's mission?

2 Third age discipleship

In 2013, the Methodist Council received a paper called 'Third Age Discipleship'. A copy is set out on the following pages.

MC/13/40

The 'third age'

"For the first time in human history, our map of life consists not of three stages but four. The suddenness with which this new shape to our lives has come about makes it unsurprising that we fumble for ways of making sense of this apparent gift of extra years."

(Ann Morisy)

1. The term 'third age' is used frequently in connection with the older people who are the subject of this paper. Third age is defined as a period of 'active retirement' and is sometimes labelled 'new middle age.' It is distinct from the 'fourth age' which describes more dependent people who are less robust. Neither category is wholly correlated with chronological age.

Ageing in the Methodist Church

2. The changing demographic profile of the UK population means that nearly 20% of the total population is over 65 (with the largest growth in those aged over 85). Medical advances and an associated longer life expectancy results in an increasing proportion of people living a relatively active life well into their 70s. People reaching the traditional retirement age now have, on average, 15 years of active life – hence the need to differentiate between a third age and an older, more dependent fourth age.
3. This changed demographic profile has particular implications for churches. Church congregations tend to have higher age profiles than the wider population, and older people constitute a significant proportion of church membership and attendance in most denominations. In fact, the over-60s is the only age group which is growing appreciably. In the 2011-2012 connexional year the Methodist Church collected demographic data on age for the first time, asking all churches to estimate the proportion of their congregations in each of four different age brackets: 20-40, 41-65, 66-80 and over 81. Whilst the resultant data are only an approximation, they reveal a preponderance of people over the age of 65, with approximately 50% identified as being between the ages of 66 and 80, and around 17% over 81 years of age.
4. A marked increase in the number of older candidates (aged between 50 and 60) for ordained ministries is also evident in the Methodist Church (as it is also in the Church of England).

Attitudes to older people in society and in the Church

"The recovery of a full and rich sense of dignity at every age and in every condition is an imperative if we are serious about the respect we universally owe each other, that respect grounded for Christians in the divine image which is to be discerned in old and young alike."

(Dr Rowan Williams, speaking at a House of Lords debate on the place of older people in society, his last as Archbishop of Canterbury)

5. Whilst the fact of an ageing population has meant an investment in cross-disciplinary research, and other work funded by the government, much of this has focused on how to maintain older people's independence and sustain well-being in order to minimise the pressure on care services. Whilst there is also an increasing recognition of the benefits of engaging with the older segment of the

population, there continues, nonetheless, to be some negative stereotyping of older people. Often they are not valued nor deemed capable of contributing to society, and a tendency to celebrate 'progress' and 'innovation' leads to a devaluing of the experiences from the past which older people are able to offer.

6. Some of these assumptions are carried into the Church context. The notion of older people as passive recipients rather than as people who have something to offer the Church, as “those with ministries to fulfil” (Hawley and Jewell), is a prevalent view which has implications for the extent to which older people are given the opportunity to contribute in ways which enable them to use their gifts and follow their calling.
7. The common belief that older people are averse to change also impacts on perceptions and attitudes within the Church. Studies suggest that ‘increasing resistance’ is not wholly true and, where it does surface, it is less about a resistance to change per se and more about a reluctance to relinquish those things which have been a long held part of an individual’s identity. (It is to be noted that older people have lived through “unprecedented levels of change in every aspect of life”, Hawley and Jewell – and these writers note that young people can be more conservative than their elders.) There is also a related assumption that older people have a lack of interest and difficulty in learning – but, as Kirkwood (cited in *Going on Growing*) suggests, “the mental capital of older people is seriously undervalued”.
8. There are other assumptions which are, arguably, present in the Church. Given their long-term attendance, it is often thought that older people are satisfied with what is offered, that they feel ‘known’ and valued and have a sense of belonging, that they are secure in their faith and beliefs and no longer have questions, and that they would wish to avoid difficult subjects such as death (Hawley and Jewell). Many of these are false representations.
9. One of the particular issues for older people in the Church is the focus on children and young people. Over the last few years much effort has been devoted to retaining and attracting children and young people, and to reaching the ‘missing generations’, with a concomitant, and expressed, anxiety about the fact that Methodist congregations are ageing. The fact that people are coming forward for ordained ministry at a more advanced age than previously is also mentioned as a matter for concern. Whilst there is no intention to dismiss the importance of older members of the Church, these expressions of anxiety can lead older people to have a keen sense that they are not a priority and contribute to a feeling of marginalisation. Certainly, the emphasis on the faith development of the young has not been matched by an investment of energy in deepening the discipleship of older people.

Discussion point: What does this mean for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church?

Models and approaches in use by the Church

“Jesus’ bias towards marginalised and silenced persons within the broader community, as well as charging his followers to do likewise, gives the Church an imperative to counter society’s ageism by listening to and empowering older people.”

(Janet Eldred)

10. Whilst there are responses to the ageing agenda in our churches, the focus has tended to be on the provision of pastoral care, reflecting an emphasis on the issues faced by those now deemed to be in their fourth age. Third age issues have been given less attention. Some of the assumptions already identified have led to the adoption of what is often called the ‘strength to weakness’ model,

an approach which is typified by ministering **to** older people rather than **with** them. The focus is generally on pastoral care rather than spiritual development.

11. Chaplaincy is increasingly welcomed in residential homes, with those running homes and care services looking to make provision for spiritual care. The potential for faith development, the commitments involved and its implications for residents may not always be fully appreciated, however (as noted by David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, cited in *'Going on Growing'*).
12. There is an increasing recognition, both in the secular world and in the Church, that learning contributes to wellbeing (and that learning is a lifelong activity). It can make significant contribution through increasing self-esteem, building connections and reducing isolation and encouraging social interaction. The approaches adopted, however, sometimes disregard the active role which adults can play in their own learning. Didactic, patronising and poorly facilitated approaches which do not capitalise on the existing knowledge and experiences of the group of learners may lessen the benefits and lead to disengagement.
13. Sessions and activities are often provided by the Church in age segregated groups with older people meeting in the day time and other age groups in the evenings. There are practical reasons for this and sometimes age segregation is appropriate, but inter-generational opportunities are also needed to increase mutual understanding and sharing. Whilst there are many occasions of 'all-age worship', it is questionable whether it is always truly inclusive.
14. People in their third age are 'used' within the Church, but often to fill those gaps left by younger members. They are rarely asked to contribute by virtue of the particular experience and perspective which they can offer as a result of their age.

Discussion point: What does this mean for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church?

Individual differences, generational differences and changes over time

"Our response to older citizens has to be sensitive, varied and flexible ... What we need is a fundamental change of attitude which expresses itself in an imaginative, sympathetic response to the particular needs of communities and individuals."

(Dr Rowan Williams)

15. Whilst there are some general principles which emerge from the various studies relating to older people in the Church, it is difficult to make universally applicable statements since the findings are mediated by social, cultural and individual differences within the population. For example, some people are more comfortable with didactic approaches than with participative learning, and people have different tolerances for questioning and uncertainty.
16. What is also evident is that each generation will have different norms and expectations so that what applies to those in their third age today will not apply to the rising generation of older people. For example, later generations may be less driven by duty and display less commitment to community and interdependence than their predecessors, while there will increasingly be a lower proportion who have experienced Sunday school and worship and who have a memory of the Christian story. Added to this, developments in social policy will lead to alterations in life patterns, as in recent changes in retirement and pensionable age, which will impact on future potential contributions by third agers. All of this means that there is no route map for the future and that any work on third age will involve constant reshaping.

Perspectives on ageing

“The ‘extremes’ of human life, childhood and age, when we are not defined by our productive capacity, and so have time to absorb the reality around us in a different way – these are hard for our society to come to terms with. Too often we want to rush children into pseudo-adulthood; too often we want older citizens either to go on as part of the productive machine as long as possible or to accept a marginal and humiliating status.”

(Dr Rowan Williams, *ibid.*)

17. There are different perspectives on ageing which result in different sets of interventions. A problem-based approach sees ageing as a difficulty, something to be feared, and the key driver of related interventions is the avoidance of illness and dependence. In contrast, there are those who adopt a perspective which claims that ageing is an opportunity and who work on how to age ‘successfully’.
18. ‘Successful ageing’ provides some useful pointers as to how to help older people to participate and maintain engagement but there are theological perspectives which provide distinctive discourses. A biblical perspective is one which accepts age as part of God’s created order, while some religious writers stress God’s presence in the losses, pains and fears associated with age. An approach that regards life as a journey (this aspect is shared with some secular approaches) and which sees age as having a function, with an accompanying set of specific characteristics, needs and tasks, is one which brings together principles of human development with an understanding of faith development.

Spiritual development and the third age

“A major spur to us in all this should be the essential call of discipleship. ‘Follow me!’ Older people often embody the pilgrim nature by their faithful journeying on, in spite of the hardships that they have faced and the questions that remain unanswered.”

(Hawley & Jewell)

19. Research conducted by Elizabeth MacKinley amongst older people living independently (and, subsequently, amongst frail older people), asked them to identify themes which they saw as particularly relevant to their lives. These led her to identify a set of ‘spiritual tasks of ageing’. They included: finding ultimate meaning, finding ways of responding to this meaning, searching for transcendence, finding meaning in growing older and approaching death, searching for relationship and intimacy in the face of the loss of long-term relationships, and searching for hope when facing fear of the future (MacKinley, cited in *Going on Growing*).
20. These identified spiritual tasks accord with the idea of a staged model of faith development, with a journey in the ‘second half of life’ where people of faith are seeking a deeper relationship with God. It also accords with the notion of ‘individuation’ – a recognised concept in Jungian developmental theory which is about the way the different experiences of a person’s life and different aspects of their psyche become integrated over time into a well-functioning whole. There are particular issues which people may seek to resolve in later life, and various tensions may lead to a complex interplay between acceptance and despair, but one of the key tasks is the achievement of integration.
21. There is a suggestion that individuation and integration is achieved by people of faith when they move away from a ‘conforming’ to an ‘owned’ faith – in other words, when they move beyond a more passive acceptance of what they have been taught, (a simpler more ‘affiliative’ or ‘institutional’ stage) to a balanced faith which they have ‘worked out’ for themselves and which emerges from their own experiences and individuality.

22. It is easy to present simplistic assertions and over-generalisations, and it is inappropriate to claim that all pass through the same stages of faith development and in the same sequence or that all profess similar needs and are looking to achieve integration, but there is some assistance in these discourses in considering what the Church can offer, and how third agers can participate in furthering their own spiritual development and in their ongoing formation.

Discussion point: What does this mean for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church?

Third age learning and discipleship

“I would like the church to answer MY questions rather than THEIR questions. I believe that some older people do become more questioning and reflective, and learning for me should be about rediscovering meaning and purpose on our journey. I should like to share some of these discoveries with others”.

(Elderly man quoted in Woodward, in *Valuing Age*, cited in *Going on Growing*)

23. A recognition of the continuing spiritual journey of older people in the Church, therefore, leads to questions about what opportunities can and should be provided to help them find wholeness and integrity. Completing the spiritual tasks of ageing involves searching, asking questions and drawing on past experience to create meaning.
24. Learning at this deep level requires processes of reflection and the application of the principles of adult learning, where individuals are invited to participate actively in the learning process, and where they are enabled to make links between material with which they are already familiar and new perspectives and new ideas, and to reflect on their experiences and reprocess them in the light of these new connections.
25. Whilst this style of learning may be unfamiliar to those whose education involved a wholly didactic approach and who have not been offered informal learning opportunities in the past, it encourages people to access their experiences and to ask questions, as well as providing opportunities for affirmation and social interaction – and these are approaches which many older people would seem to be seeking. It does, however, require skilled facilitation and a safe space where there can be honesty and openness and thus a confidence about sharing difficulties and personal stories.
26. Workshops and small groups are useful for enabling people to explore questions and concerns, and can provide relief from facing the questions alone, and, within these groups, some interactive Bible study, even role-playing, can be particularly helpful.
27. Whilst such groups may involve an element of storytelling and spiritual reminiscence as vehicles for helping people to begin to understand their own life journeys and create personal meaning, storytelling can also be approached in other ways and settings. Pastoral carers, for example, might sometimes recast their role as that of skilled listener rather than provider of comfort. This approach challenges any compulsion by carers to work to avoid distress and, in so doing, acknowledges the older person’s true feelings:

“Sometimes people cry or become upset as they speak of difficult or sad times. There is a feeling in aged care that people should be happy all the time or be jollied out of feeling sad. By continually demeaning the older person’s feelings or not taking these seriously, we encourage lack of communication.”

(MacKinlay, cited in *Going on Growing*)

28. Janet Eldred's *Like Spring Without Flowers* is based around the stories of older women in churches and it demonstrates the value of focused storytelling in expanding the understanding of the listener, as well as benefiting the storyteller. She writes:

“Throughout the course of the project I found myself comparing my own circumstances to those of the women with whom I spoke, and searching for clues as to how to age well. I was impressed that so many older women had passed through faith struggles and come to a place of satisfaction or peace; yet, I was also intrigued that a number of them continued to work at their faith, asking questions and coping with uncertainty. These latter women have helped me understand that I do not have to have the answers to my own questions very soon.”

(Janet Eldred)

29. A theme of earlier sections of the report was the notion of recognising older people as ‘subjects’ rather than as ‘objects’ or ‘recipients’ who are ‘done to’ – and thus the importance of approaches which empower older people. There is much value in peer-led groups exploring issues together. *What shall we do now?*, developed by the Women’s Network of the Methodist Church (now Methodist Women in Britain, MWiB) and published in 2002, is an example of a resource for older people: there is a need to expand the range of self-help resources and materials currently available or update those which already exist.
30. A topic which inevitably provokes different degrees of anxiety is facing death, but it is also a topic which is invariably avoided. The fact that those in the Church are, arguably, influenced by the prevalent contemporary thinking that death is a failure may add to the reluctance to address the subject. An increasing number of resources has, however, been produced, with the suggestion that there is significant value in ‘educating’ for death. Again, discussion in small groups can be very effective if properly facilitated but a one-to-one approach may also be helpful, with the possibility of a designated ‘accompanist’ to help the older person reflect and intentionally prepare – a ‘midwife’ for dying (*Going on Growing*). Similarly, support for those who have been bereaved can involve learning and accompanied reflection, as well as special services of remembrance.
31. The appointment of third age workers is becoming more prevalent and may help in meeting some of the needs for skilled facilitators and learning enablers identified. Specialist training for those who are involved in working with older people is an area which deserves further attention, and it would be helpful if it was easier to determine precisely what training and resources are available. The *Going on Growing* report identifies this as an issue – a very significant range of resources exist but there has been no systematic mapping of what is available and a large range of disparate sources makes it difficult to identify and access those which are most appropriate in any situation.
32. A part-time undergraduate diploma course has been validated recently by the University of Manchester for delivery at Cliff College and is “directed at those working with old people whether through Church events, pastoral visitation, weekday clubs, care homes, social centres” (Course publicity leaflet). So far, there have been few enrolments. Those running the course have received encouragement from many throughout the Connexion but this has not translated into many students. The course is entitled ‘Diploma in Third Age Mission and Ministry’ – and the ‘mission’ element receives significant emphasis. It is salutary to note the comment from one of the course tutors, Claire Craig, speaking of her experience in care settings:

“In my work....I meet older people who possess an incredible faith, individuals whom I’m sure Paul would describe as ‘the saints’, people with a heart for God who are faithful in prayer ... The other side of this is that within these same care settings I meet older people who are confronted with illness, often facing end of life issues and who are asking key questions in terms of the meaning of life and ‘what next?’”

(Claire Craig – taken from an account of an interview between Claire and the Programme Leader, published in the Cliff College magazine *Cliff Today*, Spring 2012)

Provision for older people such as these who may have no prior knowledge of or background in the Christian faith also needs attention – structured events run by the MHA and by other organisations such as PSALM are important in this respect.

Discussion point: What does this mean for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church?

Third age gifts and graces

“You can recognise a second half of life person by a kind of inner outpouring, a kind of inner generativity. They’re not guarded. They’re not overly self-protected. They’re looking for ways to give themselves away, because they’re now living out of their abundance, and they find it’s an overflowing wealth.” (Richard Rohr, in *Falling Upwards*, cited in *Going on Growing*)

“Old people are not pretentious and claiming to possess answers to all life’s deep questions. It is rather a case that they are still journeying on with continuing questions, but also ready to share what they have discovered so far.” (Hawley and Jewell)

33. There is some evidence that the spiritual journey in the second half of life may lead to a heightened need for reconciliation, a concern for the future of the world and a wider perspective, a gerotranscendence which is characterised by a less materialistic, less self-centred approach to life but one which is also marked by self-regulation. Hopeful approaches and mature acceptance may be held in tension with despair and a desire to withdraw but the ability to recognise and live with ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction may be part of the progress towards a wisdom, a spiritual integrity, an inner spirituality, which is seen to characterise older people, with some discovering new spiritual gifts in later life. There is a suggestion that downsizing is not just about material things – it has a spiritual dimension, too.

34. This period may involve a fresh perspective on, and an increased attention to, prayer. The evidence is not conclusive but there are signs that some may move to a more contemplative approach. Hawley and Jewell comment:

“At the heart of many older people’s understanding of prayer is the belief that this is a conversation with God. This gives an intimacy and a sense of purposeful action to their prayers. Through the years of journeying in faith they have encountered questions as well as made discoveries. Prayer has become an important part of this pilgrimage.”

35. The stories of Simeon and Anna are often quoted in relation to older people’s ministry in the Church. One of the key themes of the Bible passage is patient waiting alongside faithful service: the steadfastness and patience which can characterise the third age. Recent research on small growing churches carried out by a Methodist minister whilst on sabbatical suggests that one of the common factors is a ‘*praying 90-year-old*’ who has been praying for years for new people to come to their church.

36. It is inappropriate to make sweeping statements about the gifts and graces of older people but their knowledge and experience are resources which can and should be used:

“We can speak properly of an authority of experience that resides in our older citizens – an authority that we need to pay attention to, value and nurture appropriately.”

(Dr Rowan Williams)

Third age service and ministry

“All this requires an acknowledgement that older people are an integral part of the church and a willingness to look again at the part they play in its life in terms of contributing to its policy and exercising their gifts.”
(Hawley and Jewell)

37. The wisdom and spirituality, the discipleship, which older people display make them uniquely placed to offer themselves in the spiritual service of others. Acting as mentors, prayer partners, spiritual parents or grandparents are all possible contributions. These roles, whilst often assumed ‘unofficially’, could be encouraged intentionally and training and support given to develop skills and enhance gifts.
38. Janet Eldred who shares older women’s stories and perspectives in her book quotes Phyllis: “Remember that people do get older, but they don’t all become senile. They still have experience and alert minds and are quite happy to share either their knowledge or their questions with other people. And are willing to be used where and when it is necessary. Older people don’t like to be looked upon as something ornamental.” The desire to share and serve is evident.
39. Another of Janet Eldred’s contributors, however, stresses the need to be asked: “I think others should be prepared to listen and to seek it out more, because you don’t find that a lot of people necessarily volunteer things unless they’re approached.” This is a significant point. Whilst much ministry is informal and ‘unofficial’ there is a place for registering what (or who) is available and for affirming people by officially seeking out their contributions.
40. There are many ways in which older people can, and do, contribute – ways which sometimes depend less on imparting a spiritual perspective which comes from their life experiences, and more on expressing their discipleship by providing practical and thoughtful, sensitive help in hospitality and care:
- “Find your niche and fill it. In my case, if I can grow something – flowers or vegetables – and give it to somebody and be a good example of doing that, then that’s what I do.” “Never let someone you’ve gone to visit feel it’s a duty that you’ve come. And listen to them a lot.”
(Quoted in Janet Eldred’s book)
41. The significance of ‘community, connection and caring’, which are at the heart of church life and necessary for a healthy church, is highlighted in Janet Eldred’s book. They are aspects of church which older women both seek and sustain:
- “In fact it is older women’s own success at initiating and maintaining community, connection and caring that churches can draw on. Older women and churches need each other for the wholeness of spiritual well-being.”
(Janet Eldred)
42. A particularly important ministry by older people to the Church is through the sharing of stories – which grows out of the mechanisms used to facilitate spiritual development mentioned earlier. Using stories is a means of capitalising on the experiences of older members to benefit others. The stories may be told as part of worship, or used in smaller groups, and they may have particular value in intergenerational situations in offering a perspective born of experience. As James Woodward comments: older people “can give cultural and social meaning to younger generations. They are guardians and transmitters of truth and purpose.”

43. Hawley and Jewell suggest, too, that difficult situations in the church where there is ambiguity and uncertainty could intentionally be explored through the sharing of different generations' perspectives and through exploring the possibility of living with tension and paradox which some older people may have come to understand and accept. There is some suggestion here that the tendency towards segregation needs to be reversed to enable mutual learning and there are those who stress the importance of enabling generations to meet together and connect with one another.

“In intergenerational communities, children and teens of all ages learn from each other and from adults; adults learn from teens and children. Blessed with a sense of mutuality, everyone benefits from each other; they grow each other up into Christ.”

(Holly Catterton Allen, in *Shaped*, Keeley)

44. New ways of presenting the Christian faith may be another contribution offered by older members' storytelling, and part of the process of deepening discipleship across the Church and outside it.

“[It] can help us explore ways in which such stories can be shared, and may open up creative ways of presenting insights on the Christian faith.” (Hawley and Jewell)

45. Older people may be well-placed to offer new and different forms of ministry in the wider community in response to the increasing numbers who find themselves adjusting to long periods of active retirement and to associated third and fourth age issues. Those in their third age might be able to manage partnerships and to network with other organisations, perhaps using church venues to meet the different social needs which arise within an ageing population (*Going on Growing*).

46. *Going on Growing* also suggests the possibility of training older people to act as 'champions' who can raise the profile of older people's issues and encourage others in service and ministry.

47. A particular group who have received little attention in terms of their spiritual needs are supernumerary ministers with a lack of opportunities for them to consider the implications of 'sitting down' for their ongoing vocation as ministers. Many of the issues, and opportunities, previously identified have a particular resonance: their good health in retirement, their continuing spiritual journey and their desire to find space to reflect on their relationship with God. There is the suggestion that supernumerary ministers need to be given the opportunity to think anew about their ministry – about their particular gifts and how they would like to use these in a new stage of their ministry in which they no longer have to carry out the regular activities of a circuit minister.

48. In relation to circuits, there may be a temptation to use supernumeraries to 'fill the gaps' and fail to think creatively about how they might be able to take on projects and develop new forms of ministry. This is an opportunity which “could be an enormous gift to the Church, enabling all sorts of new developments, and encouraging the trend towards more diverse church structures and activities” (Report of a meeting of some supernumerary ministers, and those soon to be supernumeraries, convened in the north-west).

49. A final but very significant point in relation to third age ministry is the training, and subsequent ministry, of those who are older when they candidate. Given the findings and various issues described above, adjusting the pattern and structure of that training may be an appropriate response. Further, instead of being a source for concern, there may be particular opportunities associated with the entry of older people into ministry which previously have not been celebrated.

Discussion point: What does this mean for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church?

Future work

50. *Going on Growing* concludes with a set of ‘implications for future engagement’ and amongst these is the suggestion that *‘faith development resources are developed which encourage facilitative approaches that enable older people to hear themselves think and make meaning.’* The Methodist Church has started working with the Church of England to produce such resources for local people to use in small groups, which will encourage the exploration of some of the key questions pertinent to those in their third age. It is also intended that a resource is developed to enable the ministries of older people in their local contexts, again in conjunction with the Church of England and other ecumenical partners. Additional work will also be needed to address other key areas identified in this paper.
51. It is hoped that by bringing the issues raised by *Going on Growing* to the Council and highlighting some of their implications that there will be a resolve across the Connexion to give attention to third age discipleship and to adopt appropriate attitudes and approaches in enabling the learning and discipleship of older people and their service and ministries.

***RESOLUTIONS

- 40/1 The Council receives the report.**
- 40/2. The Council encourages individuals across the Connexion to examine their assumptions about older people, to listen to the voices of older people, and to enable and encourage the discipleship and contributions of those in their third age.**
- 40.3. The Council encourages the Connexional Team to continue to facilitate discipleship in older age and to produce associated learning resources.**
- 40/4. The Council suggests to the Conference Business Committee that the report be the subject of a workshop at Conference.**

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- Going on Growing: Later life in the church: developing faith, learning, spirituality and service* www.churchofengland.org/media/1374769/goinggrowing.pdf
- Hawley G And Jewell A *Crying in the Wilderness: Giving Voice to Older People in the Church* (Derby: (MHA Care Group, 2009)
- What shall we do now? Christian resources for older people* (Women’s Network of the Methodist Church: 2002)
- Woodward J. *Valuing Age* (London: SPCK, 2008)

Closing worship

Acts 2:14-24

Prayer

Lord of the years,
help us to recognise and respond
to your love in every season of our life:
the spring of childhood,
the summer of youth and young adulthood,
the autumn of maturity,
and the winter of our age.
We rejoice in your grace sufficient for each day.
We praise you for the past
and trust you for the future.

Amen.

(David Reddish)

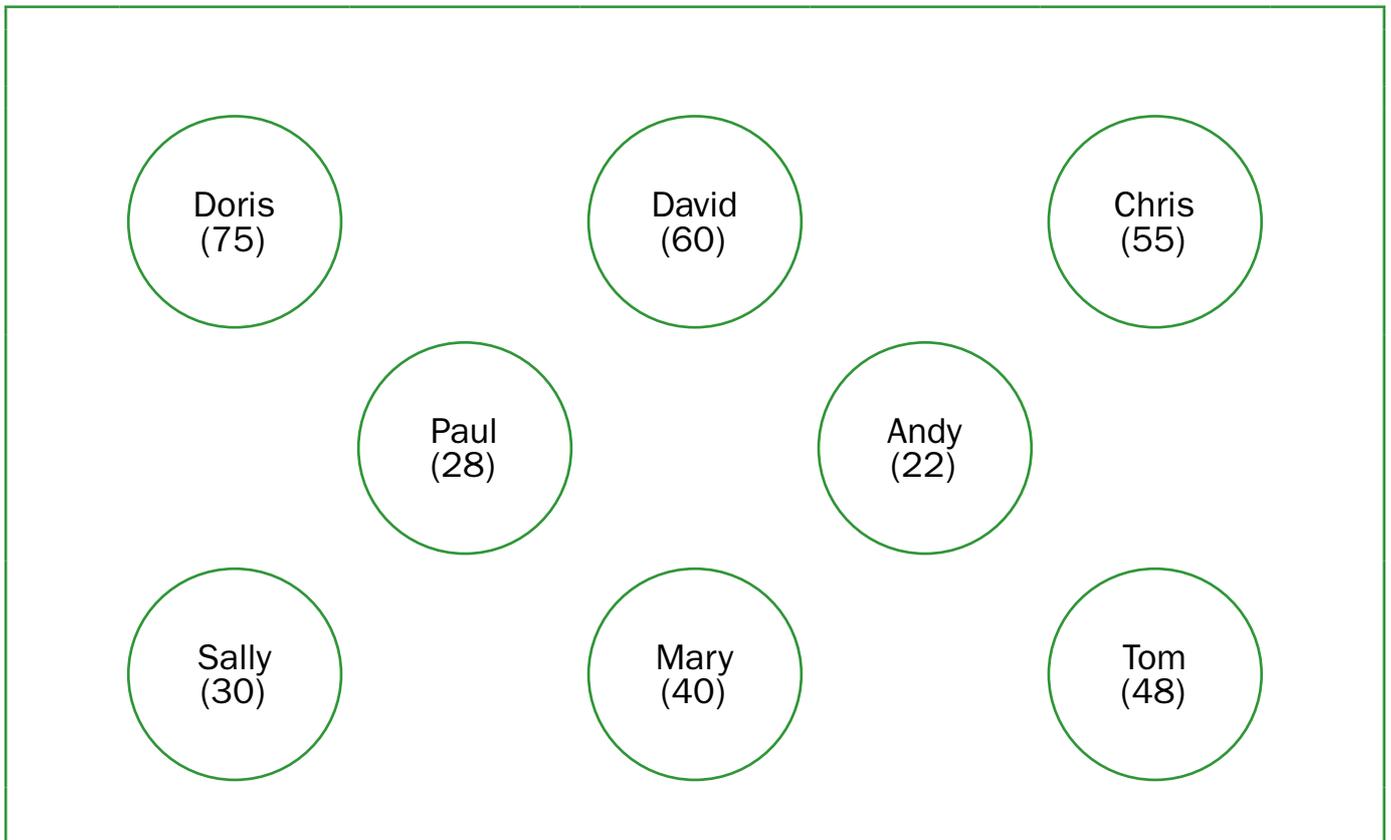
God it was who said to Abraham
Singing the Faith 464

APPENDICES

1. Activity – Guess who? (Age Game)
2. Activity answers

Activity

Guess who?



1. Has worked as a computer programmer (one person)
2. Has never been online (one person)
3. Can't remember a time before the internet (three people)
4. Always being asked to organise the PowerPoint slides in church (one person)
5. Is an experienced research scientist (one person)
6. Has osteoporosis (one person)
7. Struggles with PowerPoint (one person)
8. Has memory loss problems (one person)
9. Highly-experienced project manager (two people)
10. Never gets asked to do anything technological in church (three people)
11. Often feels treated like a child (four people)
12. Strongly feels called to youth work (three people)
13. Is in a band (three people)
14. Is a grandparent (one person)

Activity answers

Doris (75)

Doris studied mathematics at university in the 1960s and worked for a computer technology developer as a computer programmer in the 1980s. She has kept up to date with technology since. Despite this experience, she is never asked to do anything technological in church. She often feels that she is treated as a child by church members.

David (60)

David is an architect by profession. Retired in his 40s due to a site accident, he is an artist and musician. He feels the IT revolution is irrelevant to him and he lets everyone know it. He's never asked to do anything technological for the church. As a musician who plays regularly in a band, David feels he is very much suited to working with young people.

Chris (55)

Chris trained as a sound engineer, but is now a project manager for a small manufacturing business. She has been highly successful in that role for 20 years. A highly-organised person, she likes to keep up to date with technology, maintains a blog and designs her company's website. Despite this, she never gets asked to manage the IT in church. Chris feels that some of the older members of the church – her parents' generation – still treat her like a child.

Andy (22)

Andy can't remember a time before the internet and is very familiar with 21st-century technology. The stewards asked Andy to help with the technology in church, to which he reluctantly agreed. Andy is more of an outdoors person, and struggles with PowerPoint, which he considers to be a 20th-century technology. He doesn't speak up about his feelings on the matter. This is partly out of politeness, but also because he feels he is still treated as a child. Almost everyone at church remembers him as a baby.

Paul (28)

Paul works for a large construction company as a project manager. He is highly successful in this role, even though he has problems with memory loss, resulting from an illness he had as a teenager. He can't remember a time before the internet, which he jokes about sometimes. Paul is meticulous with written work and his record keeping helps him to deliver first-class projects.

Mary (40)

Mary is a busy woman, but has no paid employment due to very significant caring commitments. She has three children, aged between 17 and 22, and her eldest daughter has recently had a baby. In the last few months Mary's caring responsibilities have become less time consuming, and she has joined a band – something she had previously done when she was a student. Mary is a qualified youth worker, but doesn't talk much about her education and very few people ask. She'd love to work in youth work again, even in a voluntary capacity.

Sally (30)

Sally is a research scientist for a multi-national company. She studied chemistry and became a researcher in pharmacology. Although the internet emerged in her lifetime, she has used it so much as a study and research aid, that she can't remember a time before it. Sally has very little interest in working with children or young people, but is always being asked to get involved in church youth work. She feels it is because she looks younger than she is and often feels treated like a child.

Tom (48)

Tom loves music and still performs with a band on the local folk circuit. He's a fully-qualified sports coach and rugby referee, but has recently decided to change careers after being diagnosed with osteoporosis. Tom hadn't realised that it could affect men, let alone someone of his age. However, he is otherwise fit and wants to use his coaching skills to get involved in church youth work.