

How can we help sustain the older members of our communities?

by Anne-Louise Critchlow

'Even to your old age and grey hairs, I am he who will sustain you.'
(Isaiah 46:4)

In the previous edition of **accord**, Debbie Thrower wrote an article entitled 'Anna Chaplaincy: Pastoral care for an ageing population', which was full of insights about the needs which all of us, whether involved in pastoral care, chaplaincy or counselling, can help to meet.

I am writing as chaplain for The Abbeyfield Society, and I very much appreciated Debbie's contribution. I also enjoy working with Anna chaplains in different parts of the country. In contrast, I work for a secular society, but one which has Richard Carr-Gomm, a Christian social reformer in the 1950s, as its founder. Nowadays Abbeyfield demonstrates Christian values and recognises the spirituality of all religions and none as part of human experience. I find many housing and care companies are open to gentle, supportive Christian visitors, and I believe that we should take advantage of the opportunities provided, whether we are chaplains, volunteers or concerned Christian citizens.

Abbeyfield is part of the independent housing sector, but it is not about warden-controlled buildings. Rather, it is about establishing small communities where there is personal interest shown and two meals are provided every day for each resident. Our managers and housekeepers treat everyone as family. The Abbeyfield umbrella also includes care homes, residential homes and hybrid models of care, which can combine independent living, dementia care and end of life care. It is a charity, rather than a private company, which means all profit is returned to the society and used for everyone's benefit.

HOW CAN WE HELP WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AMONG THE ELDERLY?

Even without official counselling status, we can provide considerable help. It is what my boss calls the 'listening ear' role and any of us can practice it. Residents who are 'difficult' with staff need to be helped with their anger and frustration and an 'outside' visitor who is prepared to listen can be just what they need. Old age can be frightening, and fear is often masked by nasty remarks and a refusal to obey rules – often the only way a frustrated, elderly person has of being noticed. As a visitor, you can have the privilege of giving such people attention. One of our residents had her earlier post-traumatic shock disorder symptoms brought back because of the responsibility she felt when caring for another resident. Six weekly telephone calls that included recalling methods of dealing with symptoms, as well as advice about boundaries in dealing with others, helped her get through her panic.

Could you be a 'listening ear'?

Of course, we need to know how to signpost people for more professional help, but with waiting lists for counselling being so long, we can do much to help those we visit. We need to be non-judgmental and unshockable – an especially important factor if residents know that we are people of faith. One client of mine, for example, who had problems with alcohol, said to me that he learnt to trust me because, after reports of his alcohol-fuelled bad behaviour had reached me, I spent an hour with him playing a board game, not commenting on how he was gradually emptying the beer bottle at his side but ending the game with a simple enquiry about how his week had been. I have experience of another

alcoholic asking my advice about how to communicate with her adult children, because she felt I would be less prejudiced than the staff who already knew them. Empathy and confidentiality are of paramount importance.

PRAYER IS VALUED

It is a rare person who does not value prayer. One resident who allowed me to pray for him said to me 'But you're not going to convert me'. I replied, 'I'm not offering to convert you, just pray for you, if you would like that'. That principle is important: their relationship with God is their own business and I can't necessarily influence that.

I once had a care worker come to me after I had conducted a service. She asked for prayer because she had lost everything in recent floods and had no insurance. She knew she needed God's help, and I was privileged to pray for her. 'Privilege' is the work which most readily comes to mind when thinking about my role. I am there when people are most desperate when they have no one else to turn to. I can also help them to approach God. Years ago, a lady I had known in a purely social setting at a care home, called for me to come after she had been given a terminal diagnosis. What was going to happen when she met God? How could she talk to God now? She panicked; but then she remembered that she had heard me talking to God quite naturally. She wondered if I could help. What a privilege!

WHERE DO STAFF TURN TO?

As you visit a home regularly, the staff will learn to trust you and will confide in you. Establishing that rapport will become part of your unofficial role, as you visit. After an unexpected staff death, for example, a competent manager said she didn't need anyone; but a week later, with further family problems and experiencing feelings of despair, she rang me. That was the start of weekly phone calls over an eight-month period.

What about a member of staff who discovers the body of someone who has ended their life by suicide, or a staff member who has tried unsuccessfully to give resuscitation, while waiting for an ambulance? What a trauma for them, yet they often don't have the time to recover or reflect. A sympathetic person who gets chatting to them can really help. You may have an official bereavement counselling qualification, but you can also be 'just' a sensitive listener.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Abbeyfield was founded to counter loneliness and isolation amongst older people and that founding principle has never been more relevant than now. One of our initiatives this year is the launch of the 'tea and memories' cafe, either in our houses or in the community. Your church could host one. Using archived clips from *Living Memories* we show short excerpts from the 1940s- 80s on different themes and invite people to chat about them. I can assure you there's never a quiet moment! Naturally tea and cake are essential to the process too! If you are interested in setting up one or becoming a volunteer visitor in one of our homes, please see the links at the end of this article and get in touch.

OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE SPIRITUALITY

Older people have a variety of experiences of church, and not all of them are positive! By introducing a relaxed event, which opens the way up for them to engage with spirituality, people feel free to share their spiritual needs and accept prayer. There are lots of ways of doing this – Messy Vintage (linked to Messy Church and the Bible Reading Fellowship), Soul Stories or invent your own! Through the Truth Be Told team, residents are linked with church toddler groups. Residents will come if they feel welcome and are not made to feel uncomfortable. If they have not been to church

recently, they will probably avoid an official church service, unless it has the reputation of being very inclusive. Something based on the Christian calendar every three months can also work well, perhaps offering a lovely, decorative home-made card with a verse of Scripture or a prayer they will treasure. Life Works (formerly the Scripture Gift Mission) produce some individual verse cards and verse and prayer booklets for the month. I have come so many times to do individual visits and found them displayed on a bed side table. 'That prayer you gave me – I've used it every night since,' a resident with no links to a church, told me. The Holy Spirit will go on watering the seed sown. Don't, though, expect to be told everything!

CHANGES IN OLD AGE

I have had several people recount the stories of their successful lives – CEOs of international companies and professors, but success, while gratifying, does not tell them how to cope with sickness and weakness. They feel as though they have nothing to look forward to! But with God in the picture and good care, that can change. Regular letters to the whole house or to individuals can have a wonderful effect. 'I felt so miserable when I moved here,' said one resident from Devon, 'but when I picked up your letter containing jokes, puzzles and thought for the day, it changed the way I felt.' It is our opportunity to empathise with the weaknesses and trials of old age, especially if we're not very far behind ourselves! Knowing God does not make us automatically happy and smiling, but it does give us a sense of purpose and an understanding that Someone is behind all the apparent chaos. A spur to my own faith, has been the realisation that knowing God does make a difference to us in old age. It's often been demonstrated to me when I meet Christians in our houses. Let's share the good news in a way that is accessible and meaningful to older people,

whether they are in a care home, independent housing or in the wider community. It is a profoundly satisfying way of spending our time.

Organisations which you can contact for opportunities

The Abbeyfield Society

www.abbeyfield.com/volunteering
volunteer opportunities

Volunteer opportunities through chaplaincy

a.critchlow@abbeyfield.com

Tea and memories

www.abbeyfield.com/tea-and-memories

www.messychurch.org.uk

www.brfonline.org.uk

www.annachaplaincy.org.uk

www.storiesforthesoul.org

(linked to Godly play)

www.truthbetold.org.uk

story telling for life - contact the founder and CEO Gemma Gillard

Linking lives

(operates all over the country linking churches, volunteers and opportunities in care homes and others)

www.linkinglives.uk

Lots of local opportunities such as Caraway in the Southampton area

www.caraway.uk.com

and, in London

www.embracingage.org.uk

Anne-Louise Critchlow

About the author

Rev. Dr. Anne-Louise Critchlow (who has counselling qualifications) has been a pastoral worker in France and North Africa, an English Literature teacher and full-time vicar in Manchester, and is now a chaplain for the Abbeyfield Society. She lives in Bristol with her husband, Mark, and they worship at Christ Church, Downend. She has four children and nearly thirteen grandchildren!

