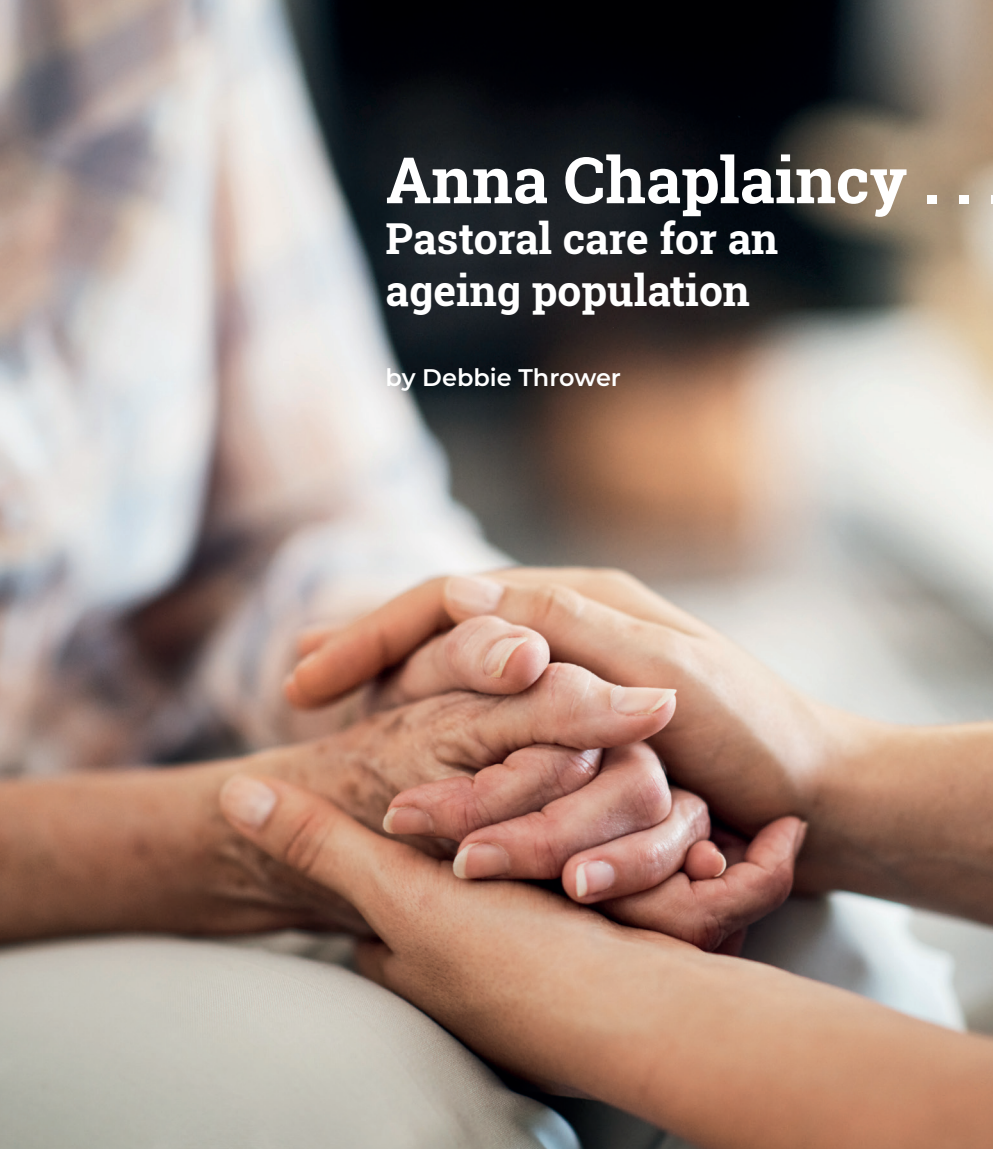


Anna Chaplaincy . . .

Pastoral care for an ageing population

by Debbie Thrower



If Anna Chaplaincy hadn't existed before the pandemic, it would surely need to be invented now. A spotlight has been shone on the challenges many older people face in their later years. Without question, we need to be responding to people's spiritual and emotional needs far more effectively than we have been, especially in the light of the isolation imposed (and now self-imposed) on many through Covid-19.

The consequences of living in a rapidly ageing society were thrown into sharp relief by the deaths and depths of suffering caused by coronavirus. Statistics alone make the case for more concentrated pastoral care for this age group:

- In 2019, the population of UK included 13,330 people aged 100

or older, an increase of 11% from 2018.

- According to *Estimates of the Very Old Including Centenarians* - Office for National Statistics 2018, the number of centenarians in the UK increased by 85% in the 15 years to 2018
- It is predicted that by the year 2031 there will be 65,500 centenarians in the UK, that figure rising to almost 155,000 by 2041 (National population projections from the Office for National Statistics).
- Around 2.2 million of people aged 75 and over live alone
- *Families and Households in the UK 2017*, Office for National Statistics, 2017.

- Over 1.4 million older people say they are often lonely, and that is projected to rise to 2 million by 2025/26.
- Older people are 5.5 times more likely to feel lonely if they don't have someone to open up to when they need to talk, than those who do (*All the Lonely People – Loneliness in Later Life*, Age UK 2018, drawing upon data collected by the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing).

GOOD LISTENING IS KEY

Anna Chaplains offer spiritual support to older people and carers. The therapeutic benefits of simply being listened to, and being able to share and reflect on one's story, are central to Anna Chaplaincy. Chaplains strive to be expert listeners.

Anna Chaplaincy takes its name from the widow Anna who appears with Simeon in St Luke's gospel (Luke 2:22-38) - *a faithful, expectant, hopeful, older woman*. There are male and female Anna Chaplains, many of whom pursue such a vocation post-retirement, finding renewed meaning and purpose in their own later years through a ministry this is open to lay or ordained people.

Our vision is to see Anna Chaplains in every small-to-medium-sized community in the UK, each contributing to the spiritual care of elderly men and women by being skilled listeners and hope-bearers.

Such chaplains help people consider the story of their lives and address certain issues - the 'ouch' points, if you like - sometimes described as 'biographical pain'; a term coined by Malcolm Johnson in a paper he wrote in 1976, describing the pain we may feel when we can't put right a past wrong, or when we are unable to apologise to someone for something we did, if they are no longer with us.

Old age is a time for looking back over one's life. We all have episodes in our personal histories which cause us grief; perhaps we experience remorse. Such memories may trigger guilt and regrets; we may be prone to lingering pangs, stemming from a whole variety of incidents and their accompanying emotions.

FORGIVENESS

Anna Chaplains should not only be good listeners, but skilled in guiding people in matters of forgiveness, helping people see the pains and sorrows of life as natural parts of the fabric of our existence: the warp and weft of a full life that involves relationships with other, also fallible, human beings.

Anna Chaplains are also taught to recognise when someone's problems lie beyond the scope of a chaplain's help, and when professional counselling or other mental health services are required.

For many people, though, simply recounting stories and relating former episodes to a sympathetic, attentive listener, can help make sense of who they were in the past, who they are now, and to start imagining who we might become in future. Counsellors understand the inherent risks of burying the sad or bad parts of our lives, as though that will somehow make them go away. Unfinished business has a way of coming back to haunt us by making us anxious, restless, or worse.

MULTIPLE OVERWHELMINGS

What prevents us from flourishing as we grow older can, sometimes, be our sheer inability to manage when one thing happens on top of another. Then our capacity to cope (let alone thrive) is stretched to breaking point!

You may already be familiar with the concept of 'Multiple overwhelmings'. The writings of community theologian Ann Morisy have been foundational to Anna Chaplaincy. She attributes the

phrase 'multiple overwhelmings' to David Ford, who wrote of them in his book *The Shape of Living* (Baker Books, 2004). They are, Morisy contends, one of the defining characteristics of later life:

'Whether that be the light bulb that defies efforts to unscrew, the damp patch in the corner of the room that each week gets bigger, the note from the GP sending you to the local hospital for tests, the terminal illness of a close friend or the impending divorce of one's youngest daughter', each singular 'overwhelming' can all-too-easily accumulate, over time, gradually become something of an emotional avalanche.

Ann Morisy, in her chapter 'Conversation Matters' (in *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing*, Cambridge Press, 2016 p.241) explores the role of conversation in personal spirituality. She quotes the writer Richard Rohr's observation that 'the language of the first half of life and the second half of life are almost two different vocabularies.' (*Falling Upward*, SPCK, 2013 p.28).

Rohr suggests that we live in a culture which is most at ease with the first half of life, and its vocabulary of 'go getting', in contrast to a vocabulary of 'letting go' which is more apt for the second half of life.

The retreat leader and writer Wanda Nash had much to say about memories, the potency of past experiences we tend to re-live, over and over again and their potential to rob us of our peace of mind in the present. In *Come Let Us Age! - An invitation to grow old boldly* (Edited by Poppy Nash and Debbie Thrower, BRF, 2017. pp.35, 36), she writes:

CEREBRAL LIMITATIONS

'Depression

Fading memory,

lost memories

Simple stupidity!

Remorse, particularly about my

earlier mismanagement, ineptness, in dealing with *anger* - mine, and that of others coming at me.

Yes, I can beat myself up quite a lot about my past mistakes, mismanagement, misreading of tricky situations. Not a lot to be done about them now, not a lot of time or energy left. But for this moment, this now, the sense of these mistakes has mellowed a bit, along with that of my peers. So, some of the bones I used to chew on like a dog can be let go of, and left behind: they don't have to be gone over and over as they used to be; they can simply be left behind, hopefully. They don't have to be continually rehearsed, as if there was a hidden secret ability to change things.

When I'm *really* convinced I've turned out a total no-gooder, I try to remember that in Jesus' teaching and practice (which is even more pertinent) the dogs under the table were fed; and that those with blocked ears, tied tongues, those who were unwashed, lacking faith and with neither material goods nor intellectual prowess were attended to by the Son of God; they were healed, refreshed, remotivated by him; warmed, held, loved by him; called 'little children' and 'friends' by him.

So there's hope for every one of us, including me, after all.'¹

CONVERSATION

As an associate of the charity Project for Seniors and Lifelong Ministry (PSALM), Ann Morisy describes their main aim in this context: which is, through conversation, to enable people to widen their vocabulary in relation to the second half of life and resist the temptation to disregard new ways and attitudes because of 'having become old'.

She adds that, 'Conversation in its fullest sense, is the most available and accessible means of enabling this critical shift of reframing

and embracing greater personal agency' (p.242).

Morisy points to resilience as a key factor in relation to how well we cope with the transitions of ageing, and the way difficulties and losses tend to mount up, and come in waves, one after another. Sometimes we need a little help in fostering that much-needed resilience.

'What and how we think influences resilience, and this, too, highlights the importance of conversation because it gives us access to our thinking and feeling. Through conversation it is possible to reframe adverse events and, whilst it cannot be guaranteed to sort out the defiant light bulb (although indirectly it might), conversation can be a vital aid in the challenge of reframing one's perspective' (p.242).

Given this understanding, then, and appreciating the cruciality of pastoral care for the elderly in a modern setting, what is the role of Anna Chaplaincy?

BACK TO THE FUTURE . . .

DEBBIE THROWER RESUMES HER STORY

Anna Chaplaincy traces its origins to the English market town of Alton, in Hampshire. I was privileged to become the first chaplain there, when in 2010, Anglicans and Methodists joined forces to create the new post. They sought someone who would spot the gaps in existing provision and raise the whole standard of good practice of ministry among older people in their area. Four years of developing a suitable model followed, until Anna Chaplaincy was ready to be replicated elsewhere.

In 2014, Anna Chaplaincy became part of Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF), and it was hoped that it could emulate the some of the success of Messy Church, another BRF initiative, which had spread nationally and internationally in the previous decade.

I joined the BRF staff that year and work began on developing

Anna Chaplaincy across the UK. To date, there are currently around 200 Anna Chaplains for Older People and others in equivalent roles - such as Older People's Pastor, or Director of Older People's Ministry - in the network nationally. Chaplaincies operate in cities, towns and villages as far afield as Devon and Kent, the Midlands, Northumbria and Cumbria, as well as in the very north of Scotland and even in Orkney!

Increasingly, the role of counsellors in training, mentoring or group supervision for Anna Chaplains is being explored; most notably, so far, in parts of Kent and in Cumbria.

More churches are recruiting Anna Chaplains

As the implications of an ageing population hit home, churches are increasingly wanting to 'up their game', pastorally speaking, among this age group. They are realising the benefits of valuing older congregation members as well as reaching out to others who are living within the evening of their life outside the usual remit of



church life and programmes. It is by no means insignificant that the name 'Anna' means gift or grace, and Anna Chaplaincy is therefore a gracious gift from the church to its community.

Some Anna Chaplains are paid, though the majority are volunteers. Each Anna Chaplain is sent out from a church that prays for them. A 'Head Licence Agreement' agreement is drawn up with BRF to use the trademarked name. Each Anna Chaplain is thus appointed and authorised by, and is accountable to, their local church (or group of Churches Together, for example). Training courses are online, based on the Anna Chaplaincy Handbook. There are introductory taster sessions online, too, for people who would like to know more.

If, reading this, you feel Anna Chaplaincy might be of interest to your church (and district), and if you would like to explore possibilities, please do feel free to get in touch:

annachaplaincy@brf.org.uk

HOW IT LOOKS IN PRACTICE

Anna Chaplains represent a wide variety of denominations. They work ecumenically and are visible in the community, at clubs where older people tend to congregate, for example, or engaging in one-to-one pastoral visitation. More often than not, they find themselves becoming advocates and champions of issues relevant to older people in the wider community, to some extent speaking on their behalf.

Chaplains are also there to draw alongside carers, whether relatives who fulfil the role of carers, or paid professionals. People looking after a loved one living with, say, dementia, need special support, and chaplaincy can help in that way.

The ministry, though, is not confined only to working with and alongside elderly people. Far from it. Almost every person

cared for is someone's mum, dad, grandmother, grandfather, uncle, auntie, or friend. In that context, links are made with families and social connections are established. Likewise, Anna Chaplains often foster good relations with local primary schools and generate visits and projects that tie in with care homes and sheltered accommodation.

For example, Anna Chaplain Sue Yeo from St Martin's Church in Maidstone offers spiritual care to residents in care homes in the parish. When Covid-19 prevented her from visiting in person, she began recording services and delivering them on DVD. Now all 23 care homes in the Maidstone area receive these DVDs. For Mothering Sunday, Sue invited local primary school children to produce artwork and poems on the theme of spring, a time of hope. The children's work was delivered with the DVD and displayed in the care homes for residents to enjoy, bringing the outside world in. She commented, 'Some of the children have a grandparent in a nursing or residential home, and I am sure being able to express their emotions in their poetry was important to them'.

COUNTER-CULTURAL

An Anna Chaplain is someone who celebrates old age in a society which often tends to overlook and denigrate people of advanced years. This is counter-cultural work in a society which highly prizes autonomy, youth, beauty and productivity. The Anna Chaplain can be a friend to someone who is lonely; a key link for the bereaved, anyone who is isolated, or simply feeling alone. Chaplains can signpost what help is on offer in any given context; for example for a husband or wife caring for their spouse living with dementia.

From the outset I was convinced Anna Chaplains could be just as effective in rural, or inner-city settings, as in a small market town like Alton. That has proved to be

the case, with Anna Chaplains now ministering in countryside areas and seaside resorts as well as increasingly within multi-cultural urban environments. Anna Chaplains plant little flags in towns and villages up and down the land, signalling the fact that older people matter!

NOTES

- 1 This layout is a replica of how the writer Wanda Nash deliberately set out her text, in her books. It is replicated here, at Debbie Thrower's request, to underline the importance of allowing people to tell their stories in their way, even if that doesn't necessarily match the way we might expect them to be relayed.

Debbie Thrower

About the author

Debbie Thrower is the founder and pioneer of Anna Chaplaincy for Older People. She is a former broadcaster with BBC and ITV, an Anglican licensed Lay Minister in the Winchester Diocese, and a Canon Emeritus of Winchester Cathedral. Debbie is married, with a daughter and a son, and a three-year-old grand-daughter.

