Worship with Older People

The Gospel of Life should be reflected in the opportunities provided for prayer and worship.

‘Coming consciously into the presence of God’. This was the collective response, summing up the essence of worship, for the sixty people at a SCOP Conference answering the questions ‘What is Worship?’, and ‘What do we understand by the term Worship?’ It did not stand alone but embraced numerous thoughts.

Worship is offered through any kind of action being worthy of God when ‘what we give is the BEST we can give’; it is the using of our gifts, offering them up, giving worth to God. Worship is about being renewed by the Spirit; it is about our adoration of God and our relationship with Him as well as with others. We give worth to God when we respect the commandment to LOVE, part of which is to enable others to worship God.

When we plan worship all these elements need to be included. They are brought together by a common language or, for those for whom language is difficult, by the use of symbols.

Worship can be seen as ‘Coming consciously into the presence of God’:

- in community and in fellowship;
- offering praise and thanksgiving;
- listening;
- opening oneself up to give and to receive.

Then experiencing transformation, being renewed, we are ALL sent out in the power of God’s Spirit to live and to work to His praise and glory.

Whilst many older people like and are fully involved in their local church, for some it might no longer be possible to attend what was once familiar and much loved. It is important to develop forms of worship appropriate to their needs. This might mean a variety of different ways to keep them connected, bringing both Church and our love through Jesus to where they are now.

All that may be required is a different time or a different day along with a warm church and more comfortable seating and, of course, appropriate print and sound magnification. In today’s society Sunday may be the only day an older person can see their family. Reduced energy levels, a degree of dependency or even diminishing confidence may mean an older person simply cannot attend church on a Sunday or that they cannot cope with a long Service. Some simply feel uncomfortable with constant instructions to sit, kneel or stand. For others there may be physical barriers – long uneven
pathways, steps, or the lack of appropriate toilet facilities. It might be the case that more radical changes are required, involving new ideas, styles and places.

Research amongst older people shows that some no longer consider regular Sunday services as sustaining and relevant to where they are on their journey. It may not deal with the most important aspects of their own lives. This does not necessarily mean, however, that such people consider worship unimportant.

The spiritual dimension of our lives does not suffer from the decrements of age; there is no spiritual plateau that an older person reaches. Spiritual growth is about journeying and being transformed. It can only happen in company, when a person has a sense of belonging and a feeling of being able to share. We must therefore find ways to enable each individual to be fully integrated, to feel they belong, to feel they have a ‘place within the body of Christ’. If we allow our older people to be disconnected our Christian communities will be diminished – for we lose their wisdom and their witness to the traditions of our faith.

In this country, most older people grew up with some connection to church, if only through attending Sunday School and the old type of School Assemblies. But over the past fifty to a hundred years there have been massive social changes with corresponding losses of old certainties, norms and values, bringing about feelings of loss of stability and consistency. Church services have also changed dramatically over the past few decades. Older people are not necessarily inflexible, but change can be too fast.

Older people are not an homogenous group. Each faith community needs to enquire what older people need, and try to understand differing positions and feelings. Any absences should be followed up, but sensitivity is needed as many do not wish to make a fuss and others are fiercely independent. It is also worth remembering that not everyone can articulate their needs.

As your Church looks at worship in the context of the needs of older people it might be helpful to consider some of these changes within your discussions.

**Bible** - Modern versions might help offer us clarity of the Word. But previous generations often knew their Bible better than we do and miss the well-loved, memorised phrases and passages.

**Music** - Different types of music may help express various moods but for the older ear it may be too loud or intrusive, in too high a key as well as unfamiliar.

**Liturgy & participation** - New forms of liturgy introduced to stand alongside the Book of Common Prayer have now almost replaced it. Worship has become more responsive with increased freedom and spontaneity and greater input from the laity.

**Preaching** - There have been incredible changes with today’s sermons often being chatty and discursive, dramatic or with visual aids.

**Encouraging the young** - Of course we must do this but not to the detriment of older people who do attend.
Generally there seems to be four aspects of worship that are really important whether an older person lives in their own home, in sheltered accommodation or within a care home. *Hymns* come to the top of the list. With low energy levels or sensory impairments the extra concentration needed regularly to learn new hymns or different tunes might be too much. It must be significant that huge numbers say they get spiritual nourishment from ‘Songs of Praise’ on the television.

*Having a sense of the presence of God* comes next. Many say that Church has joined society in appearing to place value on words rather than on reflection, and ‘doing’ and ‘achieving’ rather than on ‘being’. It is hard to find the sense of the presence of God where worship is too noisy, busy, and wordy or too human-centred. Older people are asking for *space* amidst the Word and the Sacrament to be able to contemplate mystery and celebrate the journey we are all on. Beauty, awe, love, piety, the rich resources of symbol are longed for alongside truth and justice.

The third aspect is *Prayer*. Some 85% of churchgoers say they pray daily but amazingly so do 65% of non-churchgoers. And they pray for exactly the same things as any other group of people: family and friends, thanking God and the health and healing of others are the three most common prayers. These are followed by prayer for the suffering in the world; having strength for the day and, even amongst non-Churchgoers, nearly 40% say they give praise to God.

*Sermons* come in at fourth place. Older people want the church to speak up about rights and wrongs and injustice. But a person who is crippled with arthritis will be very discouraged if they are constantly urged through the sermon to ‘do something’. Equally, a person living on a meagre pension may feel unwanted if they are constantly urged to increase their financial giving. Older people often remark that ‘teaching lacks substance and fibre’ and sermons give false reassurance, flying in the face of the reality of their life. Teaching and preaching needs to connect with where people are now, and resonate with their life experience.

Older people are no different in this respect from younger people, but they are asking different questions, or face similar questions in a more urgent and immediate way. They do not have ‘all the time in the world’ if their future is their own death. The Christian hope is a belief in death and resurrection. But many find that the certainties they felt when they were younger are now no longer so. They are questioning – some things for the first time. They are asking for honest discussion and relevant exposition.

**So let’s think radical**

Older people do not wish to be separated from the main church. They simply ask that their needs be recognised and taken into account. But if they are no longer able to be a part of the usual model of ‘coming together’ as church, new models of being church should be explored so that they are still in fellowship and feel a sense of belonging. This does not mean that they should become merely recipients of whatever is on offer, nor that their talents and gifts become redundant.
As I write this our Churches are celebrating Candlemas – the presentation of Christ at the Temple. It would be a wonderful time to plan a celebration of older people. After all it was Simeon and Anna, who ‘of great age’, were led by the Holy Spirit to recognise the baby Jesus as the Messiah.

How often do we hear someone say ‘I wish . . .’, then we go away agreeing with them that it is not possible. Susan’s ‘I wish’ is that when Communion is taken to her at home other people are there as well. Why not? Why cannot they be there? Not as spectators but as the ‘community coming consciously into the presence of God’. Is it possible that Susan might host a regular ‘Communion by extension’ service’ in her own home? Or perhaps people from the church might join her in her home during the normal service time, to read through the liturgy, then have someone coming straight from church with the Eucharist.

Older people often have ‘time on their hands’. Can this time be utilised? Someone with poor mobility may be able to prepare the intercessions to be read out by others or, if there is a roving microphone, by themselves from their seat in church. Prayers could even be played back within the service having been pre-recorded.

It can be very lonely eating by yourself. Maybe your church could start a ‘café style’ service? And, rather than simply having a lunch or tea followed by a service, perhaps the meal could be integral to the worship? This would be less threatening to those who are un-churched and be a wonderful opportunity for ‘friendship evangelism’. As denominational pigeon holes often become unimportant for older people it would also be an opportunity for building further ecumenical ties.

Young children and older people so often have a natural affinity. Can they be brought together for an ‘ageist service’ with only specific age groups being invited or a grandchildren and grandparents service?

Retirement can be a wonderful opportunity. But for some, particularly if they found their own sense of identity through work, retirement can be threatening and the loss of role painful. Could you consider a ‘time and talents celebration’, or a ‘swapshop’? Invite people who have recently retired to a service of celebration. Do some homework to find what needs there are, such as a car scheme or gardening. Then build a display making it easy for people to volunteer.

These are just some ideas and suggestions which might help your church to explore the needs of individuals within the community and, thinking beyond the usual, find new ways of ensuring that older people stay connected. These suggestions may also help those who are de-churched to return and those who have not been members before to find a place of belonging. Some ideas will require careful consideration and special training; others time, energy and generosity in order to implement relevant changes or adjustments.

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” John 10:10

[SCOP and Bishop Colin are looking at ways of using web-cams to relay services into people’s homes. If this idea interests your church please let us know.]