

**EMBRACING AGE**

Later life in all its fullness



# HOW TO ADOPT YOUR LOCAL CARE HOME

A Guide for Churches

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# CHAPTER

# 1

# INTRODUCTION

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# INTRODUCTION

The world has been through a huge transition over the last 18 months. None of us have been unaffected by the pandemic, but perhaps the worst impacted in the UK have been care home residents: 40% of all deaths in the first wave were of care home residents, as Covid-19 raged relentlessly through the sector.

This is not the time or place to focus on the catastrophic decisions that meant people with the virus were discharged to care homes, whilst the staff battled on with a shortage of PPE. But we do need to understand the impact: the anxiety for staff as they feared unwittingly spreading the virus, and struggled with the ever changing rules and regulations; the grief and emotional trauma experienced by relatives separated from their loved ones in care homes, and the isolation and sadness of residents themselves in the midst of the turmoil. The ripple effects of these impacts will be felt for some time - it's more important than ever for churches to engage with their local care home, and to come alongside staff, relatives and residents as they process these difficult experiences.



# THE CARE HOME SECTOR IN A NUTSHELL

According to the latest statistics there are 10,476 care homes for older people across Great Britain, with a total of 444,737 bed spaces, and a further 305 care homes in Northern Ireland. The average size of each home is 42.5 beds. 72.2% of care homes are rated as good, and 4.3% as outstanding.

On top of all the Covid challenges, the care sector is dealing with huge staff shortages, estimated at 105,000 workers; the vacancy rate is 8.2% - that's twice the national average. We live in a society that is ageing, which places increased demand on care services. It's estimated that 627,000 extra care staff will be needed by 2030/31.

It's not surprising that there are huge shortages – care work is amongst the lowest paid occupations, with nearly three quarters of care workers earning below the living wage. In fact, in many places you can earn more working in a supermarket or walking a dog! That's the value we place on looking after older people with care needs in our society.

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Statistics from [carterwood.co.uk/carterwood-index-q3-2021-release](https://www.carterwood.co.uk/carterwood-index-q3-2021-release)



# 2

CHAPTER

## THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CARE HOME RESIDENTS

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## **THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CARE HOME RESIDENTS**

Imagine moving to a new place, knowing that it will probably be the last place you ever live on earth. You've had to give up lots of your possessions as you only have one room to store things in, and you're also coming to terms with the loss of your independence, the deterioration of your health and a loss of agency.

These challenges in themselves are huge things to process, but there's often very little help and support in doing so. Not surprisingly, research shows that care home residents have higher rates of poor mental health and depression. Perhaps what may be a little more surprising is research that shows care home residents are twice as likely to feel severely lonely as older people living at home, and this was before the enforced separation of Covid-19.

As we begin to understand the lived experience of care home residents this research makes sense. Again, imagine you have moved to a new place and you've got to start again building new friendships. Older age and frailty bring challenges in communication, such as hearing loss, visual impairment, and reduced mobility, which make the building of new meaningful relationships much more difficult. Problems like incontinence can bring further isolation. I remember meeting one lady who never left her room at the care home because she feared that if she went to the lounge she wouldn't be able to reach the loo in time, should she need it. Her world had been reduced to her care home room, purely due to the fear of embarrassment over incontinence issues. So sad.

It's estimated that 70% - 80% of care home residents have dementia or significant memory loss. Research shows that people with dementia are more likely to experience loneliness, and if you are one of the 20% - 30% without dementia it might be more challenging to build meaningful relationships if you are surrounded by people who do. So, we can begin to see why care home residents are twice as likely to feel severely lonely. And staff simply can't meet all the emotional and social needs of residents.

There's a huge opportunity for the church to come alongside residents with the unconditional love of God, showing by our actions that their worth is not dependent on their productivity, but in their value as individuals whom God deeply loves.

Of course, there are positive aspects to moving into a care home as well. For those struggling to cope at home it can be a welcomed lifeline. But there will still be psychological adjustments needed for this transition into a care environment.

My experience has been that even the little we do to draw alongside care home residents can make a huge difference, and we'll be exploring a whole host of ideas in this little book.

The Bible shows us that God has a special place in his heart for orphans and widows. He sets the lonely in families and draws alongside the outcasts of society, those who have been overlooked and ignored. He places worth and value on those society diminishes.



**A father to the fatherless, a  
defender of widows,  
is God in his holy dwelling.  
God sets the lonely in families**



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Psalm 68:5-6



# 3

CHAPTER

## HOW TO ENGAGE WITH CARE HOMES

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# HOW TO ENGAGE WITH CARE HOMES

One of the most important keys to forging a relationship with a local care home is building trust. Care homes have a duty to safeguard their residents and may be wary of random do-gooders wandering in off the street to tell them what they should or shouldn't be doing! I'm sure if you're reading this that is not your intention, but the care home doesn't necessarily know that, and we don't know what negative experiences they may have had in the past with other volunteers. So building trust is essential.

The care home needs to know that you will be a positive influence in the home – both for staff and residents. It's no good going in with a critical attitude - that's the last thing care homes need right now, especially after the last 18 months.

In this book I'm going to give you loads of ideas, but the important thing with most of them is to check that they will be a blessing to the home. Every care home will have different needs – we want our offerings to be a blessing, not a burden.

You may already have a relationship with your local care home, from running church services or doing pastoral visiting pre pandemic. The following ideas can also build on those existing relationships and offer different ways of bringing joy and hope to residents and staff.

# EXPRESSING THANKS TO STAFF

This is an easy win, that you don't need to check out with the home before doing, and is always very appreciated.

As a charity, we worked in partnership with local churches to create over 900 gift bags, which were distributed to all care home staff across our Borough. We included chocolate, biscuits, a scented candle, hand cream, lip balm, a postcard with "Footprints" on the front and a message on the back to let them know that their local churches were praying for them, and each bag also had a hand written card expressing thanks and gratitude for the way they were looking after the elderly in our community. Staff were so touched, and I heard some of them talking about it, a year or so later.

Of course, you don't need to do something quite so supersized, but it's a great way to start forging a trusting relationship with your local care home, and we don't need to be in the midst of a pandemic to thank staff for all their hard work.

You may choose a different approach – perhaps a regular hamper of goodies or box of chocolates to keep reminding staff that they are thought about and appreciated.



# CARDS OF KINDNESS

Who doesn't love a card in the post? Why not engage the crafty folk at your church to make some greeting cards that can be given to residents?

We have found these not only bring delight to the residents who receive them but also spark conversations between residents.

It's wise to check with the care home before doing this – find out if there are particular residents who would appreciate a card. They may give you names of individual residents or ask for the cards to be left without a name so that they can distribute them to the residents who would appreciate them most.

This can also be a good way to promote intergenerational connections with children drawing pictures for residents.



# BOUQUETS OF BLESSING

This is another way to express thanks and gratitude that both staff and residents can enjoy.

If you have green fingered members of your congregation who enjoy putting together floral displays, a regular bouquet to a care home reminds them that their local church is thinking of them and this will help to build trust.

You may be able to come to an arrangement with your local supermarket where they donate flowers that have not sold.

Or why not get your congregation growing flowers and shrubbery that can be used?



# TECH CONNECT

The pandemic brought an acceleration in the widespread use of zoom and other technology such as Alexa devices, to help people stay connected. Such technology can bring great benefits to care home residents, enabling them to stay more easily connected with family, friends and their local community.

But care homes may need help in setting up some of this technology for residents. At the start of the pandemic we secured a grant to provide our local care homes with an Android tablet, as well as giving a couple to individual residents who we felt would benefit. I have been playing Words with Friends with one of these residents for the last 2 years, as she missed having a volunteer to play Scrabble with. However, I have had to pop into the care home every few months to provide tech support when the app has stopped working. All it needed was the app to be uninstalled and reinstalled but neither the resident or the staff had the confidence to do this.

We heard of a Baptist minister who used the “Drop In” facility on an Alexa device to pray with a member of her congregation who was admitted to a care home during the pandemic. Audio Alexa devices are relatively cheap and can be a great way for residents to stay connected, particularly if they find telephones difficult to use. They can also be used to listen to music and ask all sorts of amusing and interesting questions. There might be people in your congregation who have the IT skills to support a care home in this way. With the move to more home working since all the lockdowns they may have the extra time on their hands to do this.

Many churches now offer hybrid church – online as well as in person. Does your local care home know about this? They may appreciate the opportunity for residents to log in to your online services.

# PICTURES OF JOY

Pictures can be a very helpful tool for sparking conversations with people living with advanced dementia, and others.

We have created a library of joyful pictures that can be printed off and laminated for this purpose, or you can create your own, with the assistance of google.

These could include pictures of your local area in bygone days, cute animal pictures, cars, babies, nature, and reminiscence prompts – the list is endless.

These pictures can be gifted to the care home for the activity co-ordinator to use with residents, or if you have volunteers visiting residents they may wish to have some to use during their interactions.



# CLOTHING & CAPES

Some care home residents may be admitted in a hurry from hospital and have few of their own clothes with them.

Often if setting up power of attorney is involved this can take time, meaning those residents may have little with them for an extended period.

We have a project offering second hand clothes to care homes. All the clothes are carefully quality controlled and sorted into specific sizes and gender, and are clothes that are easy to put on and take off. We have been surprised at how popular this has been with our local care homes.

We have also got our local community knitting and crocheting soft capes and shawls which are included in these packs. These can be a wonderful comfort for residents, especially those with reduced mobility who are confined to bed or chair. There are plenty of free patterns available online and we have links on the Embracing Age Pinterest account.



# PLANTS, SEEDS & GARDENING

Fortunately, most people are more green fingered than me, and growing plants and seeds can bring joy and delight.

We know of one church that got their children involved in planting seeds in pots for residents, which were put on the window sill at the local care home so that the children could see them growing.

Another church provided their local dementia care home with sensory plants in pots, such as lavender.

Embracing Age has a project in Richmond, in partnership with a local outdoor learning organisation, where we have connected schools with care homes, and the residents and children do gardening together. It has proved very popular. This might not be possible for a church, but you may have congregation members who love gardening who could volunteer to run a gardening club at the local care home.

There are so many benefits to be had from getting outdoors and doing meaningful activity with others.



# KNITTED AQUARIUMS

This is a really fun way to engage with your local community as well as with your care home. There are loads of people who love knitting and crochet and are always on the lookout for meaningful projects – I know, because I'm one of them!

Again, it's good to check with the home first – it's no good giving a huge colourful aquarium if they've got nowhere to put it!

You may have folk in your congregation who love to knit and crochet, and if you do a little bit of research and put some posts on local Facebook community groups you'll find loads more. A word of advice – be specific about the size of the knitted items you require, so that they're not too big. Although, if you do get some that are too large for the tank they can be given separately as tactile, sensory additions.

You can find lots of free patterns online for all things under the sea – colourful fish, shells, crabs, starfish, coral of all shapes and sizes, mermaids, octopus, jellyfish – the list is endless! We have brought a collection of them together on the Embracing Age Pinterest account. There are also some good pattern books that you can buy:

How to Crochet Animals: Ocean: 25 mini menagerie patterns by Kerry Lord

Mini Knitted Ocean: Woolly whales, dolphins and other nautical knits by Sachiyo Ishii

Of course, you'll need a tank, but we found there were plenty of people with used tanks who were willing to donate them. They needed a bit of a scrub but worked beautifully.

To make it look more authentic we scattered aquarium pebbles on the bottom. We created a mesh lid for our aquariums and suspended the sea creatures with fishing line. It worked a treat, and the aquariums look so bright and joyful.



# CARE HOME FRIENDS

It's wonderful to find creative ways to connect with care home residents, especially when visiting is restricted, but nothing can beat the warmth and kindness of in person interactions.

This was brought home to me last week when I was able to start volunteering again at my local care home. I sat with a gentleman with limited speech on the dementia unit, holding his hand and trying to have a simple conversation. I was wearing gloves as part of the PPE requirement, but the gentleman was stroking my wrist, above the edge of the glove. I sensed his need for skin to skin touch.

Of course, we have to be careful, especially with infection control requirements and boundaries in the use of touch, but it is a basic human need that helps people to thrive, and can be so lacking for care home residents. They may receive functional touch as part of their physical care, but this is different to affectionate, therapeutic touch.

Many care home residents have few visitors, particularly those with advanced dementia. The lady I spent weekly time with pre-Covid had no other visitors – only an hour of my week, yet for her it made a huge difference. In the days before her speech became limited she would often say to me, “Thank you so much for coming to see me – it's so nice to have someone to talk to!”

Could your church mobilise trained volunteers to spend quality time with residents doing meaningful activities together?

This could be anything from simply chatting, to reading poetry, going out for a walk, playing a table game like cards, Scrabble or chess, doing a crossword together – the list is endless and depends on what a resident enjoys.

Volunteers can be from across the ages – there are often young people keen to do volunteering as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award, or for their university applications, and those type of intergenerational links can be wonderful.

Of course, there are safeguarding considerations, and training needs, but it is something worth exploring as you build trust with your local care home and will make a huge difference to the lives of residents feeling lonely and isolated. Care homes may already have a training and vetting process for volunteers in place. There is also training available from Embracing Age.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there's a huge opportunity for the church to come alongside residents with the unconditional love of God, showing by our actions that their worth is not dependent on their productivity, but in their value as individuals whom God deeply loves.





# CHAPTER 4

## LEADING SERVICES IN CARE HOMES

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## LEADING SERVICES IN CARE HOMES

Many churches were running services in care homes pre-Covid, and some have been able to start again, albeit with restrictions and infection control procedures in place.

There are online resources about running services in care homes which can be accessed [here](#).

# TOP TIPS FOR CARE HOME SERVICES

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

Bear in mind that 70-80% of care home residents have some degree of significant memory loss or dementia, so keeping it simple is imperative - you may have profound theological revelation and insight, but now is not the time for a half an hour sermon. A five minute talk emphasising an eternal biblical truth through story telling will be way more meaningful. Of course, simple doesn't mean childish or patronising.

## MAKE IT SENSORY

Hearing loss and visual impairment are very prevalent the older we get, so aim to stimulate different senses. It could be printed pictures that people can look closely at, a wooden or knitted cross to hold, or a herb to smell. You are limited only by your imagination, and even then you still have Google!

## KEEP IT FAMILIAR

There is comfort in the familiar – whether it is in singing songs that we know, or reciting well known liturgy and prayers. People with dementia will often be able to recite or sing words and tunes they have known from a young age. They not only draw comfort from this but there is a sense of togetherness and belonging when these are done in unison.

# TOP TIPS CONTINUED

## MAKE IT **4** INTERACTIVE

Involve residents in the service. The most obvious example of this is in singing together, and praying the Lord's Prayer, but also look for other opportunities – are there residents who could do the Bible reading, for example? You may need to make it more accessible in large print, but it may be wonderfully valuing to enable an individual to participate in this way. Perhaps percussion instruments could be distributed for use during the singing – this might be particularly good for residents who struggle with words, enabling them to participate in a non-verbal way.

## DEEP CALLS TO DEEP **5**

We have no idea what God may be doing in someone's heart by His Spirit, even if it appears that they are not participating or they have their eyes closed. Of course, it's entirely possible that they've fallen asleep because we haven't kept it simple or familiar and haven't provided opportunities for interaction and sensory exploration. Or they may be having an off day and simply tired, despite all our best efforts.

But perhaps God is working in their hearts, deep calling to deep, reminding them of His great love for them, and filling them with His Holy Spirit and surrounding them with His comfort and peace.



# 5

CHAPTER

KEEP ON SOWING  
YOUR SEEDS

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# KEEP ON SOWING YOUR SEEDS

I love the verse in Ecclesiastics that says “Keep on sowing your seeds – you never know what will bear fruit – perhaps it all will.” I have it on the wall in my office to encourage myself when I’m feeling despondent.

There are days when I come home from spending time with residents in the dementia unit at my local care home and wonder whether I’ve made any difference at all. Only today a resident told me to, “Sod off! You’re no help at all!” because I couldn’t help her to go home, or find a telephone so that she could call her husband to come and collect her.

I don’t mind the rudeness or the anger as I know it’s a symptom of her dementia, but what discourages me sometimes are my own feelings of uselessness and incompetence. It’s likely most of us will experience days like this, when we need to remind ourselves to press on, and to use the negative moments as learning curves, reflecting on how we might do things differently next time. The reality is that when you are journeying alongside people with advanced dementia their responses can be unpredictable and techniques that you use successfully one week might be useless the next. But keep on sowing seeds of love – you never know what will bear fruit in the long term – perhaps it all will.

Other days I read the stories from volunteers visiting care home residents and I sit at my computer in tears hearing about the difference they are making in their lives. When we show kindness and spend time with those whom much of society has written off we are expressing the very heart of God, placing worth and value on their lives.

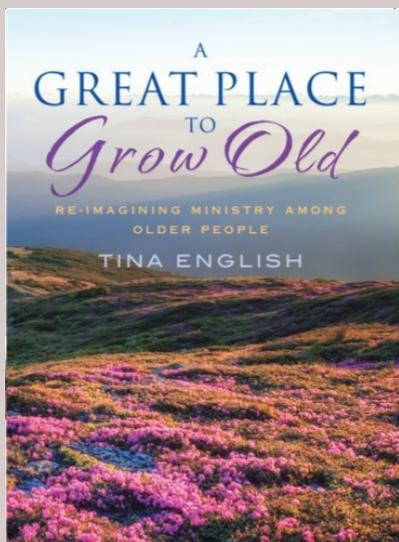


**Keep on sowing your seeds –  
you never know what will  
bear fruit – perhaps it all  
will.**

-  
Ecclesiastes 11:6

**E M B R A C I N G A G E . O R G . U K**

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ MORE ABOUT MINISTRY  
AMONGST OLDER PEOPLE CHECK OUT TINA'S BOOK**



“

*Super-accessible...  
practical, imaginative  
ways to support and  
learn from older  
people.*

-  
Debbie Thrower,  
Pioneer of Anna Chaplaincy  
for Older People

”

It's full of inspiring stories and ideas for successful ministry amongst older people, including chapters on dementia, supporting carers, ideas for if you don't have an accessible church building, and much more.

[Available from online retailers, or click here  
for a special rate](#)