

Session 1: SUMMARY

A. The challenge of dementia today

At least 850,000 people are living with dementia in the UK

- one in six of those over 80
- one in fourteen of those over 65
- over 40,000 under the age of 65[1]

700,000 families provide an estimated £11.6bn worth of unpaid care.[2] What resources are available to support this army of caregivers? They do it gladly but find it draining and sometimes overwhelming.

They can't be replaced by 'social care'. That is not just because of the financial implications. Much more important are the bonds of love and the links of family and community that we all need.

'Carers are the keepers of dignity and personhood for people living with dementia.' [3] This is such an important role.

It's a beautiful role. But it can also be very demanding. In a recent global survey, 54% of carers indicated they feel stressed "often" or "all the time," in trying to cope with their caring responsibilities. Only 8% said "rarely" or "never." [4]

And dementia affects a range of people - 'It's like a stone dropping into a pool'

- the person living with dementia
- those who are caring for them, usually family members or close friends
- other family members
- their wider circle of friends

Churches need to be alert to the impact of dementia, not only on the individual but on this wider circle. All of them are people affected by dementia.

This article from Embracing Age gives simple ways in which we can be aware and show our support:

<https://www.embracingage.org.uk/caring-for-carers.html>

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B. The churches' unique opportunity

As the challenge of dementia increases, so do the resources – which is really good. There is a growing number of organisations, as you can see from the appendix. They all offer valuable help and the situation has greatly changed in recent years. Do churches simply provide more of the same? They certainly need to work along with the organisations and resources that are available. But churches have at least two distinctive contributions, which give them a unique opportunity:

* Churches offer **relationships with continuity**. Professionals come and go, and organisations are not always accessible, but church members continue. They can offer time – to listen, to share, to be with people.

"When Shoko and I were living with Alzheimer's we needed to build a support team. But it was hard, confusing work to navigate the social care system. We realised that we already had a network of friends in the church. We experienced the 'power of loving community', at a time when physical and emotional resources were stretched and faith was challenged."

We already have this network to offer, of which caregivers are already a part (or can be). This is an amazing resource, which many, if they are not part of a similar community, do not have. But many groups other do very good work in providing support.

How can we make this unique network stronger and more intentional? There is no formula. Each individual or family's experience of dementia is distinct. To be able to give support we need to build relationships of trust and understanding. Those of us who are not directly affected need to learn about dementia and its impact. We need to understand the challenges that caregivers face. We also need to understand some of the attitudes and skills that they, and we, need in relating to those actually living with dementia.

Then we need to think, and plan, how best to use this to help them build their own support team. This is the content of the sessions in this course.

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* Even more important, churches are **communities of spiritual power**. They can share faith, hope, forgiveness and prayer.

"Shoko no longer read her Bible. Her spoken prayer was limited, with occasional surprising exceptions. But we continued to sing, at home and in church. That was the familiar place that welcomed us, to join the worship and be greeted by smiling friends. Our vicar arranged a regular meeting with me where I could share my feelings and pray with him. We saw church members demonstrating the truths of the Gospel in their attitudes and their care."

The Gospel provides the basis of the faith that we need in order to face the challenges that dementia gives us. We will remind ourselves of some of its basic truths, as we go along.

Here is a starting point:

We have a heavenly Father who is both loving and powerful

The Lord's Prayer begins 'Our Father who art in Heaven' (the traditional wording).

There you have the two sides – a loving and dependable father who is also all powerful. Whatever happens is under his control, even when we don't understand how.

That gives a very secure framework for our lives.

It also enables us to welcome and affirm people of any background, whatever their mental, physical or emotional condition. We are all part of our Father's family. Our identity is based on his love and his remembering each of us. We will explore this more in the next sessions.

In summary:

Churches have a unique opportunity to serve those affected by dementia, among their members and in the community. We already have this amazing network. How can we make it stronger and more intentional?

How do we use it to help those affected by dementia to build their own support team?