



How to ...

Create dementia friendly church services

Dementia

Dementia is a disease which impairs people's ability to remember, think and make choices. It currently affects 800,000 people in the UK, and that number is expected to double in the next 30 years. As a Christian presence in every community, the Church of England is uniquely placed to help make life better for people living through the challenging times that dementia brings. From, hospital chaplaincy, dementia friendly community choirs, Anna Chaplaincy, to thousands being trained in churches to become dementia friends, the Church is responding.

Introduction

In this guide Sarah Thorpe, Dementia Support Worker for the Diocese of Lichfield, explores how to make a church service dementia friendly.

My work is centred on encouraging and equipping church communities to welcome and understand those living with dementia and those who care for them. Dementia Friendly Churches are inclusive, accessible and community focused and their worship celebrates the meaningful and intentional relationships we have with God and the people around us.

Church Services

For people living with dementia, the multi-sensory nature of a church service can be very powerful whether it be the hymns recalled from childhood, the familiarity of the cross or words of the Lord's Prayer.

I've been speaking to a number of people about dementia-friendly church services. St Andrew's Church, Church Aston near Telford held a dementia-friendly main Sunday service, put together by Rev Leonie Wheeler and Hilary Griffin. Some of the adaptations they made to their service included:

- A shorter, simplified non-Eucharistic service.
- Simple name badges, to make people easily identifiable.
- Extra people as welcomers, able to support people during the service and guide people easily to the toilets in the church hall.
- The church Memory Box was left open at the back of church throughout the service, available to anyone who wanted to engage with its contents.
- Cold drinks were provided at the back of church throughout the service.
- An initial announcement made it clear that people were free to move about during the service, if they wanted to.
- Familiar hymns were chosen: "Guide me O thou great redeemer" was particularly commented on as someone's favourite. Music is so important, often connecting even when words are fraying at the edges: we have a wonderful resource in our hymns.
- The talk was simple and short, using an accessible, relevant Olympic theme of "running the race".
- The prayers used objects and movement, instead of a barrage of words. So people reflect on a person or situation they wanted to give thanks for – and then were invited to

choose a flower and place it in a vase, as a sign of God's goodness and our gratitude. Next, everyone held a stone in their hand, noting a worry or anxiety, before placing it in a basket, as they gave it to God and felt the weight lifted from their hands.

- The service included the Lord's Prayer in its traditional form. This can connect so deeply – even for people who are making few word-based connections.

One daughter has acknowledged, at a dementia-friendly service she brings her mother to, "It's a real relief to bring mum to a place where people will accept her as she is and I don't have to feel embarrassed."

As dementia advances, it's important that family and carers can still involve people with dementia in community activities: it's all too easy for people to become isolated and to stop joining in, because it becomes too much of a stretch. A Carers UK survey confirmed that 8 in 10 carers have felt lonely or socially isolated because of their caring responsibilities – and a properly inclusive church service and welcoming church community can be a really creative response to that startling statistic. Others have noted different strengths of dementia-friendly services: "sharing", "support", "celebrating", "community" and "continuity and stability", as well as "staying in step through changes".

What other elements might you consider, if you are putting together a dementia-friendly church service? Pictorial signposts on the service sheet can help people to follow – perhaps a picture of praying hands or music, a bible or a candle.

Think about ways of moving from head-level, word-based worship to whole-hearted, inclusive worship. You can include active participation by passing an object round as a key focus, or sharing actions for songs, like "He's got the whole world in his hands". Candles or a cross can provide a clear visual focus. You could use smell and taste by bringing in a loaf of home-baked bread, fresh from the oven, with the reading, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

Further information

Have a look at [Livability's "Top Ten Tips" for dementia-friendly worship and prayer](#). This resource includes 10 top tips for being a Dementia Friendly Church in a number of key areas including; worship services, prayer, buildings and being a dementia friendly community.

Conclusion

Above all, notice the atmosphere of your service: don't get stuck in rigid expectations or requirements, but value an easy and accepting atmosphere, so that unexpected responses or involvement can be incorporated. So in our church, everyone loved the way Mary engaged with the choir's singing, as she walked down the aisle after communion conducting happily, spreading smiles to everyone: even at the heart of a formal communion service, we all felt the transforming, present-moment life she brought to our service.

Written by Sarah Thorpe; Dementia Support Worker, Diocese of Lichfield.