

Dementia-friendly church



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The challenges of dementia

Martin is in the middle stages of dementia, with most of his care needs met by his wife Gillian. She loves Martin dearly and doesn't begrudge his increasing reliance on her, but she is often exhausted and misses the conversations they used to have. It is taking longer to get ready in the morning, so being in church for the 10am service on Sundays is not always possible.

Martin and Gillian are among a growing number of people affected by dementia, with many now living well into their 80s and 90s. For those who have been church members there is a deep desire to continue participating, but dementia can make this difficult.

Isolation and loneliness

Church is often a setting for fellowship and social contact. But Martin now finds post-church coffee bewildering, as all the noise and activity makes it difficult for him to engage in conversation. For Gillian, however, these times are vital for receiving support from friends, including Anna Chaplain Jess.

Unusual patterns of behaviour in church linked to dementia (such as restlessness or making noises in quiet parts of the service) can draw disapproving looks. Longstanding friends may avoid conversation, unsure of what to say or how to respond to changes in communication. Roles the person fulfilled are taken from them and given to others, leaving feelings of displacement and loss.

People with dementia may gradually stop coming to church and after a while their absence is no longer noticed. In withdrawing from church, the person with dementia and their caring relatives are cut off from worship and friendship at a time when it is most needed. Sharing with other Christians can bring reassurance, hope and a sense of belonging, a strengthening of faith and a reduction in loneliness.

Practical and cognitive problems

People like Martin and Gillian also face practical problems, such as getting ready on time, or navigating the building as a result of declining mobility. Reduced concentration and awareness may cause difficulty following what is happening. Declining language skills can make reading prayers and following sermons difficult.

Keys to a dementia-inclusive church

Martin and Gillian's church have tried to respond positively to their unfolding needs by developing ways of including people with dementia. Here are several approaches churches can adopt to offer a warm welcome.

Awareness – Being a dementia-friendly, or dementia-inclusive, church might involve holding awareness sessions for the congregation, or focusing on aspects of dementia in written materials. How can we encourage communities to understand dementia-related brain changes better, including busting myths and overcoming fears that surround the condition? (See [WEB](#) for lists of organisations that offer information and advice.)

Intergenerational, multisensory worship – Martin loves to sing in church and he can mostly follow song words on the overhead screen. Gillian prompts him, explaining what is happening during services. All-age services are especially positive for Martin as they are interactive and involve young and old alike. Intergenerational services can engage people living with dementia because they are informal, shorter and more engaging of the senses. Choose simple themes and draw upon familiar Bible stories, using visual prompts or creative activities.

Traditional songs and midweek meal

Shorter, more relaxed forms of traditional worship held late morning or early afternoon midweek may attract an older congregation; they are often held café-style and combined with a meal or light refreshments. It helps to include older liturgy and hymns, as more recent memories are lost sooner in dementia than those

from earlier in life; hymns sung at Sunday school are remembered but songs from recent times may be forgotten. Music is effective in making connections as it draws on parts of the brain that are less damaged. Messy Vintage, a form of Messy Church geared towards seniors, may also be helpful.

Whole-body worship – We use our whole bodies in worship, using rituals for prayer and worship held in muscle memory. People with dementia respond to the invitation to pray, to sing, to take Communion, and join in with actions to songs – their spirits and bodies hold the recollection of God's loving care, even when language and thinking skills are failing. It is deeply moving to see clear responses in worship from people in late dementia. If we are one body, each fulfilling a role, what can people with dementia teach us about faith, and how can we enable them to minister to us rather than always being on the receiving end?

Safeguarding and risk assessment – Both these form part of the planning for dementia-inclusive services, with volunteers given space to explore the limitations of their role in offering help (e.g. with mobility or care). Dementia raises distinctive safeguarding responsibilities which need to be addressed in our planning.

Kindness is remembered – We can make practical adjustments to how we worship and our buildings, but the most significant changes are of attitude. People with dementia can be deeply attuned to the responses of others because emotional awareness remains. Martin enjoys church because he and Gillian first established friendships in the congregation through the community café the church runs on Tuesday mornings. Kindness from another human being leaves behind feelings that are recalled in subsequent interactions, even if the identity and role of that person is forgotten; the ability to give and receive love remains, if we only look for the signs – a smile, a gesture, a look in the eyes.

See [WEB](#) for helpful resources.

