

# Bread & Wine

## Holy Communion in care homes: Helping people with dementia



**Julia Burton-Jones, Anna Chaplaincy Training and Development Lead, shares suggestions for leading Communion services in care settings.**

A common role for Anna Chaplains in their work supporting older people is leading worship in a care home for a group of residents who are very frail and living with varying stages of dementia. The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is a central faith practice for Christians and a source of hope, comfort and reassurance. It can continue to nourish the souls of faithful Christians living in the later stages of dementia, but needs to be offered in sensitive and appropriate ways.

### Create a sacred space

Preparing the room is a crucial aspect of leading worship in a care home. The room's main purpose may be a lounge or dining area, so creating a visual display at the front with items such as a cross, a Bible, an LED candle and flowers (fresh or faux) helps to create an atmosphere of worship. Chaplain to Older People Louise says, 'I love it when after appearing unsure about what is going on, someone's face suddenly lights up when they see a chalice and bread and realises it's time for Communion.' Playing Christian music, or even a recording of church bells helps set the scene and indicates to everyone that a time of worship is beginning.

### Use pictures and objects on the theme of the service

In dementia, the senses are of increasing importance in understanding and engaging with the world. Showing pictures and objects linked to the theme enables participants to grasp the topic of conversation and take part. Some may enjoy holding and exploring objects, especially if they have a pleasing tactile element to them.

### Encourage participation

You may have people in the group who are used to taking part; inviting them to read a Bible passage or the Collect helps affirm their continuing contribution. Instead of giving a talk, you could introduce the theme and invite stories and their reflections.

### Remember participation is not just through the mind and language

Many people in the later stages of dementia struggle with verbal communication but this does not mean they are disengaged. Anna Chaplain Joan talks about a man in later dementia who enjoyed rearranging the objects she brought to the Communion service, holding and examining them.

### Use music to invite participation

Areas of the brain we use for music are less damaged in dementia than other parts. Chaplains frequently comment on the joy of seeing a person who rarely speaks join in, word perfect, with the words of a familiar hymn or song or prayer. This points to the need of choosing music that will be familiar to members of the group. Anna Chaplain Jo visits local care homes with her vicar, Trevor. Trevor takes his guitar to accompany the singing, which is greatly appreciated by residents and staff alike.

### Work closely with care staff in understanding needs

Given the frailty and vulnerability of our care home congregations, it is vital we work closely with the staff, who know the needs of each resident. In later dementia, the risk of choking increases. Anna Chaplain Joan says, 'I take intincted wafers into the care homes and am aware of those for whom the wafer might be a choking hazard. I usually give a blessing to those not taking the wafer.' (Intincted wafers are dipped in communion wine and, based on your tradition, may be already blessed by a minister.)

### Hold emotion

Louise says, 'There are times for all of us when coming into God's presence can feel emotional, we may cry as we feel God's touch, cry as we feel peace, cry as we bring sadness and troubles to God, cry with joy. This is so for people with dementia just as it is for all of us – sometimes more so, as people face extra challenges and troubles and may have changes to their emotional regulation. Sometimes receiving Communion can be very moving and make people tearful. Don't panic or feel the need to brush quickly past feelings. If you are concerned, catch up with the person after the service and check in with staff if it's a care home.'

### Go with the flow

Don't be put off if it feels a bit chaotic, if everyone appears asleep and you wonder why you are all there; hand it to God, let the Holy Spirit minister. Reassure people that God loves their presence more than their ability to work through the social rules around services, such as standing and sitting at the right times, or coming forward for communion. It may help to have a simple service sheet, with illustrations linked to the theme, but however well you plan and structure your service, sometimes you will need to abandon what you had in mind and go with the needs and wishes of people in the room.