

Support the Forgotten

by Marion Shoard

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The pages of *plus* have seen much debate about ways in which churches can support older people during the pandemic, but three groups stand out perhaps more than any others to demand our attention.

Digitally-excluded people

How should we all seek to prevent ourselves from becoming lonely during the pandemic? The NHS offers seven tips. Move your activities online – such as playing Scrabble or having dinner with friends. Join a virtual choir. Why not message old friends on social media? Or give a mindfulness app a go? The majority of the NHS's tips involve the use of digital communication. Yet 10 per cent of UK adults did not use the internet in 2018, according to an Office of National Statistics survey. Four-fifths of the 5.3 million people involved were aged 65 or over.

People who cannot afford a computer or a smartphone, have one but lack sufficient bandwidth or the confidence to use digital equipment, or are prevented from doing so by difficulties in seeing or understanding face exclusion from more and more aspects of daily life. The pandemic has thrown up new challenges. How can these people avoid mixing with strangers by ordering a supermarket home-delivery? How can they make purchases at a store which stipulates only click-and-collect? Or quickly discover how local bus timetables have been adjusted during lockdown?

Potentially life-changing information too may be beyond their reach. If a hospital proposes to discharge you into a care home, the facility to call up within seconds the home's latest Care Quality Commission inspection report can help stop a move to a low-quality home in which you might die. Or perhaps you are facing much restricted visiting of your loved one in hospital. Having at your fingertips the latest government advice on hospital visiting and that hospital's visiting policy can be hugely empowering when confronted by a ward manager who seems to be unduly restrictive on face-to-face visits and/or unhelpful over phone and video calling. People in churches who enjoy digital access could do a great deal to help those who are digitally excluded by calling up a wide range of key information for them at the time they need it.

Unvisited care home residents

During my years as a church pastoral visitor in care homes in Surrey, I came across many delightful people who never saw any visitors, except perhaps once a year. Their relatives and friends had died or lived far away, or had simply lost interest in them. These residents must have felt their lack of visitors acutely, particularly at Christmas. How do they feel now, at a time when so much public discourse about care homes focusses on the desperate desire by family and friends to visit particular residents and when the unvisited see the homes in which they are living being adjusted to accommodate the safe visiting of those of their fellow residents who are favoured by visitors?

To reduce the risk of infection posed by many different people going into care homes, government guidance has introduced the idea of each resident choosing only one nominated visitor, at least for indoor visits. Churches could ask their local homes whether they would approach those residents whom currently nobody is seeking to visit and ask them whether they would like someone from the church to become their visitor, giving a short description of those who have offered in this way, including their hobbies and interests. The care home resident could receive a first visit and decide whether they wished to see the visitor again – control would remain in their hands. Plainly, many older people in churches may think twice before putting themselves forward lest they catch the virus in the home, but there may be a sufficient number of volunteers in churches, perhaps younger adults, prepared to put themselves forward. What a lovely Christmas present such an offer of friendship could be.

Family and friend carers

The unpaid carers of older and disabled people have found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place since the start of lockdown in March. Many of the day-care facilities on which they depended for a break from caring have closed. They may fear hiring paid help lest the care assistants involved, attending to many clients each day, bring the infection into their home. At the same time, carers who in the past would have seriously considered encouraging their loved one to move into a care home when the mental and physical toll of caring had become too much to bear now fear taking such a step lest the care home drastically limit future contact.

St Paul told the Galatians, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” People in churches could offer much support to carers – baking a Christmas cake perhaps, or offering to help with deliveries. But if they would like to do more and have not formed a social bubble with any other household, they could offer to ‘bubble’ with a household containing a carer and cared-for person. Plainly, they would need to take the utmost care not to expose themselves to any risk of infection and to inform the carer’s household of any risks they had taken, leaving the carer free to withdraw from the arrangement if they so wished. But if all went well, ‘bubbling’ would enable the helper to visit the carer and cared-for person indoors. They could sit with the cared-for person while the carer went out, giving him or her valuable me-time. They could take the carer and the person for whom they are caring on trips outdoors. They could provide a wide range of practical assistance. In this way, the lives of a group of people who must be among the hardest hit by the effects of Covid-19 could be transformed.

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Marion Shoard is the author of the 1000-page [*How to Handle Later Life*](#). She has taken part in many of Christians on Ageing’s Conference Calls about churches’ help for older people during the pandemic, the reports of which can be found at <https://christiansonageing.org.uk/conference-call-2/>.