

# Celebrating older people



## Andrew Wileman talks to Shanelle Manderson about a report advising how churches can better value older people

**‘P**AST your prime’ and ‘over the hill’ are phrases you may hear more often as you age. But becoming older is a normal part of life. Even as you read this sentence you are 15 seconds older – give or take – than when you first opened this page.

It is no secret we are an ageing population. In 2019, there were 11.9 million UK residents aged 85 and over. Known as the ‘fourth age’, this group represents 18 per cent of the total population and is likely to increase over the next 40 years to 26 per cent. Across the denominations this brings a great opportunity for churches to nurture,

develop and value older members.

Bournemouth University has partnered Faith in Later Life, a church-wide ministry organisation that advocates for older people across denominations, in writing a report to help churches and Christian organisations consider how they might better support, include and encourage older citizens.

The Salvation Army is an active ministry partner of Faith in Later Life.

‘The Army is the only denominational member,’ explains Assistant Director of Older People’s Services Andrew Wileman (THQ). ‘Elaine Cobb, the retired director of Older People’s

Services, and I are also trustees of the organisation. So, although we didn’t write the report, we saw a lot of the text and agree with the final version.’

*Guidance for Christian Faith Organisations in the Support and Value of Older People* is divided into eight sections, which each include reflections and questions, so readers can consider what is already known or in place and how to improve it.

Section one stresses the importance of celebrating the fourth age and valuing the contributions, wisdom, experience, biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity of older people. It offers guidance on how readers can acknowledge and value them; how to minister, serve and support the development of their faith; and how to reach out and share the gospel message.

It also suggests that churches may be able to help with the spiritual needs of older people, such as experiencing God, accepting loss and having awareness of the end of life.

‘There are all sorts of spiritual issues around loss, stress and health that perhaps become a little more relevant when you get older,’ says Andrew. ‘From that point of view, I think a corps being able to be the hub of spiritual and pastoral support for older people is so important.’

Unintentionally, ageism can manifest itself in society and churches, as the second section explains, leading the spiritual and pastoral needs of people living in the fourth age to sometimes be overlooked or forgotten.

Andrew agrees: ‘Despite many of our corps being predominantly older, we still have a very first-half-of-life culture about the Army and the Church in general, which focuses on families and children. We very often don’t listen to,

seek out or value the needs of older people in our congregations, communities or society.'

The report goes on to say that Christian faith organisations can have practices, services and policies that discriminate against older people, without being explicitly ageist. Churches need to develop more pastoral ministries that focus on bringing together age groups and better recognise the rights of older people to be heard and valued, otherwise opportunities for Kingdom work will be missed.

'We can't make assumptions that older people have reached the end of their spiritual journey, simply because of their age. Our needs for spiritual support don't stop just because we enter older age,' stresses Andrew.

'We believe that ageing well is possible, rather than passively waiting for our bodies or minds to fail us. This is something that The Salvation Army can promote. We believe there is a creative and Kingdom-focused reason for our later years, and our corps and centres can play a unique role in equipping and enabling all its members in a more focused way.'

According to one study published in 2015, loneliness can have the same negative impact on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Many people have struggled with enforced social isolation and experienced loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, for many living in the fourth age, this is an everyday norm. Section three of the report calls on churches to identify those most at risk of loneliness in their congregations and communities, set up networks of social engagement and activities appropriate for older people, reach out to those living alone through befriending and visiting, and share the gospel at every opportunity.

'I think every corps has a role to play around tackling loneliness and isolation,' adds Andrew. 'There are organisations and faith-based ministries in most towns and cities looking at this, so it could be more beneficial to work in collaboration and partnership with others.'

Section four acknowledges older people in care homes. It encourages churches to get to know the different care homes in their neighbourhoods and arrange regular visiting. It also recommends involving members living

in care homes with church activities, meetings and decisions about church life so they do not feel isolated and cut off from the fellowship. Advance care planning, end-of-life care and protecting older adults at risk also feature in later sections.

'It is important that corps understand their older people and the risks that they perhaps face around safeguarding, fraud and scams, and make sure that they've got the right access to support,' adds Andrew. 'Perhaps there may be isolated older people who are financially challenged. Older age poverty is quite a growing trend as pension funds and those sorts of things are under more pressure. So that's something for corps to think about.'

The final section provides ideas for specific Christian ministries among older people.

'This report highlights the fact that churches have many opportunities to show appreciation for and celebrate older age,' enthuses Andrew. 'One of the straplines we've always had for older people's ministry is "just because we're an older corps, it doesn't mean that we're a failing corps". I want to reiterate the importance, value and the role of older people in our mission and our ministry week in and week out.'

● To download the report, visit [faithinlaterlife.org/resource-hub](https://faithinlaterlife.org/resource-hub) and search for 'Guidance for Christian Faith Organisations'

