

Published in the Church Times 7 May 2010

Older People have their part to play, too.

Two pieces of news capture attention. First, the publication of statistics from Archbishops' Council informs us that half of those in our pews are pensioners. Some rural congregations were older than 65 on average, while the youngest Anglicans were found in London, with the 'standard' churchgoer aged 54. It compares with the population as a whole where the average adult age is 48. (Church of England Web Page 22 January 2010). Second, the news that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that people should be allowed to work beyond the age of 65 and with more flexible hours (BBC News 25 January 2010).

What the statistics mean is important for all who care about the shape and practice of religion. Whatever the positive spin we should note a drop in attendance for the fifth consecutive year despite increasing its efforts to woo people back to the pews. A strengthening of evangelical leadership in Dioceses does not seem to have had any impact. The constant use of the word mission has not enabled us to shift the steady movement of the tide away from the Churches.

There is one theme here that should be tackled head on. It is the ageism that exists in both Church and society. Forces combine to keep older people on the margins, to make them redundant, useless, a statistic to be feared as part of the picture of decline. We need to ask why we have so few positive images of ageing. We need to stop apologising for older people. Age is a reality both around us and within us. Older people can liberate us into a different perspective on living and faith.

Two practical suggestions emerge from this assumption. These suggestions might go some way to grounding the theoretical debates and assertions about ageism in the fabric of our own lives.

Many congregations are being encouraged to be more reflective about the shape of ministry and resources for outreach. Some are now being required by Dioceses to audit their life as part of exploring how best to use time and resources for evangelism. This is partly a financial imperative which is a result of our steady decline. The question here is whether in the process of reflection see older people as a resource rather than a problem. So, two suggestions. First take stock of the age profile of your congregation with a view to marking and celebrating the contribution that older people make to the life of both Church and community. Consider who it is that hold key positions of responsibility. Reflect on the hidden work of care: unpaid care of older family members, the love and encouragement of grandparents, the small acts of kindness expressed by neighbours who have the time to consider the little things that help life along, like shopping, advice about heating, benefits, or that difficult letter. Go further and see these people, grey and slower as they may be, in the time line of the story of these last decades of your Church and imagine their sustaining presence amidst all the changing fortunes of history. And once we have built up a picture by listening to what older people have so freely shared then find a moment to value and celebrate age in your cycle of worship. Allow them to tell their

story. Deal with the prejudice that we all participate within that marginalises and distances and protects us from befriending the older stranger within ourselves.

If our Christian ageism is unlocked in this way then the spiritual task of renewal through the making of our soul might unlock the spiritual energy that can come from all owing age to be a teacher. Older people can show how little time in all our bureaucracy we give to consider what substance and depth mean for being human. It is no accident that older people become more spiritual and that they can help us to perceive age is essentially a spiritual. If you have a picture of human life as a story that needs pondering, retelling, organising, a story that is open to the judgement and mercy of God, it will be natural to hope for time to do this work, the making of the soul. Not only should we celebrate age but seek to integrate its essential gift into the spiritual body of the Church. That the body will change as a result of this combating of ageism is perhaps obvious but there is also the possibility of growth in all kinds of unexpected ways.

One of our abiding concerns is a vision of the Kingdom of God as a hope for the transformation of this world. The work of transformation makes demands upon us especially as we shall all be asked to consider how best to make provision for the common good in the coming election. This leads to a second concern about ageism in society expressed particularly through our social provision for older people. Churches could have a critical role in asking politics to take a lead in the reshaping of our negative images of older people by allowing their experiences to be heard. How can we encourage debate so that the needs of older people are moved up the political agenda? We should bear in mind the human realities behind these facts; over half a million older people spent last Christmas alone; 11% of older people describe the quality of their life as 'very poor'; pensioner poverty continues to rise (Age Concern figures) and we continue to fail many older people who are denied access to residential care for lack of state funding. How might the Churches work together in moving age, older people and our responsibility to them further up the political agenda?

We are all getting older. We all have a stake in this subject! Can we find practical ways of combating ageism in both Church and Society before it is too late for us?