

Spirituality & Ageing (S&A)

1. Background

Several Superintendent ministers raised concerns with the DMLN about the spirituality of ageing congregations. There are well-known issues over the practical challenges of fulfilling Our Calling as a Church of increasing age and frailty, with fewer people willing or able to take on the essential roles, eg stewards, treasurer, property steward, leading to stress, distress, and closure.

Whilst understandably concerned about those things, the Supers were also concerned to maintain the spiritual life of these ageing congregations and to receive help with ideas and ways that enable our older members to flourish in their relationship and faith-journey with God.

The DMLN wanted to identify the need in order to respond to it appropriately, engaging churches and circuits across the East Central region in a range of locations including rural seaside and other places where there are above-average numbers of older people. The task was to identify where in the region we have ministers and congregations interested in this subject and invite them to host a gathering of their locally-interested people for conversation to explore what they think they need and whether the resource book 'Seasons of My Soul' could fit part of that need. If so, then a taster session could be arranged to introduce Seasons of My Soul to those interested in using it in their small group, church or circuit.

2. Preparation

Engaging people in hosting a conversation took longer than expected. The first approach was to identify potential interested parties through their role (eg known interest, chaplain to a care home) or by referral, and to phone individually, explaining the brief and requesting assistance in order to organise a gathering. This approach took time (elapsed and actual) but did not generate the expected response, possibly because it wasn't reaching people who were both interested and available. Key individuals are usually in demand from a number of sources and have to prioritise their time, often many months in advance.

The second approach was to work with circuits and let them choose a date. A flyer advertising a Summer Special was emailed to all ministers in the region (with thanks to Julia Gibson, Administrator for DMLN East Central) that included the following text.

Does your Church, Section or Circuit have an interest in spirituality and ageing? Maybe you're concerned about or have an interest in our (generally) ageing congregations and the spiritual aspects of 'being church'? May I meet with you and your colleagues one day in August for 1 to 1.5 hours for conversation? Conversation with interested parties would:

- explore what you think spirituality and ageing is about - eg healthy Methodist community, pastoral care, mission, wisdom transfer, dementia-friendly churches, preparation for death, companionship, discipleship*
- explore what you think you and your congregations need to support and equip this area of ministry*
- consider what resources are readily available and whether one of them, 'Seasons of my soul', could meet any of those needs.*

The DMLN wants to understand local needs in order to provide support to those engaged in ministry (ordained and lay), and to equip our churches to meet the spiritual needs of older people.

This generated several responses from interested people, some of whom could not engage due to holidays and/or covering for colleagues, whereas others had more time because August is typically quieter in our church communities.

Once the date and venue were fixed with the host, another flyer was created specifically for that gathering and emailed to all contacts in that circuit and the adjacent circuits within the region. Contacts included all ministers (active and supernumerary, presbyteral and diaconal), circuit administrators, circuit stewards, and any other lay people already on the DMLN's contact list. There was one exception to this: the Journeying Group that meets at St Michael's Priory ('The Well') in Willen, Milton Keynes. This is a closed group to which I was invited.

Summer Special ~ Spirituality and Ageing

A conversation about the spiritual aspects of 'being church' with older people has been arranged to which you are invited ...

Date: Monday 8th August 2016

Time: 10am to about 11.30am

Place: Southside Methodist Church, 129 London Rd, Peterborough PE2 9DD

I recognise that this date will not be suitable for everyone. If there are points you would like included in the conversation and can't be there, then please jot them down and send to me, or talk to a colleague who will be attending. Conversation with interested parties would: ... (text as before)
...

*Please would you **share** this with any colleagues and lay people who would be interested in joining us, e.g. with a particular ministry to older people?*

Thanks for assistance with email distribution go to Julia Gibson, to Susie Palmer and Christine Thompson at the Northampton District Office, and to several circuit administrators.

3. Conversations

Of the 52 circuits in the region, six hosted a gathering to which another 23 circuits were invited, providing reasonable access to a total of 29 circuits representing 56% of the region.

The seven gatherings for conversation were held in manses and church buildings as follows:

Time	Date	Venue	District	People
1000h-1130h	Tue 2nd Aug	Duffield Rd, Derby	N&D	4
1000h-1130h	Mon 8th Aug	Southside MC, Peterborough	Northants	8
1000h-1130h	Tue 16th Aug	Nettleham, Lincoln	Lincs	3
1030h-1200h	Wed 17th Aug	St Michael's Priory, Milton Keynes*	Northants	18
1000h-1130h	Wed 24th Aug	Winshill MC, Burton-upon-Trent	N&D	6
1000h-1130h	Thu 25th Aug	Kingswood MC, Wollaton, Nottingham	N&D	8
1000h-1130h	Wed 31st Aug	London Rd, Daventry	Northants	8
Total attendance				55
Interested but couldn't attend				12
Total demonstrating interest				67

*The Milton Keynes (MK) session was different because I was invited to join an existing Journeying Group established over three-and-a-half years ago specifically to explore issues of ageing and spirituality. The group meets one morning (1030h-1200h) every six to eight weeks and now has 18 members aged 70 to 88. They choose topics for discussion and were very open to me joining them and leading the conversation, which I did in the same way as the other conversations but acknowledging that this time I was with entirely third-agers talking about themselves, whereas in all the other sessions, whilst third-agers were present, the conversation was often about others rather than self - the rest of their congregation(s).

The conversations took the form of:

- introductions and purpose of gathering
- a reading from Isaiah 35 and prayer
- setting the scene: some facts about ageing in the UK
- opening the conversation: what comes to mind when we say 'spirituality and ageing'?
- some prompting questions to aid the flow: eg
 - what does good spirituality look / feel / sound like?
 - what sorts of issues do you experience with older people in fulfilling Our Calling?
- where do you think and feel you need support?
- what is there already? Some examples including Seasons of My Soul shared in more detail
- closing reading of H&P 277 and a prayer

My full facilitator notes are in **Appendix A: Conversation Starter**.

After setting the scene and asking the first question, most conversations flowed with little prompting from me, unless they strayed into the practical difficulties of ageing and stayed there, for example as sometimes happened when responding to the 'Our Calling' question. I took notes as people talked and have mostly kept them in the order they were shared. They are structured as:

- general conversation about spirituality and ageing issues, thoughts, feelings
- support required
- resources shared from the experiences of group members

The full notes from each gathering are in **Appendix B: Conversations** and covered a wide range of aspects on spirituality, ageing and related challenges including stories of hope and compassion, as one would expect. Here is a summary of what came out during the conversations.

Spirituality ...

Spirituality is whatever keeps someone going and gives meaning to their life - a powerful essential joy - and it changes over the years as life changes. It's active, a response to faith, the 'God' part of relationship; finding God in life; an awareness of a higher being; a peaceful journey. One can be spiritual but not religious and express it through nature, family, photographs, music, art; it flows through all subjects; it's about attitude and is not always understood. It's often difficult for older people to talk about, although one-to-one conversations make that easier. Developing personal spirituality is important and needs time; people thirst for it but don't know where to look.

.. And Ageing

Life changes, energy decreases, loneliness increases. Self-worth is important. Older people have increased anxiety over life, health, mobility, money that get in the way of spirituality. In living longer, health issues become more complex. They may be juggling grandchildren and very elderly parents. Sundays are different to when they were young; society has changed.

Routine and familiar patterns become more important and they dislike change, often keeping the values and attitudes from their earlier years. There are feelings of guilt about being unable to do more and a sense that 'doing' is more important than 'being' for good discipleship, based on what older people learned during their formative years, or the community where they live. Their energy is spent on keeping the church going, with none left for exploring deeper.

There are big questions about life after death and a reticence to broach the subject, partly because the older generation weren't taught to question everything as younger people do.

People who left church many years ago do drift back, prompted by thinking time in retirement and the gradually increasing loss of family and friends as time passes. Many stayed through habit, their parents' then theirs; belonging to a community may be more important than believing, increasing the sense of loss when they are no longer mobile outside the home. Forgiveness and reconciliation increase in importance. There are difficult faith questions and experiences with prayer for release when someone is ready to die, yet doesn't.

Dementia is a big issue, in oneself or as a carer, and the questions of worth that it raises. It can unlock things that were hidden for years.

Older people bring precious gifts of wisdom, knowledge and experience. "The less I need to believe in, but the more I need to believe it." Keep the main thing the main thing.

Our Calling - worship

There's familiarity with a style of worship - the old hymns and the 'right' tunes; the liturgy learned by heart years ago - that needs respecting as much as modern styles are generally preferred by younger people. Each generation has its own favourite. There are the practicalities of mobility, hearing, seeing; the need to connect through one sense when another is impaired.

Worshipping and receiving communion in community is important, wherever it takes place: home, sheltered housing, residential care home, church. Valuing the support of prayer both by and for older people.

Our Calling - caring

As more of us live longer and move into care homes, the need for pastoral visitors and the pressure on ministers to visit, eg to take communion, increases. Yet those getting older feel less able to be pastoral visitors and more in need of a visitor themselves.

There's value in groups of like-minded people, eg 'knit and natter', football supporters, and mixed groups especially as older couples become singles. Important to make space for people to be encouraged and to encourage each other.

Our Calling - service

Encouraging older people to use their gifts differently or in new ways; to share love and grace; that prayer support is vital; to help with the preparation for other things, eg Messy Church, if they can't help with the event itself.

Our Calling - evangelism

Many feel unable to contribute, or unwilling because their own foundation is (secretly) wobbly or their faith is a private thing. Many have a strong faith and it shows; they encourage discipleship in others. Many are weary, having tried something and it didn't work.

Support required

A list of resources and courses.

Access to practical advice, eg power of attorney, funeral services, safeguarding advice for being with vulnerable adults, planning things for daytime not nighttime and all those practical tips for working with older people.

Dementia - learning about the disease(s) and training in pastoral care for the whole church in how best to care for the carers and respond to people with dementia at all stages, including undiagnosed dementia-like behaviours.

Dementia - resources for dementia-friendly worship, discipleship and fellowship that includes carers.

Devotional - user-friendly liturgy, worship, devotional material, eg large print, audio version, specifically for leading services in care homes, especially dementia care.

Devotional - reminder training for those who lead worship: practical aspects of delivery, include the known and familiar, language, substance for those familiar with a Bible passage, avoid patronising.

Devotional - a worship time chosen for those who need longer to get ready on Sunday; mid-week communion at a sensible time.

Discipleship - resources for discipleship and spirituality for those at home with no internet access.

Discipleship - resources to help people embrace their value in 'being' a disciple rather than 'doing'.

Discipleship - practical ways to build relationships and conduct pastoral visits so that spirituality can be discussed, eg how to bring a friend to knit and natter (or whatever), growing the bus-stop chat.

Discipleship - creating a safe space where doubts can surface, life experiences can be shared and valued, people can express their discipleship and spirituality in ways that have meaning for them

People - how to encourage the right skills, ability, time and heart to care for the fourth-agers.

People - how to link the generations to share skills, eg technology advice, cooking a roast dinner, knitting, Messy Church preparation, story-telling.

4. Conclusions and recommendations for discussion

The original brief example resource list that I shared was updated as I went along with information from the gatherings, recognising that it is not comprehensive but rather focussed on the subject in hand, and it does not claim to have picked up all or the best of what's available. For example, there is a lot of quality information on dementia 'out there' but providing a guide to it was not the purpose of this task. Dementia resources included are those that have a direct bearing on spirituality and are suitable for non-specialists.

The list is in sections to guide people to what they may need and is in **Appendix C: Resources**. It was emailed to participants after update from each gathering, and then the complete list was sent to all participants and interested parties as an interim help, with an encouraging reminder about the usefulness of Seasons of My Soul.

1. The current resource list does not cover all the support required and needs expanding. Whilst resource materials are likely to exist already that meet many of the requests, it needs to be easier to find them and to know how appropriate they are. For example, there are probably several publications or on-line resources for any particular subject but they may not all fit well with Methodist theology, faith and practice.
2. There are likely to be areas where nothing suitable already exists and the Connexional Team will be able to advise if they are already working on materials to fill those gaps. If not, then it may be appropriate to make the request, perhaps after discussion with other DMLN Regions to ascertain if there is a similar need in other parts of the Connexion that justify such a request.
3. The resource list could be made accessible to the Connexion via the main Methodist Church website, providing one page that points to resources available. Hosting a web page has a cost: it would need creating and maintaining to ensure the links haven't changed, to review and add new material (some of which would have an expiry date), and to review then write something about each resource mentioned.

However there is clearly a need for access to a range of resources to help ministers and lay people address what is an important issue for the whole Church. It's more efficient to do this at Connexional rather than at District or Regional level. The links to other websites would benefit from a bit more information about what is available there to save people feeling that they have a lot of wading through other webpages when they aren't quite sure what they are looking for. Some clearer 'pointing' is needed.

Seasons of My Soul was known to at least one person at each gathering, some of whom had used it a little and spoke highly of it; others took note with an intention to purchase. It was given a bigger 'plug' than the other resources, with encouragement on how it could be used with a range of different groups that relate to the local church, linking it in to earlier parts of the conversation to demonstrate its relevance. From all the conversations about spirituality and ageing, it was clear that the wide range of material in Seasons of My Soul could meet many of the needs for introducing, or re-introducing, spirituality gently into existing groups. It is especially good at helping people see the value of 'being' rather than 'doing' - the first theme is Identity.

4. Seasons of My Soul is well-written and presented such that it does not need a taster session for its benefits to be understood, but if the DMLN wanted to host taster sessions, then those who attended the gatherings would be the obvious people to contact. Targeted publicity and promotion are probably the most cost-effective ways to bring it into wider use, via District and DMLN Regional newsletters, MWiB, MHA supporters, chaplains, Local Preachers and Worship Leaders (who are often involved in home groups and pastoral visiting), as well supernumerary and active ministers (presbyters and deacons). Getting an inspiring story of its successful use into 'the connexion' magazine may help, perhaps from a participant from these gatherings.

One request was for safeguarding advice for being with vulnerable adults, recognising that many people don't need any safeguarding training (Creating Safer Space) because they don't have a role that requires it, but who would value something to help them with adults who have dementia or undiagnosed dementia-like symptoms.

5. Someone with the relevant skills from the District / Circuit safeguarding teams / officers could put together a short session (based on information in Creating Safer Space) about working with vulnerable adults suitable for anyone to attend, separate from DBS requirements. A 'top tips' sheet or similar could be created for sharing more widely, eg via the newsletters and District websites so that as many people as possible have easy access to 'the basics' to increase awareness and care amongst our congregations.

Another request was reminder training for those leading worship on the practicalities when worshipping with older people. Whilst there may be many useful bits and pieces on the internet, there may not be one that encapsulates all that is required.

6. Someone with the relevant skills from the Regional / District / Circuit 'Worship: Leading & Preaching' training team, or an appropriately-skilled preacher, could put together a 'top tips' sheet of reminders, based on material in the W:L&P course. Engaging those who lead worship in care homes regularly would help ensure a positive outcome. This could be shared via the District websites and District LP Secretaries and their networks.

The Milton Keynes (MK) Journeying Group was life-affirming, rich in wisdom and spirituality in a range of styles, and a wonderful model to share. One of its strengths is that it was formed by a group of self-starters - motivated and articulate people of faith in their third age. It may be when others hear of such a group, they are motivated to create a similar local group for their needs in this area of life.

7. The model of the MK Journeying Group could be shared in ways that would encourage people to start their own if they wanted to. This would probably work best after the Church running a group / course on S&A such as Seasons of My Soul, and sharing the MK experience in the last two or three sessions. The group may be willing for its inspiring story to be told in 'the connexion' magazine.

Finally, there were some requests for support that don't really come under the remit of the DMLN but are more for the local church to decide how it wants to approach them. The DMLN's role is to continue its programme of helping the people called Methodist fulfil Our Calling through its support to ministers and lay people in all aspects of discipleship and in sharing God's message of love for all people.

Sue Draper for DMLN East Central
October 2016

Appendix A - Conversation Starter (3 pages)

Appendix B - Conversations (8 pages)

Appendix C - Resources (3 pages)