



Dementia Friendly Church – Guidelines for Including People with Dementia in Church Life

If you receive a diagnosis of dementia in later life, the place you should feel most comfortable and welcome is your local church. In the Christian community we are accepted and loved just as we are, made in the image of God. In fact, special honour is given to our 'weaker' members. People with dementia can disappear from parish life without their church family noticing. This briefing suggests ways to help people with dementia remain at the centre of our communities, to support their faith but also allow us all to share their experiences of disability and its lessons about the nature of divine love.

Feeling part of the Christian family

The most important message for churches is that people with dementia value friendship. Some old friendships fade after a diagnosis because of the fear and stigma surrounding dementia, so loneliness and isolation are common. To feel you belong still within the family of the Church affirms your self-worth, but also provides a context in which you can continue giving to others. You may assume someone with dementia is less aware of how they are treated by other people, but the reverse is true. Being left out of conversations or treated disrespectfully can cause feelings of frustration and sadness.

Communicating sensitively

As words become less easy to use and understand, the person with dementia will tune in to what we call 'non verbal' elements of communication. They pick up on genuine warmth and concern shown through facial expression and eye contact. It is not so much what you say that matters, but how you are with the person. Taking time simply to be alongside the person speaks volumes. Choose words carefully, avoiding overlong sentences and abstract ideas, though maintaining a respectful tone. Too many questions can feel pressurising for someone whose brain is not letting them find answers easily. Try not to talk fast and pause from time to time so the person can keep up. Take your lead from them, responding to their feelings and giving full attention. People with dementia long to be treated as 'normal', when the dementia is often all that others see.

'Buddying'

Being in a large group situation can be overwhelming when you are living with dementia, especially where there is lots of noise and activity. It becomes more difficult to initiate conversations and follow the thread of what others are saying, so there is a risk of being marooned and feeling anxious. Without 'crowding' the person it can help if church friends support the person in these situations and look out for them appearing lost and stepping in to support, or sitting alongside them during the service to prompt if needed.

Accessible worship

Clearly it is not possible to adapt every aspect of church life to the needs of those with cognitive impairment, but some principles for inclusion might help to maintain involvement and guide the design of services aimed at people with these needs:

- ✓ Keep services short – between 20 and 30 minutes
- ✓ Use symbols and rituals that provide multi-sensory prompts – such as candles, breaking of bread, the cross
- ✓ Choose familiar songs from childhood which are more firmly rooted in the memory
- ✓ Use a familiar structure or liturgy that allows people to follow the flow of the service
- ✓ Enable participation and inclusion
- ✓ Be comfortable with odd behaviour, like speaking during quiet parts of the service

Being able to contribute

People with dementia want to continue contributing to church life and have much to give. Some tasks may become difficult when cognitive abilities are reduced, so we need sensitivity in helping people relinquish tasks and creativity in identifying other roles that match the abilities of the individual. In relationships people with dementia have much to offer and intergenerational activities can be mutually rewarding. In a spiritual sense, living with memory loss can challenge faith but also permit a unique insight into God's love and faithfulness at times of vulnerability. We all need to be open to being encouraged and challenged in our faith by the perceptions of those with disabilities.

Supporting family carers

It is likely members of your church will have caring responsibilities for a friend or family member who has dementia. Seeing the changes that dementia brings is painful and leads to feelings of loss. It can also challenge the faith of family members. Emotional, social and spiritual support from friends at church helps carers sense they are not alone. The simplest kindness is in remembering to ask the carer how they are and showing genuine empathy and compassion in listening to their stories. Helping the carer to keep coming to church services might include offering transport or being willing to sit with the person with dementia while the carer is out at church activities. When church members are welcoming towards the person with dementia the carer can relax and benefit more easily from spending time at church. Visiting the person with dementia and their carer at home is another way of maintaining the links and providing spiritual nourishment and support.

*For more ideas on 'Dementia Friendly Church' (including tips on worship, prayer, communication, buildings and community life) visit the website of the national disability charity **Livability** at dementiafriendlychurches.com.*