

An ageing society – a growing challenge

We are an ageing society; numbers of older people are increasing both in real terms and as a percentage of the whole population. This is a fact that most people appreciate, up to a point. The Health Service and local care services are increasingly stretched because of the growing demand upon them. How the nation can afford this is a matter of considerable discussion and analysis. The Church in general acknowledges the issue, although how to respond is answered with varying degrees of enthusiasm and concern. What do we need to do? It truly is a growing challenge.

In 2016 the office of National Statistics estimated the population of the UK to be over 65 million. Of that number, 18% (almost 12 million) were 65 and over. By 2026 it is estimated that the population will be nearly 70 million and 20.5% (over 14 million) will be 65 and over. In the UK there are now more people aged over 65 than there are under 16, and the number of 90-year-olds has nearly trebled in the last thirty years. That will double further in the next ten years. In terms of church attendance, the statistics are even more dramatic. In the 1980s four million people were in church on Sundays, of which 815,000 were over 65. It is now estimated that at the present time only three million attend a church, of which just under a million are aged over 65. So, whilst overall attendance is falling, the number of older people attending is increasing in real terms. Of course, in some places the trends are different, and evangelical churches do appear to be growing rather than declining. But one fact is clear – there is a higher percentage of older people in our churches now than previously.

How then should we respond to this changing situation? Some people bemoan this trend and express concern for the future of the Church. They see the whole future being dependent on young people. But what we must always remember is that demographics merely describe what is happening; they do not define what God might do. Jesus said “I will build my church” and he is in full control. Age discrimination does not occur in the Scriptures. Rather, the needs of all people are given equal concern whatever their age, nationality, race, gender, religious background or whatever other false division some will make. We are called to work and pray for the growth and progress of the church as a whole. Having said that it also has to be admitted that churches have rightly invested quite extensively in youth and children’s work. Nothing should be done to reduce that. But it has to be noted that attention to work with older people has, in comparison, been very small. Indeed, we could say that older people have been neglected.

It is time to start thinking about how we develop ministries with and for older people across the whole spectrum of need. There tends to be an acceptance of the self-indulgent perspective of retirement and old age, and so the vast resource of older people are neglected and lost. Similarly, pastoral care of older people is too often superficial and fails to address significant issues of later life. Then again, the vast evangelistic opportunities that exist among older people in our society are largely under-addressed. One particular area of opportunity is the significant impact of loneliness. There is even a government Minister for Loneliness, but churches seem reluctant and slow to respond. Yet AgeUK suggest that there are 1.2 million people in the UK who say they are “chronically or persistently lonely”. Major Christian conferences have seminars on all manner of legitimate concerns in the church, but responding to the needs of older people is rarely on the agenda. Having presented this rather negative but, I believe, sadly accurate, analysis it has to be thankfully acknowledged that some churches excel in some or all of these areas, but there are not many.

A new initiative has now been established which is intended to support and encourage churches in developing ministries to older people. “Faith in Later life” is a joint project between five major evangelical organisations – Pilgrims’ Friend Society, London City Mission, The Salvation Army, Mission Care and Keychange. A website has been set up (<http://faithinlaterlife.org>) which has details of over 1500 different resources. These are from a varied range of sources and reflect a wide range of evangelical thinking. But there is very useful material there which will help and inform churches as they take action to respond to the needs of their particular setting. The website also suggests areas of new activity that churches might develop. This website has been operational for three months and already interesting trends can be seen in the areas of evangelism and worship.

Alongside these practical ideas “Faith in Later Life” has also employed a researcher and writer to produce a summary of biblical teaching on old age. This project is under the supervision of Dr Garry Williams at the Pastors’ Academy of London Seminary. A book is planned for publication later in the year. This is important because one of the major needs is to enable churches – and especially church leaders – to think more biblically about later life. It is also an important that older people themselves start to think biblically about ageing and not to accept the attitudes and low expectations of the culture around them.

There is then this growing challenge. The numbers of people who may be classed as older and of those who are retiring are increasing, even though the retirement age is rising. An opportunity is therefore coming both to harness the skills of older Christians to use them in the advance of the gospel, and to develop new initiatives to reach out to the vast numbers of older people who do not yet know the Saviour. May the Lord grant us all courage and wisdom to respond effectively to this growing challenge of an ageing population.

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