

Sunshine behind the clouds



Campaign for Developing
Dementia-friendly Churches
Handbook

The Union of Welsh Independents



Introductory Message from the Reverend Dyfrig Rees, **General Secretary, The Union of Welsh Independents**

Over the past few years, our awareness of dementia has increased significantly and nowadays it is an exception for anyone not to know of someone who lives with the condition, their families and carers. This is no surprise, as the Alzheimer's Society reports that 45,000 people in Wales are currently living with dementia, and that 1 in every 3 of us will care for someone living with this condition at some time during our lifetime. According to NHS Wales statistics, 1 in 14 of the inhabitants over the age of 65 in Wales have dementia – a fact that churches, that have a significant proportion of elderly people in their congregation, have been aware of for some time.

It is therefore a great pleasure to receive a copy of this work. It firmly declares the resolution of the churches to grasp the implications of one of the most perilous conditions facing us today and reminds us of the essential place of care within the Christian faith. I am delighted to bring this valuable work to the attention of churches within the Union of Welsh Independents, and to encourage them all to become dementia-friendly.

Within the work you can gain a better understanding of the condition and learn more about the services and support that are available for those in need. Equally important is the guidance on how to become a church that opens its heart, ears and hands to offer guidance and support – both spiritual and practical – that will enrich the lives of those living with dementia. This will happen because, within our churches, there are many people willing to provide a helping hand.

Amongst them are members of the Working Party – Emlyn Davies, Sian Meinir, Rhodri-Gwynn Jones and Gwilym Huws – who, under the auspices of the Union's Department of Christian Citizenship, were able to produce this work that deserves our gratitude and pride as Welsh Independents.

We are grateful to the Alzheimer's Society, Welsh Carers Trust, Bangor University, the Interdenominational Safeguarding Panel and TIDE (Together in Dementia Everyday) for their support and valuable suggestions in preparing the material.

We are confident that the hand of God is on this work.



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Contents

Message from the Reverend Dyfrig Rees,
General Secretary of the Union

Introduction to the Campaign

Section 1:

The Theological Basis of Dementia-friendly Churches

(The Reverend Beti-Wyn James, President of the Union)

Section 2:

Developing a Dementia-friendly Church

Section 3:

Exemplar Services

Section 4:

The Power of Music

Section 5:

Details of the Dementia Friends Courses

Section 6:

Organisations and Charities, Digital Resources and Printed Books



Introduction

Every three minutes of every day of every week, someone in Britain learns that they have dementia. That fact alone sums up the scale of the problem. More often than not, this leads to a huge strain on the family whether it be financial, physical, emotional or spiritual. According to the statistics of the Alzheimer's Society, over 850,000 people in Britain are currently living with dementia. Furthermore, it is projected that the total will have risen to one million by 2025 and doubled to two million by 2050. With one in every six of those over 80 years of age, and 40,000 people under 65 diagnosed with dementia, we can appreciate the firm grip that this cruel condition has on our society today. There cannot be many families without some experience of dementia.

The Union of Welsh Independents believes that our churches are in a strong position to offer valuable support to those with dementia, their families and carers, on more than one level.

How can we help?

Firstly, we have resources and facilities that could be very helpful in providing a safe meeting place to conduct a variety of activities such as a craft hour, memory café, musical session or board games. Used wisely, our buildings can be of great help to those organising sessions for carers, families and those with dementia.

Secondly, we are a caring community that believes in assisting our neighbours and others, and we can offer ourselves in various ways according to the need. Occasionally, it may be necessary to care for someone for an hour or two on a weekly rota, or to chat with someone on the phone.

Another aspect is the range of expertise that exists in our chapel communities, and the extensive experience of co-operating with agencies and local councils.

Thirdly, our existing services can offer comfort as a warm and familiar setting for those who faintly remember hymn singing and listening to Bible verses. Even if their recent memory is diminishing, a warm feeling may still linger of services and social gatherings held in the chapel or vestry.

Fourthly, we cannot ignore the fact that the spiritual needs of many people living with dementia are not being fulfilled. There may be a tendency for some to stay away from services, but it is important to stress that dementia should not be an obstacle from attending worship. We should welcome them and plan services tailored for them where there is a demand.

Rediscovering the Person

In Section 1, the Reverend Beti-Wyn James discusses the theology of dementia. She states that 'we are challenged to be person-focused and not dementia-focused. I believe that the Church community is called to listen for the faint muffled voice of the dementia sufferer, and through their voice to rediscover the person and understand their needs, both physical and spiritual.'

That is why we are leading a campaign to encourage all our chapels to become dementia-friendly by means of educating our members and officers, advising families of the support that is available, and collaborating with other organisations and denominations to uphold the rights of individuals, their carers and families.

Dementia and Covid-19

One of the saddest truths to come out of the recent pandemic is that the impact on those with dementia has been worse than on most other groups in our Society. According to figures released by the Office of National Statistics for March and April 2020, a total of 25,000 people died in England and Wales that we know had been diagnosed with dementia, and this figure is double what we could have expected in a normal year. We are told by experts that dementia is the most common medical condition amongst those who died from coronavirus. The Alzheimer's Society claims that by now the Social Services are totally inadequate and unsuitable for those living with dementia, and consequently they, and their families, face dire outcomes as a result of social distancing and the failures of the National Health Service. This is in no way a reflection of those working within these services, but rather a damning condemnation of the attitude and priorities of various governments.

From our perspective as Independents, it was extremely unfortunate that the first lockdown coincided with our plans to launch a new and exciting scheme to encourage our churches to become dementia-friendly. A resolution to run a campaign along these lines was approved at the annual meeting of the Union of

Welsh Independents held in Rhydymain in the summer of 2019, and some of us spent months gathering evidence from individuals, families, carers, specialists, doctors, representatives of the Alzheimer's Society, ministers of religion and members of various churches. We researched printed and digital resources relevant to the topic and had arrived at the juncture where we were ready to commence on an ambitious programme. We began to hold discussions with other denominations and there was a realistic hope that we would be in a position to announce an exciting scheme to be activated throughout Wales.

This is when everything came to a stuttering halt. A key feature of our scheme was to encourage people to mix and socialise, to open our chapel doors to create new communities, and experiment with alternative forms of worship. However, the nature of the lockdown meant that we were faced with living in an environment that was in direct opposition to this ideal. Even though it was feasible to demonstrate a caring and neighbourly empathy in a phone call, and also to show one's concern at a distance via virtual platforms, the core of the scheme to develop dementia-friendly churches was not envisaged to be an arms-length approach, but rather one embracing those living with dementia face-to-face.

Raising Awareness

Our hope, as a first step, was to awaken an awareness of the condition amongst members of our churches. If possible, we would like to see at least one person from every chapel attending a short but very valuable session to become a 'Dementia Friend'.

In addition to having a basic understanding of the condition, we would encourage churches to welcome not only those living with dementia, but also their families and carers. This involves sharing suggestions as to what type of activities could be arranged, be it a café, a singing session, a craft hour or board games, or a session to share photos and memories. For example, one chapel could hold a musical session for those with dementia, and try to encourage others to do likewise.

Occasionally, in some instances, it may mean adapting a part of the building or the administrative structures in order to be dementia-friendly. It would be possible to conduct a risk assessment of the signage and furniture if needed, and to nominate a dementia co-ordinator. It would also be useful to organise a rota of carers to give the family/carer a break for an hour or two.

We know of some churches who feel it would be better for them to support existing activities in their area rather than organise new events, and this is very often a sensible approach.

Spiritual Lead

We place much emphasis on providing a spiritual lead, and you will note that the work contains exemplar services that could be held, that are suitable for those living with dementia, their families and carers. Remember also that the aim is not only to support dementia families; they, in turn, can also enrich the life of the church.

Further Support

In various sections of this work you will see references offering further support. There are phone numbers and websites you can use, and a wealth of information that can be consulted. The most important thing that we, as the Union, can do at present is to appeal to churches to offer support to members and their families where dementia exists. If church officers are of the opinion that families need further support, they should be encouraged to contact the Alzheimer's Society on 03300 150 3456 or through its website www.alzheimers.org.uk