



Section 1:

The Theological Basis of Dementia-friendly Churches



Being diagnosed with dementia can be a frightening experience. The sufferers' and the carers' voices are often the most difficult to hear. It can cause someone to retreat from active family and public life – not always because of physical symptoms, but frequently because of fear of self-inflicted embarrassment and changes to one's life status. Some sufferers accept the diagnosis, whilst others are in complete denial.

A diagnosis can result in a lack of interaction with the sufferer, mainly due to lack of knowledge or confidence in dealing with the condition. The voice of the sufferer is quietly heard trying to overcome the barrier of the disease and encouraging those around them to see the person in their uniqueness, rather than the disease itself. Amazingly, the human brain seems to grasp the most negative and fearful thoughts, outweighing or even ignoring the others, and the hardest battle people must fight in their minds is the negative thinking that often dismisses all evidence to the contrary. In the face of this, 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.



God's Creation

The history of dementia is probably as old as mankind itself. When God created man and woman, He gave them the ability to recall every new experience. Where there is memory, there has always been the possibility of memory loss.

There is much more to a human being than the ability to carry out what is expected from them as a person. There are many more elements connected to personal existence, such as the ability to communicate, to relate, to respond, and so forth. Each one of us is a member of the human race and we are defined as being a person. A person is not simply a set of abilities, but a status that forms the essence of being human. Understanding the nature of personhood in such a way offers huge potential for people with dementia. It follows therefore that nothing, not even memory loss, will mean that an individual is less of a person or is not part of a genealogically linked family.

The greatest loss with dementia is that of building relationships. Each person is a child of God, and as nothing can separate us from the love of God, 'neither death nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation,' nothing can alter our status as persons in a relationship.

However, our identity is one of the aspects of our humanity which is seriously undermined by dementia because we rely on our memory to remember significant things in our lives. Memory loss leads to losing one's identity – a failure to know who we are, where we came from, and where we are at present.

But whilst there is a danger that a person living with dementia could lose their mental identity, yet the question arises whether the individual's spiritual identity is also at risk of being lost? However, do we not hear God's voice not so much with the mind but with the soul?

Inevitably, the human memory is imperfect and can be deceived and distorted. We can be uncertain about who we are, but that is not true of God. God remembers us well. God remembers us because God knows us.

I believe that human beings are more than their memory. People living with dementia experience major changes to their lives, but the key for them is to discover new ways to meet with God when the old ways have faded away or

disappeared. Will they recognise God if they cannot remember? The obvious answer is that God will always remember them. The Bible is full of verses that emphasise that God will remember his people – a truth reaffirmed regularly in the psalms:

'You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise, you perceive my thoughts from afar.'

(Psalm 139:1)

The Christian Confessions and Creeds begin with 'I believe' and not with 'I remember'. God's everlasting arms will be beneath us, supporting us. We are called to trust in God, who will hold us safe in his memory. The Church, by means of worship and pastoral care, embodies God's love for those living with dementia and their families.

For all believers, the fellowship and community of the Church is central. It is here that we are called to worship and build a relationship with God and His people. The Bible uses many metaphors to describe this relationship. Israel is God's son, his spouse, his vine, his flock, together with many images in the New Testament, e.g. Christ's flock and branches of the true vine. Each member is introduced into a special relationship within the family of the church and as a result are blessed with love, friendship, and support.

Sadly, most people with dementia stop going to church. They feel uncomfortable because their ability to process information is impaired. It is also sad to see some people withdrawing from visiting or spending time with dementia sufferers. I understand from my own experience in the Ministry how difficult it can be to engage in conversation with dementia sufferers. Connecting with them can be quite a challenge. Does the church have something 'extra' to give in terms of communication? Believers are the most powerful means of communication imaginable because we carry the Holy Spirit within us, and the Holy Spirit is an excellent communicator. Visiting people with dementia and their families provides opportunities for developing love and a relationship, and although dementia may have led to an inability to communicate, simply by being alongside them, knowing that the Holy Spirit is within us. When we do this, we are connecting at an eternal level.

The 'whole' person

There is a great need to encourage church communities to gain confidence in adapting to provide for those living with dementia and their families. Churches have a specific and unique role to play, i.e., encouraging identity of the 'whole' person which includes the spiritual and the physical. A positive attitude towards the condition needs to be adopted rather than being tentative and raising barriers.

In a society where dementia awareness is at the forefront of conversations, there is a need for churches to be at the heart of dementia-friendly communities, where the voices of those living with dementia, and those who care for them, are clearly heard. I believe that 'Dementia-friendly' is rather a weak description – churches that welcome people with dementia would be a better description.

Amongst the Church Organisations raising awareness of dementia are the Union of Welsh Independents, who unanimously passed a proposal in its General Assembly in 2019 to:

'Encourage churches and associations to stimulate debate on the issue within the Union of Welsh Independent Churches and all other denominations.'

Amongst the practical issues under discussion are the importance of networking within a wider network of people, learning from others, organizing a Memory Café, reaching out to dementia units in local Care Homes, and providing opportunities to support carers.

Although important, churches that welcome those living with dementia mean far more than only taking practical steps. It also means encouraging the identity of the 'whole' person, which includes the spiritual and the physical. This is the 'extra' element that a church can provide compared with other organizations. It is our calling to provide a sense of purpose to those living with dementia and to assure them that, even though they themselves may have forgotten, God will never forget them. We can reassure them of this truth through the act of worship – be it congregational worship, in a care home, dementia unit or in their own home.

Worship

Developing dementia-friendly worship is a current topic of conversation and many authors have shared their views, e.g., the use of objects whilst leading worship in a dementia unit is appropriate as it is in a children's service, but we are reminded that the persons present are not children. Treating them as such would further diminish their sense of dignity. In my own experience of leading worship with those living with dementia, I choose to keep the service simple, using familiar hymns and readings, short and meaningful prayers, praying the Lord's Prayer and using visual aids in a creative but respectful manner as a focus to the worship. Music is always a good option which often has a calming effect and sets the appropriate atmosphere for worship.



Contributions by the younger generation (local Sunday School or school) are always welcomed. One thing I've learnt is to always expect the unexpected! God's voice is often heard at the most unexpected of times and through the weakest and most fragile of vessels.

Being fluent Welsh speakers, several of us were eager to campaign to ensure that worship is provided in Care Homes in the resident's mother tongue. Many elderly sufferers will not have worshipped in any other language, and any hymns, readings and the Lord's Prayer etched on their memory will be in their mother tongue.

Although leading a service in a dementia unit or care home is different from incorporating dementia worship into the normal Sunday services, is not impossible with a little creativity and preparation beforehand. If we ignore their needs, worship relegates them to be observers of entertainment, or excludes them completely from the worshipping community. Worshipping with a dementia sufferer requires understanding, empathy, compassion, and attentiveness on the part of the leaders – a challenge that is a privilege for us as churches to respond to.