

**FAITH IN OLDER PEOPLE**



**CHURCH OF SCOTLAND GUILD**



in collaboration with

**ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND**



**REPORT OF A CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE**

**ON**

**THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN COMBATTING LONELINESS AND ISOLATION**

**Tuesday, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

**Church of Scotland, 121 George Street, Edinburgh**

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## ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND

### Introduction

This consultation was arranged to take forward a project supported by ACTS to look at the place of older people in the work of the churches and is intended to build on the work of Faith in Older People, the Church of Scotland Guild and others to look at how churches might develop their work with older people in terms of worship, prayer and action with the following principles in mind:

- Older people are people *with whom* we should be working rather than people *to whom and for whom* we do things.
- Churches should seek to benefit from the skills, experience and wisdom of older people and see them very much as contributors.

A current key issue for both Government, statutory and voluntary organisations is that of loneliness and isolation which is a matter of concern to churches. The event was designed to begin discussion on the issues and to share what practical action is being taken.

### Participants

Invitations were sent to different denominations and participants came from:

Bruntsfield Evangelical Church (1)  
 Scottish Episcopal Church (3)  
 Quakers (1)  
 Church of Scotland (9)  
 Unitarian Church (1)  
 Baptist Union (2)  
 Congregational Federation in Scotland (1)  
 Action on Churches Together in Scotland (1)  
 Faith in Communities Scotland (1)  
 Bethany Christian Trust (1)  
 Salvation Army (1)  
 Catholic (FiOP) (1)  
 Jewish community (FiOP) (1)  
 FiOP (1)  
 Church of Scotland Guild (1)

## Speakers

**Very Rev Dr John Chalmers** – Church of Scotland

**Trevor Owen**, Cohesive Communities Team Leader, Scottish Government

With responses from

**Elsbeth McPheat**, Service Manager, St Margaret's House, CrossReach

**Claire Stevens**, Chief Executive Officer, Voluntary Health Scotland

**Barbara Urquhart**, Church of Scotland

**Glenda Watt**, Scottish Older People's Assembly

**Very Rev Dr John Chalmers** gave a very thought -provoking presentation on the impact of loneliness and isolation whatever age we are but emphasised the effect that bereavement, dementia, current ways of communicating and how families and friends are dispersed.

The need to spend time with people, to talk with people and to have a physical presence including touch was critically important. Friendship and hospitality are core to the way we should act and research has pointed out that having a community of people/interests to which we belong provides a sense of belonging and identity.

Churches can play a great role in being welcoming and affirming with the ability to befriend.

**Trevor Owen** outlined the Government perspective on the issue which had been identified clearly in the Enquiry undertaken by the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee, 'Age and Social Isolation (October 2015). The issue was now recognised as a public health issue which required a stronger strategic approach and the SNP had a made a Manifesto commitment to develop a national strategy.

He emphasised the following points:

- There is great diversity amongst older people so there is not one single solution
- The need to consider loneliness and isolation as different issues
- Recognising the wider benefit to the individual and society if solutions can be found.
- The importance of taking a preventative approach to produce long term benefits
- Appreciating that many individuals and organisations are doing constructive and support things – e.g. Men's Sheds, Link workers with GP surgeries, encouraging individuals to participate through volunteering, tackling the issues of transport.
- The Scottish Government wishes to develop a dialogue on what would be effective and to find out what is already in place. This would include faith communities.

## Issues raised by participants:

- How to find people when they become invisible?
- How to recognise and encourage what people have rather than what they don't?
- How to enable people to retain their community connections if their circumstances change?
- How can faith communities make a difference?
- Can IT help?
- Encourage churches to help individuals to think about and encourage advance planning

## The responses

**Elsbeth McPheat** emphasised that it was important not to reinvent the wheel and to share insights and experience in finding solutions.

- The value of creativity in helping to generate self-worth – e.g. the CrossReach project ‘Heart for Art’.
- Making people feel valued.
- Sharing skills
- Important to go out into the community. IT is helpful but not a substitute.
- People can feel lonely in a care home especially at the end of the dementia journey.
- The value of Namaste – one to one attention and touch.

**Claire Stevens** explained the role of VHS which is to promote greater recognition of the voluntary health sector and support it to be a valued and influential partner in health and care. A key strand of its work which was highlighted in its annual conference is around loneliness and its threat to Scotland’s health. This work resulted from a survey of its members which rated the impact of social isolation and isolation as a determinant and symptom of health inequalities.

The discussions undertaken by VHS had identified the importance of connections, family, churches and community involvement as being essential parts of social capital in terms of prevention. She highlighted the report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Carnegie UK on ‘Kinder Communities: the power of everyday relationships.’

She emphasised the following issues:

- Value of volunteering - reciprocity
- Finding an activity that draws people in
- Sharing food – “something to eat; someone to eat with”.
- Transport
- Harness digital technology but ensure the balance with a person

**Barbara Urquhart** spoke about her role as a pastoral carer with responsibility for older people who said, ‘I hardly ever see anyone’; ‘I miss going to church, shopping ....’; ‘I miss someone to talk to’; ‘I miss my independence’.

She emphasised the importance of practical activities:

- Listening skills and not making a visit an inquisition
- Bereavement visiting
- Being more aware of the impact of dementia on the individual and those who provide care
- Making sure that people feel valued, loved and something to offer wherever they happen to be
- Find out about someone’s interests
- Food – sharing
- Singing, massaging of hands
- One friend to bring another on a visit
- DVD’s of church services to someone’s home and to care homes

- Assisting people to attend church (transport)
- Using photographs
- Volunteers
- Connections which help with daily living

**Glenda Watt** explained the work of SOPA which exists to give a strong voice to older people about their concerns and experience of life in Scotland, and raises issues about age inequalities. It identifies issues that worry the older population and conveys messages from the grassroots direct to Scottish and Westminster Governments and it contributes to and supports policy that has a positive impact on later life and challenges when implementation falls short.

SOPA highlights successful volunteering where the voice and experience of older adults are making a difference across generations.

- It highlights inequalities
- Age discrimination
- It highlights issues around loneliness and isolation and in some instances the contradictions between policies e.g. having concessionary travel but a lack of bus routes.
- Considers ways of involving older people – e.g. ACIT which provides computer training for older people.
- Members contribute to the democratic processes in Scotland
- SOPA makes use of the skills and experience of members and aims to empower older people to have a voice

### **Ideas/reflections emerging from the discussion**

- How to best engage with technology so that it complements daily life and not replace human contact
- Using older people as champions to encourage involvement
- Churches help to develop spiritual care plans for the future and to encourage people to tell their stories
- Churches working in partnership with other community organisations
- Churches providing a safe space for people to air sensitive issues such as end of life
- Churches could have a key role in stimulating engagement with the wider community
- Ensure that Government includes faith communities in the dialogue on loneliness and isolation
- Enabling fellowship over food
- Everyone's responsibility to tackle loneliness and isolation
- Ensuring that the connections between local and policy level are coordinated and consistent– e.g. transport as this is a critical aspect of enabling people to retain connections.
- Concern that loneliness and isolation can lead to the abuse of alcohol

## Conclusions

At the end of the day, those in attendance were invited to reflect on the experience and to look ahead to how the discussion could be taken forward into practice in the longer term.

The day had been a very worthwhile one, with a range of issues opened for discussion, including:

- How churches could begin to consider their relationship with older people, rather in the way that we are inclined to think about how we work with young people. This included a proposal that churches be encouraged to appoint Older People's Ambassadors/Champions to keep the issues of older people before governing bodies and organisations.
- How churches could address these matters both within their own structures/services, etc and within their communities.
- What roles older people could play both in the development of the issues and within church work.

## Next Steps

It was agreed that:

- A report of the day should be written and circulated to all who had taken part and others for whom it is a concern to highlight the activities in the churches and the need for the churches to be included in consultations.
- A further meeting should be arranged to progress the thinking that had begun.
- The group, perhaps including other people, should look to establish itself as a network within which issues could be discussed, resources developed, challenges shared and good practice exchanged.

MO'N/IW

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