

# The Gift of Age

## Older people, faith communities, and volunteering

The research was conducted by Faith in Older People and Simon Jaquet Consultancy Services Ltd between October 2021 and September 2022.

It comprised:

- An informal literature review
- 20 scoping interviews
- An online survey with 248 responses
- 16 case studies

This paper contains the draft conclusions from the research.

September 2022

### Older people

There is a **growing number of older people in Scotland**.

In the last Census (2011), the **over 65 year olds numbered just under 900,000** or 17% of the total population, with women in the majority - a trend that holds good for faith communities as well as the general population. This has become more evident in recent years. As many churches have approved the appointment of women to positions of authority and power, women in some faith communities have become more visible in a wider range of roles.

Faith community leaders in our survey reflected on the fact that they had spent a lifetime contributing to the life of their

community, and there is some evidence that **many now want to take a more 'backseat' role, making way for the next generation of leaders and powerbrokers**.

Unfortunately, too often we heard the voice of older people expressing concern about the absence of these younger people 'in the pews'. Despite this, many remain passionately engaged with their faith community.

The term 'older people' encompasses multiple gifts and challenges. They are far from being a homogenous group. In particular, we recognised that **important differences existed between what could be described as 'younger' old people and 'older' old people**, with the latter group being substantially more vulnerable, and often in need of more support. The recent pandemic has shown up some of the tensions between older people wishing to continue their involvement in their local faith community and others reluctant to leave the house for fear of catching Covid, or because Government policy advised against it. Many of this older group have given a life of service to their faith community.

### Volunteering / community engagement

**Every faith community relies on the work of volunteers in order to meet the requirements of their community**. Further than that, volunteers form a core part of the non formal local workforce providing support services to groups and individuals. They may choose to use different terminology (preferring words such as 'service'), but **they are indisputably volunteers**, performing tasks in the interests of others for no remuneration. They constitute a significant and precious resource. Their sometimes awkward reluctance to engage with the more formal aspects of 21st century volunteering



culture (including for example routine bureaucracy, training and compliance), can occlude their invaluable contribution to local communities.

Because most faith communities are located and are operational at a local level, **they play a particular role in identifying and responding to local needs.** The development 'arc' tends to start with small beginnings in local neighbourhoods. Our research found many cases of highly developed foodbanks for example, which were now quite sophisticated social enterprises. These had started life when a couple of members of that community became aware of a struggling family. **A concern for people supersedes the more technical aspects of large scale programme development.**

A wide range of services are on offer through this web of local social action. **Activities are** characterised by being:

- **Very localised**, serving specific local areas
- **Broad based** (ie not focused solely on one narrow target group)
- Very much 'under the radar' with a **low public profile**, and benefitting from **little or no public funding**
- Highly **dependent on volunteer effort**

We asked survey respondents to give an example of a 'community initiative' that their faith community currently had a role in. The 139 that we received ranged from informal social support for the recently bereaved to summer programmes for primary school children, from debt advice for people struggling to manage their finances to foodbanks for people who struggled to make ends meet, from dementia 'hubs' for people and relatives living with dementia to 'messy church' programmes for children. Having

analysed the data on this, we found that these could be **grouped into 14 categories of initiative** - all involving volunteer effort and skill.

Most of the faith communities described a **variety of co-working arrangements** that involved many local actors with a responsibility for social care. However, these initiatives **tended to rely on goodwill rather than formal partnerships.** The most common bodies working with faith communities were **other local third sector organisations and other faith communities.**

As a result of this, there is **often a lack of recognition by statutory authorities of the countless small, unobserved, yet vitally human activities** going on in and around faith community spaces the length and breadth of the country, and delivered by volunteers. These people have often spent a lifetime in the church, synagogue or mosque, and may be activists, supporters, or advisors.

The advent of the **Covid pandemic has impacted negatively on older people's ability to volunteer.** Although some older people enjoy the benefits of technology for maintaining contact, others have lost confidence and are reluctant to leave their homes. Others remain encouraged by seeing the positive results of their work, have enough time to 'do the job properly'; and value receiving a warm welcome.

The **over 75s**, in particular have **found it harder to volunteer in the post COVID environment**, and many have lost the confidence to leave their homes.

## Faith communities

With an **estimated 3,700 'congregations'** across the country, the collective resource that is Scotland's faith communities

represents a **potentially powerful contribution to the country's civic life.**

The role and contribution of faith communities to their local neighbourhoods can be understood through the presence of **four key dimensions.**

- Inclusion: **the faith community as a place where all are welcomed and valued**, irrespective of belief, political standpoint, or age. This is especially important in the context of local, often febrile, community politics.
- Trust: faith communities as **trusted community assets that are rooted in practical community action.**
- Longevity: the simple fact that **faith communities are in it 'for the long run'** means that solid relationships can be built, initiatives begun and developed at the pace of people, and a commitment made to the long term development of communities over generations rather than funding periods.
- Hope: the net result of being inclusive, trusted, and present is that **faith communities can offer hope to individuals and groups in local communities.**

**This contribution from faith communities to the lifeblood of local neighbourhoods is often largely unheralded.** It is only recognised in small measure, with attention more usually focused on internal politics or ecclesiastical scandal. The profile of faith communities in the public sphere is limited. When asked why this is (...and shouldn't they make more use of Twitter and Facebook?...), faith communities will often respond **'It's what we do', 'Our lives are messy'**.

A striking (but sometimes overlooked) feature of what faith communities bring to a

neighbourhood is **the practice of hospitality.** This infuses most of their work, and expresses itself not least through the informal sharing of food. It was striking to read the number of community initiatives where this was the case.

In developing a shared language to describe their activities, the **'Gift of Age' model (the human gift, the social gift, the economic gift, the cultural gift, the physical gift) has potential for some faith communities to help promote a broader understanding of volunteering in local neighbourhoods.** For others it is unnecessarily rigid, overly complex, and does not 'fit' the culture of faith and belief. It could, however:

- Help create and **enrich communication and dialogue between faith communities**, and with partner organisations in the public sector.
- Assist the **understanding of the work of volunteers operating in fluid environments**
- Provide an approach to **reflect on the wider impact** of what they do

Scotland's faith communities are currently facing multiple challenges - some widely recognised, some less so. These include:

- The challenge of **succession planning and sustainability** as faith communities struggle to deal with **an aging membership**, and to reach out to younger people.
- The **tyranny of enforced timelines and specified outcomes**, replacing the freedom of human contact - as dialogue with the public sector increases.

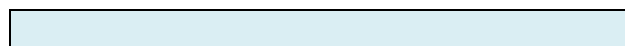
## A local voice for the voiceless

In recent decades, considerable energy has been expended in Scotland (as well as other parts of the UK) on trying to understand the relationship between the citizen and the various structures of the state that purport to have their interests at heart. This began with discussion about subsidiarity, which is seeking to locate decision making more closely to local inhabitants of communities. A Scottish Government body, the Christie Commission, concerned itself with performance improvement which prevented negative social and economic outcomes. More recently, pundits have spoken of '**community anchor organisations**' as a potential route into re-shaping local democracy and re-thinking public services.

Research carried out by What Works Scotland in 2018 defined community anchor organisations as **multi-purpose, community-led and -based organisations such as community development trusts or community-controlled housing associations**. These priorities lie fully within the ambit of faith communities.

At the heart of much community based work which supports vulnerable individuals and groups lies the 'localism' agenda. The Scottish Government's 'Fourth National Planning Framework: position statement'<sup>1</sup> sees '**20 minute neighbourhoods**' as one

vital method of connecting people with their local community, with all major public services, and with recreational activities - all available within a 20 minute walk. Faith communities are ideally placed to contribute to this broad agenda and deserving of recognition of the extent to which they already play a quiet but vital role in it.



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Thursday 15 September 2023

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-fourth-national-planning-framework-position-statement/pages/2/>