REACHING OUT TO THE ELDERLY
I thought retirement would be fun. And, at first, it was: time to spend with the grandchildren – liberation from the daily grind of work. But that feeling of freedom didn’t last. As time has gone on, the joys of retirement have been replaced by pain. Pain in my body, pain in my heart. And I don’t really know where to turn..."
It’s a common story – a repeated theme. Growing old is tough. The early years of retirement are often times of great gain, the later years more likely characterised by loss after loss:

- Loss of health
- Loss of independence
- Loss of purpose
- Loss of relationships
- Loss of hope

For some, these losses come within the context of a loving family. For others, such stresses and strains are faced largely alone. For no-one are they entirely easy. How could they be? Loss hurts. It hurts a lot.

And then there’s the question of God. While some prefer to ignore the idea of death on the horizon, for others the question looms large: “Is this life really all there is?” Ardent atheists begin to waiver. Religious adherents ask if they’ve got it right. There can be a hunger for certainty at a time when many things feel slightly out of control.

Such is the context for many in our communities. Such is the context for the mission of the local church. Amid the challenges of increasing age we, the Church, need to ensure we give people more than the endless distraction of the TV.
THE TRUTH THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

The Christian message is an exciting one for the elderly of our areas. It is a message of hope, a message of love, a message of community and purpose and a message full of life – a life that goes on forever. In Jesus’ family, the lonely are welcomed, the frail are valued, all are gifted and given real purpose, the elderly are honoured – and the uncertainties of the future fade away as an eternity of praising God comes into view – all because of Jesus’ work on the cross, a sacrifice that brings forgiveness and reconciliation with our maker and sustainer. Through the wonders of his death and resurrection, people can taste Jesus’ promise of life in all its fulness if they come to him (John 10:10). It’s a wonderful message. An urgent message. A message that needs to be shared with those approaching the end of their life before it is too late.

BRIDGING THE MISSION GAP

But, if we’re honest, many of us struggle to reach out to the elderly. Many of us aren’t quite sure how to begin. Churches often have people who are responsible for children’s work or youth work, even women’s ministry and men’s ministry but rarely is there a role for someone to spearhead ‘grey evangelism’. We need some tips on how to galvanise both the young and the not so young in our churches to reach out to the community around.
REACHING OUT

1 Friendship
Many of us live near an elderly person. It can be easy to assume that they are well-supported but Age UK statistics suggest 39% of over-65s feel lonely and 20% feel forgotten. A friendly word can make all the difference. It can begin with a chat over the garden fence or on the way home from the post office – nothing complex, just a simple hello. Maybe a coffee can follow or an invitation to lunch and, as you get to know each other, all kinds of topics of conversation may crop up, from happy memories to future concerns. You could help with their garden, their weekly shop or meet for lunch once a month? Pray for them and tell them a little about Jesus? In time, you could even bring them to church?

2 Advertising
Many churches drop leaflets through the doors of nearby houses – leaflets inviting people to services and events. It’s worth ensuring these leaflets are in relatively large print to make them easy to read and making sure that a phone number is included, not just a website. If your church is near some housing that is specifically for the retired, you might even like to do targeted leaflets for those homes which include offers of lifts, and advertise events appropriate for the age group. You can also advertise events through clear posters placed in day centres, doctors’ surgeries and newsagent windows – places where older people may go on a fairly regular basis. And it’s great to knock on a few doors too – best done in daylight hours.

3 Activities in care homes
“There’s not much money left for activities.” That’s the sad reality of some care homes. While not many elderly people live in care, and some of those who are in residential homes benefit greatly from options to help stimulate body and mind, others spend many hours staring at a television screen. A group from a local church may be very welcome if they can provide stimulating board games, craft, musical activities or easy and safe fitness routines. It’s not that hard to make or buy giant games with pieces that are easy to hold and they can provide hours of fun and interaction for those who feel isolated. The relationships that are built up along the way can provide fertile ground for deeper conversations about spiritual things.

4 Services in care homes
It’s not just activities that are welcome. Many residential homes are keen to offer spiritual nourishment to the believers within their care. Maybe your church could approach a local care home? Maybe a home where one of your church members is now staying? Maybe once a month a team could visit to sing some hymns, read a passage of Scripture, share a few thoughts on the passage and pray for those in need? Such mini-services can be a huge time of encouragement for Christians who can no longer get to church and a wonderful time of outreach for those who know little of the Lord. You just need some large print Bibles, hymn sheets, a keyboard and time.
WELCOMING IN

1 Lunch clubs and Tea afternoons
As well as going out to meet the elderly where they are, it’s great to invite them to church. For some, it may be too scary to come to a service but a mid-week event might be right up their street. Monthly lunch clubs (where simple, traditional meals are served) or tea afternoons (simply offering a brew and some cake) can be wonderfully social times. They help overcome isolation and – if a ‘pause for thought’ or an interview with a believer is included – there’s plenty of scope for gospel input too. Offering lifts can maximise attendance. Offering a book library where Christian biographies and other books can be borrowed can help impart true and lasting hope. Audiobooks can be just as popular as paperbacks!

2 Holidays at home
It can be hard not going on holiday. In August most activities seem to stop. That’s where church-based holidays at home can be one of the high-points of people’s year. Each day on a given week, the church doors can be flung open to the elderly. With themes ranging from world travel (with each day focusing on the food, crafts, music of different countries) to time travel (with each day reliving some of the films, fashions and photos from different decades) holidays at home can stimulate laughter. Each day can include a pause for thought or an optional Bible study with plenty of opportunity for discussion on spiritual themes.

3 Gospel care
One of the ways churches can begin to meet the practical and spiritual needs of the elderly is to engage in gospel care. How wonderful to drop round a meal to a housebound gentleman and, at the same time, take a moment to pray for the tough aspects of his life. How useful to give a lady a lift to the doctor’s one morning and share a little about the story of Jesus, the ultimate healer. The aim is to be holistic – to be passionate about caring for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the elderly in the community. Maybe there’s a team of people in the church who can cook, drive, pray and speak about Jesus? It’s worth keeping a stock of leaflets about local organisations who offer services to older people too so you always know to whom you can refer people on. And it’s worth talking to the older members of the congregation about what the common needs and the available services are like – they may know far more than the younger.
Small groups
Many churches run regular small groups that provide Bible study and prayerful support for those who join. And many older people can happily integrate into these to learn about Jesus for the first time – or learn more about him – as long as large print Bibles or notes are available. But sometimes it’s good to have some age-specific groups that just run for a few weeks. These can be topical (‘Preparing for the future’), evangelistic (why not try Matthias Media’s Making the Most of the Rest of your Life course?) or pastoral (dealing with loss). All can be a good way of bringing the practical and the spiritual together. Peer-led groups can be particularly valuable.

Accessible services
Hopefully, in every church the services are welcoming to the elderly but it’s worth checking if there’s a loop for hearing aids, large print service sheets for those who can’t see the screen, a handrail in the toilets and a few chairs with arms. It’s worth remembering a mix of music (traditional and modern) is good for all generations and sermon applications need to speak to the retired as much as the working. If the services are accessible and, most importantly, the gospel preached faithfully, then older people will grow spiritually.

If local churches roll up their sleeves and get on their knees then the elderly of our community can be served. And what a privilege it is to reach out in the love of Christ to help those who feel isolated become welcome in God’s family; to reach out with the hope of Christ to help those who are scared of the future know the security of the cross and to reach out to people struggling with identity with the sure and certain hope that they have value in the body of Christ. That’s exciting gospel work!
SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH THE LEAST REACHED SINCE 1835

London City Mission exists to serve the Church of London in sharing the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ with the least reached of London.

Our staff go to those those living in poverty, on the margins of society or from other cultures. We show God’s love in practical ways, continuously seeking opportunities to share the life-changing gospel message. We work in partnership with churches, to ensure that individuals who make a commitment to follow Christ are embraced by a loving church family. The gospel is at the heart of all we do.

BECAUSE LONDON NEEDS JESUS