

Best Sunday for Ages 2017 – Befriending Age

Order of Service

Welcome and Call to Worship

God who has called us here, **draw us nearer to you.**
God who offers friendship in Jesus, **draw us nearer to each other.**
God who has sustained us in the past, **draw us into the future filled with your Spirit.**

We worship God as we sing our opening hymn.

HYMN: “How shall I sing that majesty” (StF 53)

Prayers and Lord’s Prayer

God of us all, we come to you in confidence because we know you welcome us with open arms and with a knowing compassion. You are the God of silent loving, who hears and accepts the unspoken emotions of the human heart; the One in whose presence we are invited to be silent and still.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Blessed One of God. You are the Painbearer, the Compassionate Friend, the faithful Companion; the one who meets us in our pain and distress and offers wholeness.

Lord, Holy Spirit, the breath of God, you are the source of our common life, closer to us than our breathing; the One who enables connection and community and gives us hope to face the future.

As we make our journey through life, O God help us to learn:

from the trust and dependence of babies,
from the enthusiasm of children,
from the probing of young people,
from the experience of those in middle age,
and from the wisdom of the old.

As we meet new challenges, O God help us to learn:

from those who have gone before us,
from those we knew and those who are just names,
from the highs and lows of our stories,
and from each milestone in our lives.

As we meet obstacles in our journey, O God help us to learn:

from the diversity of human experience,
from insights from our encounters with you,

from the way that you call us on,
and from the balancing calm of your love.

We ask this in the name of him who teaches us the love we need to learn, even Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Prayers of confession

God, when we forget that life is about change, or when we try to hold on to times that are past. Forgive us.

When we forget to let go of hurts or grudges that become stumbling blocks for ourselves or others. Forgive us.

When we forget to love each other as people made in your image and make excuses to justify what we do. Forgive us.

When we forget to use the gifts you have given us together with the excitement of youth, the experience of middle years and the gentle pace of older age. Forgive us.

God forgive us and give us grace to trust in you and to learn from our past mistakes. Encourage us and lead us onward as we offer ourselves for you and for each other, in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Introduction to Theme – *Befriending Age*

- Age – more than a number, a state of mind? Yes, but...
- I recently visited two of MHA's care homes on the east coast. In one, there was a sense of sadness that their oldest resident had died – aged 108! In the other there was a delightful humorous and slightly raunchy conversation between three of the residents going on after a memorial service. One lady seemed unclear as to how old she was, although she knew she was born in January 1927, the second lady was proud of the fact that she was 99 and then the gentleman on the end said he was born in 1919 – to which the first lady responded – “on yes, after the men came back from the war!”
- Our theme this year – ‘**befriending age**’ – looking not simply at the work of MHA over nearly 75 years, but looking at the place of older people in society and at our own experience of ageing – we're all doing it!
- Perspectives and expectations change – ‘old’ looks different from different places... And all the while, the reality of an ageing society confronts us with ‘good news’ and ‘bad news’, although generally the media prefer telling us the ‘bad news’! Bed blocking, pensions crisis and social care funding crisis to name but a few.
- And where is the church in all of this? Often rather silent in my experience...

HYMN: “Says Jesus ‘Come and gather round’” (StF 510)

Reading: Joshua 14: 6-12

Talk 1

- MHA has almost 75 years’ experience of accompanying and supporting people as they age, and are committed to doing all that can be done to ensure that people’s later years can be as fulfilled as possible, working to combat loneliness and providing opportunities for people to create caring and supportive communities.
- MHA’s Origins – towards the end of 2nd World War...
- Residential Homes only up until mid-1970’s then Sheltered Housing introduced – a desire for people to maintain independence – early developments would have been impossible without support from the Church.
- 1980’s – it could still be said, “You have to be well to go into an MHA Home” – things have changed.
- Around 30 years ago – changes made in response to differing needs...
- Increasingly diverse experiences of ageing... People living to great age with amazing levels of independence while for others, it can be a time of limitation... MHA’s responses... Dementia Care / Nursing Care / Live at Home...
- Most older people will remain part of their own community living in their own homes, so the role of churches in offering support is vital.
- Society’s issues in response to an ageing population
 - Funding crises – Austerity and NHS Winter issues
 - Charity laws – opt in legislation...
 - Care Quality – media line is often simply that “Care Homes are bad news”... MHA at around 85% Good or better – aiming to continue towards 100% Good or Outstanding
- Not an easy sector! But that God that Walter Hall’s vision was caught by the Church and carries on still. Relationship with Methodist Church has changed – but it is still in our DNA! Social Justice...
- Fundamentally though, the biggest issue that MHA brings to light is our own attitudes to ageing...
 - Whose ambition is to be old??
 - Who wants to spend their last years in a Care Home??
 - What is the theology behind that?! And what of the psychology as well!
- Human beings have always told stories of bogey men and giants as a means of warning people off and keeping them away. That’s how Caleb’s story begins... In Numbers 13, the majority report of the spies sent to explore Canaan ahead of occupation told of men of gigantic stature which made them feel like grasshoppers.

- For many years the same stories have dominated our approach to older age and, therefore, to our own ageing... But the story is changing and while the landscape of ageing still has some of the features of diminishment and difficulty, those are to be seen alongside features of flourishing, discovery and adventure.
- Sing next hymn as a prayer for those known to us for whom this ageing journey has brought with it immense challenge, and for all who journey with them.

HYMN: “When memory fades” (StF 621)

Reading: Philippians 3: 7-16

Talk 2

- Befriending Age – what is the story of ageing with which we live? Games of word association, in which you are asked to complete the phrase ‘old and...’ all too often throw up just the ‘F’ word and the ‘D’ word – frail and decrepit!
- In our book, *God, Me and Being very old*, the story is told of one of our former residents, Winnie, who towards the end of her life was tired and used to pray every night that God would take her, almost to the point of being disappointed when she awoke in the morning!
- But the story of ageing has changed and will continue to change. Partly that is because of the lengthening of the average lifespan, and partly because of where that stretching is happening. It is not a case of adding years at the end, rather it is the emergence of a whole new phase of life – Adulthood II or Third Age...
- The writer Mary Catherine Bateson uses the analogy of the effect that building an extension to your house has. It does not simply add extra space, it affects the way in which the existing spaces are used and designated. So too with the additions to the human lifespan.
- One consequence of the changing landscape is that many of us entering into this ‘Third Age’ do so in dialogue with our aged parents... The Austrian novelist, Arno Geiger, whose book *The Old King in his Exile* has recently been published in English, has written about his Father’s journey into dementia. He says, “The last thing my father taught to me was what it means being old and ill – it is the relationship between parents and children to teach them something.”
- Befriending Age – involves accepting what many have led us to think is an unwanted gift. And it involves taking up Paul’s challenge in our epistle reading: **Phil 3¹⁴** “I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”
- God gives us the opportunity to construct a new story of ageing – but not simply replacing a tale of frailty with that of the bungee-jumping granny – for while the landscape of ageing still has some of the features of diminishment and difficulty, these are to be seen alongside features of flourishing, discovery and adventure.
- The writer Marie de Hennezel puts it like this: “*I have the feeling that the future is bound to be less sombre than we think. We will grow old for longer, but in a better way.*” She continues... “*We still have to construct a more positive image of this time of life, confront our fears in order to overcome them, and*

work out a real policy for preventing unhappy old age. Lastly, it is up to us to combat the denial of old age and death, by working at growing old.”

- That’s what I mean by befriending age – seeing it as a gift to be welcomed and embraced, rather than pushed away. It will involve recognizing and living with the limits of being human – Finitude, Mortality, Frailty and Death, but by accepting rather than tolerating them. If we do then that opens up new possibilities which help us to befriend ageing...
 - **Accepting our interdependence.** This may go against the grain of what we have been taught. One resident was sitting in the conservatory in her wheelchair, longing to go into the garden, but she needed help to do so. It came when a male resident, walking with his zimmer frame, left it behind and used her wheelchair as his support instead. Together they went into the garden!
 - **Becoming comfortable with being dependent.** Again this can be seen as a challenge to the norm. The term “Independent Living” has crept into the language of MHA and other older age providers, as if independence is the only measure of ageing ‘successfully’! What many long for is Assisted Living, Supported Living – or just LIVING! In our later years of life, every day can be a discovery of new forms and levels of need and new opportunities to practice what Arthur McGill calls ‘resting-in-neediness’
 - **Supporting ‘doing’ and not simply opting for ‘being’.** It may take longer, but time is not usually an issue! We are familiar now with the phrase “Use it or lose it” and it is relevant to learning to grow old. The temptation for family carers and those in care homes is to ‘take over’ for their own convenience. In one MHA care home, a relative who was a retired Occupational Therapist worked with carers and residents to help them maintain the ability to use the stairs, rather than simply using the lift.
 - **Ageing does not mean stopping doing new things or having new experiences.** Ageing need not merely be a collection of subtractions. – MHA’s Seize the Day initiative has seen older people have to opportunity to do many things for the first time.
 - **Having unfinished business is OK!** It is a sign of having started something new!
 - **Giving back what we have received...** The church has much experience of inter-generational work – and it is so important for older people to be givers and not simply receivers. In one MHA home, the relationship with the local school sees residents teaching the children how to knit, and the same children returning the favour by helping the residents become more IT proficient.
- From a religious and theological point of view, the challenge and opportunity is to embrace the lengthening of the lifespan as being something in the purposes of God, and to explore ways of Christian nurture that fit us not simply for life-long discipleship but for long-life discipleship; which views the whole of life as God’s gift and embraces it all as something to be worked out and worked on throughout life.
- One of the great privileges of working with MHA is while we have no idea of how we will cope should we live into extreme old age, we do however have many guides. One such was Miriam. ‘Ask him to guess what you’ve asked for for your hundred-and-fifth birthday!’ suggested the

manager. Fortunately her retort, 'I don't know what all the fuss is about' saved me from the dilemma of guessing, and so I asked her to tell me herself. With a broad smile she announced, 'I've asked for a Kindle! I read a lot, they're light, and even if I don't get a lot of use of it, someone else will when I'm gone!'

- Although separated in age from this woman by almost half a century, it was clear that she was in a place where, should I live that long, I would want to be: still active and engaged with this world and those who matter to me, but sitting lightly to it and fully accepting of my mortality. As St Paul put it, "I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Thanks be to God, Amen.

HYMN: "The love of God comes close" (StF 654)

Prayers of Intercession and Dedication

Prayer for MHA

God of love and hope, of encouragement and challenge, we thank you for the work of MHA. We ask you to bless those who live in our Homes, Schemes and Communities, and those who care for them. We thank you for those whose vision and research enable new ways of caring, for those in the organisation who direct and manage and for those who support this work with prayer and by raising funds.

We acknowledge our need of one another and ask for your gifts of wisdom and understanding, that the love of Christ may be shown in all we do. **Amen.**

Prayers of intercession

Lord of the years, you call people to follow and we have travelled with you. Sometimes we have lost touch with you but you always call us back into your way. You are our God and you hear our prayers.

We pray for the world, where so much changes, yet where so many situations always seem to be the same. The litany of trouble spots, where war and famine rob life of meaning, is depressingly familiar, but we still pray in hope and in faith for justice and for peace.

Lord of the years: **in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for the Church, called to be the Body of Christ, a fellowship in which all are knit together. We confess with shame the times when we allow one part of the body to thwart the participation of another part, and pray that we may help each part to flourish. We pray today for those aspects of our life which bring the different generations together and for all that they can share.

Lord of the years: **in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are carers, carrying burdens and bearing responsibilities all the time. In particular we pray for those caring for an elderly friend or relative where, through frailty or confusion, their relationship is being changed. And we pray for those whose time of caring is now past, and who are feeling the loss deeply.

Lord of the years: **in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for the work of Methodist Homes, giving thanks for the love, care and support that they offer to older people. We pray for those who work in the care homes, sheltered housing schemes, in Live at Home schemes and other community services. We pray for support staff, chaplains, and volunteers and for those who serve on the Boards. May they know your blessing in all that they do.

Lord of the years: **in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

And finally we pray for ourselves and for those whose needs are known to us...

Lord of the years: **in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

These prayers we ask in the name of Jesus, our Lord and our Saviour. Amen.

Offering

Loving God;

You reveal your compassionate grace by the simple act of always being present with us.

You unselfishly feed us when we are hungry and quietly walk with us when we feel alone.

Combine this offering of money with all we offer of ourselves, so that our caring for the oldest and most vulnerable may continue through the work of MHA.

In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

HYMN: "God it was who said to Abraham" (StF 464)

Blessing

May the life-giving Spirit and the friendship of Jesus make all our meeting and sharing a sign of God's way. And wherever we travel may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon us. **Amen**