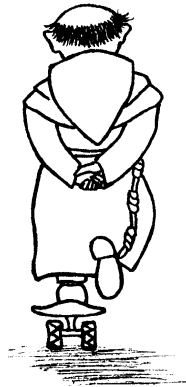


**Diocese of  
HEREFORD**

**Policy  
for  
Older  
People**



Prepared by the AGE Working Group  
of the Hereford Diocesan  
Council for Social Responsibility

July 2006

In the spirit of prayer, love and humanity,  
we commit ourselves to work for  
a just and inclusive society.



“Older people’s understanding of God needs to be accepted and listened to if the aspects of his character are to be correctly understood. Then the next generation can in its turn understand, in context, God’s new revelation to them. If today’s older people’s experience of God is ignored, future generations cannot be expected to believe that today’s knowledge of God has any relevance for them. History will repeat itself.”

**A Webber**  
***Life Later On : Older People and the Church 1990***

## FOREWORD

Deep within our Christian tradition is the valuing of wisdom. Indeed, Jesus himself is the Wisdom of God as well as the Word of God. While it does not automatically follow that age brings wisdom, yet nevertheless our tradition also speaks of “elders” and the valuing of the development of wisdom along the pilgrimage and journey of our life closer to God. We, as Christians, need to stress this crucial dimension of our own heritage and also encourage the search for wisdom within our society as a whole.

This is but one of the strands in our policy for older people. While we value every age group, so we also need to reflect on the distinctive gifts and needs of each stage of life. This policy document which was adopted by our Diocesan Synod and which I wholeheartedly welcome and support, encourages each congregation to reflect on our Biblical inheritance, our learning from and care for older members of our congregations, and our valuing hugely the contribution that they make with their gifts, energies, wisdom, experience and prayer. As more and more people live longer, so older people are becoming healthier and the stress on “age” in this document is more of a comment on functional age than chronological age!

I am delighted to not only support this document but commend it to every congregation for reflection and implementation so that we can affirm and care for one another in the best possible way. Our congregations provide a marvellous opportunity for all the generations to meet together and value one another in our common tasks of worship, ministry and mission.

**+ Anthony Hereford**

# INTRODUCTION

The Bible challenges many of the prevailing stereotypical assumptions about older people. It presents us with an image of older people as respected members of the community, as culturally important and as having a continuing role to play. We need to recognise that they are not a uniform group of people and like the rest of us differ in gender, class, income levels, race, age and health. After all, older people are simply those who have travelled further in the journey of life.

It is against this background that this Policy is presented. Beneath each of the ten aspirations there are some practical questions for individuals and churches to consider for further action.

The comments in boxes are quotations taken from a lecture given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Revd Rowan Williams, to mark the centenary of *Friends of the Elderly* at Church House, Westminster in September 2005. The AGE Group of the Hereford Diocesan Council for Social Responsibility is grateful to the Archbishop for allowing us to quote him in this paper.

Grateful acknowledgement is also extended to the *Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy* for their support in preparing this Policy.

**Revd David Clarke**  
**Chairman**  
**AGE Working Group**

**Mrs Caroline Bond**  
**Chairman**  
**Council for Social Responsibility**

**July 2006**

# POLICY FOR OLDER PEOPLE

**1 Those involved in church life at all levels should reflect upon how God views older people as revealed in biblical stories and how this might affect their attitudes and actions towards these elder members of the community.<sup>1</sup>**

- Consider the Christmas story. How many of the characters are older people? (See Advent Talk by John Bell of the Iona Community – Appendix One).
- What might we conclude from the responses to Jesus of Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and Gamaliel (all of whom we may infer to have been of mature years)?

“The question of how we perceive age is essentially a spiritual one. If you have a picture of human life as a story that needs pondering, retelling, organising, a story that is open to the judgment and mercy of God, it will be natural to hope for time to do this work, the making of the soul..... Furthermore, if we are all going to have the opportunity of undertaking reflection like this, it will be important that old people have the chance to share the task with the rest of us.”

**2 Churches need to recognise how in practice they discriminate against older people in much of what they say and do.**

- Do you apologise to newcomers with the words “I’m afraid we’re all elderly here”?
- Are your ‘traditional’ services always held in the early morning or after dark? Why do youth and family services always take place in the prime mid-morning slot?

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<sup>1</sup> *The comments in text boxes are quotations from the Archbishop of Canterbury (see Introduction)*

"Giving dignity to the elderly ..... is inseparable from recognising the dignity of human beings as such. So the challenge we face .... is about identifying the underlying assumptions that keep elderly people marginal, challenging the shortage of positive pictures of ageing."

**3 Churches should listen to older people's experience and be ready to learn from them.**

- Can older people offer a much-needed longer perspective in a time of rapid change?
- Can older people afford to be more radical because they have less to prove and less to lose?

"In a spiritually sensitive culture, it might well be that age is something to be admired or envied. A person is released from the pressure to justify themselves, free to discover who they are and perhaps pass on ... something of what they discover."

**4 Churches should ensure that older people are offered new experiences rather than assuming that they will always prefer the *status quo*.**

- Reflect on the top ten favourite hymns (see Appendix Two) voted for by Songs of Praise viewers, a majority of whom are older people. Does this not suggest that older people are often willing to embrace the new?
- Have you noticed that many older people are ready to be liberated from oppressive religious ideas taught to them in the past?

"In contrast to a setting where age means freedom, ..... age in our context is often implicitly presented as a stage of life when you exist on sufferance."

**5 Churches must recognise the wide range of abilities and potential to be found amongst their older members and appreciate their positive contribution.**

- How often does a funeral address reveal an older person of talent, vision and energy who was simply not recognised as such by the vicar or congregation?
- How many of your church leaders are over the age of 60?

"Supporting the dignity and security of the elderly is about identifying the underlying assumptions that keep elderly people marginal, challenging the shortage of positive pictures of ageing. .... a positive attitude to ageing is an act of faith in human freedom from the mechanical processes of work and the anxieties that go with this."

**6 Churches should however be aware of the effects of both physical and mental diminishment on their older members and help them to learn to cope with the associated feelings of loss.**

- Does the constant emphasis in the church on 'doing' rather than 'being' devalue the importance of 'being'?
- Could normal church activities such as house groups or women's meetings sometimes take place where older people already are, for example, in their own homes or maybe in a care home?

**7 Churches need to ensure that when older people become too frail to attend Sunday worship, their absence is noted and pastoral support offered.**

- What systems do you have in place to notice when regular attenders suddenly disappear?
- What procedures do you have for following up such absences, for example, providing home communions or offering transport to church?

"Ageing brings much that is bound to be threatening; of course it entails the likelihood of sickness and disability and that most frightening of all prospects, the loss of mental coherence. If this is combined with an unspoken assumption that the elderly are socially insignificant because they are not prime consumers or producers, the public image of ageing is bound to be extra bleak."

**8 Churches should be conscious that many older people are themselves carers of spouses, parents, other elderly relatives and friends or of grandchildren and, as such, need both practical and emotional support.**

- Is help ever offered to carers to enable them to attend church activities from time to time?
- Have you considered setting up a support group for carers?

**9 Churches should recognise that many older people feel challenged in their beliefs as they cope with losses and diminishment and their questioning needs a response.**

- How often are older people's concerns about the afterlife brushed aside because it is easier to talk about something else?
- How can older people be helped to come to terms with events in their past which need resolution?

"In most traditional societies, the term 'elder' is a title of honour - as it is in the Christian Church, where the English word 'priest' is an adaptation of the Greek for 'elder'. A person who has been released from the obligation to justify their existence is one who can give a perspective on life for those .... who are in the middle of the struggle; their presence ought to be seen as a gift."

**10 Churches should act as beacons of intergenerational activity so that young may learn from old and *vice versa* and that neither is seen as more important than the other.**

- Why do nearly all dioceses have posts concerned with youth and children's work but few have posts specifically related to older people's work?
- What opportunities are there within the life of your church for young and old to talk or engage in activities together?

"Age doesn't automatically confer wisdom, and the authority of 'elders' of one sort or another can be oppressive, unrealistic and selfish. But when we completely lose sight of any idea that older people have a crucial role in pointing us to the way we might work to make better sense of our lives, we lose ..... the assumption that there is a perspective on our human experience that is bigger than the world of production and consumption."

## APPENDIX ONE

### From an Advent Talk on Radio 4 by John Bell of Iona

Advent and Christmas ... are about old people. Shall I say that again?  
Advent and Christmas are about old people.

But what about the children? someone asks. And I have to reply that they don't feature in the story.

The Advent stories begin with an elderly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, he a priest helping out in his retirement years, she a childless senior citizen.

The Christmas stories end with another elderly couple. One is Simeon, a God-fearing man who regularly visits the temple, the other is Anna, an 84 year old widow and prophetess. They are the people who witness Jesus being dedicated to God by his parents in accordance with Jewish tradition, and who recognise his uniqueness.

And in between, we have three wise men, of indeterminate age, though if Eastern tradition is to be acknowledged, wisdom should be considered as the gift of years, not of youth.

I claim Advent and Christmas as a time for adults, not out of any dislike for children, but because I fear that by viewing these seasons as if they were devoted to and for toddlers, we avoid one of the quirks of God's nature. God expects old dogs to do new tricks.

God expects people whom the world would deem past it to initiate. The beginning of Jewish-Christian history involves an old man, Abraham, a nonagenarian, and his equally aged wife Sarah, from whom God maintains a nation will spring. He could have chosen a fertile upwardly mobile pair of newly-weds. We would have.

But God is not us. God expects old people –

to be the sowers of new seed;

to be midwives of change;

to be the ones who recognise and name the new directions which society has to take;

to be the ones who applaud and encourage young potential.

Elizabeth and Zechariah become parents in their old age and Simeon and Anna recognise the uniqueness in Mary's tiny baby, because God will not have people marginalised or written off on account of age. And when we see the wise men worshipping Jesus and then going home by another way, we see God's belief and expectation that older folk can change and will change when they recognise the truth.

*(Quoted by kind permission of the Wild Goose Resource Group)*

## APPENDIX TWO

### Songs of Praise Top Ten Hymns

How great thou art  
Dear Lord and Father of mankind  
The day thou gavest Lord is ended  
Be thou my vision  
Love Divine all loves excelling  
Be still for the presence of the Lord  
Make me a channel of thy peace  
Guide me O thou great redeemer  
In Christ alone  
Shine Jesus shine

## **APPENDIX THREE**

### **Consultants**

The Age Working Group consulted with the following during the preparation of this Policy and its other activities:

#### **National**

The Archbishop of Canterbury

Church House, Westminster

Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy

#### **Local**

Age Concern, Hereford and Worcester

Commission for Inspection of Residential Homes

Hereford People's Advocacy

Help the Aged, West Midlands

Herefordshire Social Services

Other People's Vision Group

Primary Care Trust

West Mercia Constabulary

Parishes across the Diocese were consulted via questionnaires.