

Developing Dementia Friendly Churches

Livability, formerly the Shaftesbury Society and John Grooms, is the UK's largest Christian disability charity and over the last 18 months it has developed its Dementia Friendly



Church Initiative which supports churches seeking to become dementia friendly. Livability sees Dementia Friendly Churches as churches that are inclusive and accessible to people with dementia and their carers

and support the development of dementia friendly communities. The approach draws together three separate discourses relating to dementia, social policy and theology.

Livability's approach towards people with dementia draws on a 'social model of disability' (McCloughry 2013) and sees people with dementia as having a disability and recognises that they face many social and cultural limitations. While recognising that dementia is a disease that arises from pathological changes to the brain, the disability approach also highlights that people with dementia are citizens and have the same rights as other people. The approach therefore challenges how society frequently marginalises people with dementia and disadvantages them.

This approach builds on the work of Tom Kitwood (1997) associated with 'person centred care' that was extended by Bartlett and O'Connor (2010) who highlight the dual focus of **personhood** and **community**. Through this approach, Livability has sought to highlight the relational and political experience of people with dementia and support their inclusion and participation of people within churches and their local neighbourhood.

This understanding of people with dementia corresponds with recent health and social policy and allows churches to make a positive and distinctive contribution to people with dementia. This policy is outlined in the National Dementia Strategy (2009), and more recently in the Prime Minister's Dementia Strategy (2009) and by the Dementia Action Alliance (www.dementiaaction.org.uk, accessed 7th March 2014) and comprise a number of strands that focus on the person with dementia and covers bio-medical and social/psychological aspects of support. This policy has given rise to increased interest in the promotion of early diagnosis and treatment towards people with dementia, enabling people with dementia to make choices and have control over service provision, and the development of communities that are dementia-friendly.

This policy is based on 'communitarian' ideas that highlight not only assets within communities for example statutory and voluntary agencies like local churches and other faith communities but also the assets of people with dementia themselves within the local community. Implicit in this approach is the idea that vulnerable people have a rightful place within local communities and should have access and inclusion to community-based groups and organisations. It is at this point that communitarianism and the social model of disability overlap and assert the contribution of community agencies to include and maintain the independence of vulnerable people. Livability therefore actively supports and works within this ideological framework in its Dementia Friendly Church Initiative and

advocates and equips churches to be accessible and inclusive to people with dementia and promote the creation of dementia friendly communities.

As a Christian organisation Livability bases its work on a Biblical model of social involvement and community engagement (Probert et al. nd). At its heart is the concept of the Trinity and the idea of the oneness of God existing in a three-fold relationship. This offers an understanding of God as social and relational and provides a helpful image of community and interdependence; and the love of God that is constantly given and received. This understanding is seen in Jesus who came into the world because 'God so loved the world' and who taught that his disciples are, and should be the light and the salt of the world. Livability highlights Jesus' key teaching on the Kingdom of God and the role of churches in its proclamation. Christians and churches are therefore seen as the place where the kingship of God is displayed, and through which it is engendered in local communities through the creation of peace, justice and reconciliation. Moreover, Livability applies St. Paul's inclusive approach towards diversity and participation in churches to people with dementia and sees them as occupying an important place in churches without which churches are diminished.

Since commencing its work on dementia friendly churches, Livability has sought strategic partners that share its vision. Organisations that are working with Livability include the Alzheimer's Society and the Dementia Action Alliance and those within the Christian community such as Greenbelt Arts Festival, Premier Radio, and the Christian Resources Exhibition, as well as individual churches and denominations. In addition, Livability has developed an audit for churches seeking to know what they need to do to become dementia friendly and training that supports them to know how to put it into practice. One local project Livability undertook was with the Diocese of Lichfield in the Church of

England. This partnership led to four half day workshops for churches within the Diocese that focused on promoting their awareness about dementia and sought to help participants help their church become more accessible and inclusive to people with dementia. Stories from the people who had attended the workshops were interesting and revealed different ways they had increased their church's accessibility and inclusivity to people with dementia. In fact their stories were so good that Livability decided to capture them on film and publish them on the Livability web site for all to see and receive inspiration about what is possible (www.livability.org.uk/church/dementia-friendly-churches/).

It is well established that the rise in the number of people with dementia in the United Kingdom presents a substantial challenge. While we recognise the value of support given by statutory agencies and families to people with dementia, we would also highlight the need to develop stronger and more cohesive communities. We see churches as being an important part of many local communities and that there is a need for churches to be accessible and inclusive towards people with dementia and also to contribute to the creation of dementia friendly communities. Livability's work seeks to extend the mission of the church to people with dementia and develop dementia friendly churches within dementia friendly communities.

References

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