**Befriending the elderly stranger: lived mission and older people.**

**James Woodward**

It is the purpose of this chapter to explore some of the issues and questions that are associated with our understanding of age and older adults within the context of society and faith. Older people in western society experience both poverty and marginalisation. In an imperial and capitalist culture their relative lack of economic and social traction has left them overlooked and even silenced. We both fear age and the often-used descriptor, ‘an ageing church’ has become symptomatic of an ecclesiological and institutional anxiety about survival.

I write as a middle-aged white man whose lived experience of practise has been wholly within England. Within the context of this volume, I am aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of some of my horizons of thinking. I will argue that a radical reconstruction of priorities in mission and lived mission in and amongst older people will inevitably result in some fundamental epistemic disobedience. It will challenge some cultural assumptions about power and ecclesiology alongside models of ministry for mission.

The chapter is organised into four sections. The first section invites us into a closer attention to experience. Three stories from my own experience illuminate elements of the nature, challenge, and opportunity of attending to the narratives of older adults.

This is followed by a brief examination of the social context within which our views and practices relating to age and ageing are shaped. I ask the reader to note the power and pervasive realities of ageism that shape our views and relationships.

The third section offers an overview of some of the thinking around the spiritual lives of older people from several writers and researchers. I draw upon the work of Gutmann, Carstensen, Thornstam and Coleman. This work illustrates how and in what way older adults become more spiritual and open to the religious questions that faith holds before us.

 Finally, section four, discusses the nature of paying attention in pastoral ministry as a way of modelling lived mission drawing on the work of Andrew Root.

1. ***Paying Attention to Experience***

***Colin Woodward - a story close to home.[[1]](#footnote-1)***

During the planning and initial research for this chapter my father collapsed and died. Despite his mature age (of 85) he was in reasonable health thanks, in part, by the care of my siblings and the village where he had lived and worked for all his life. By some of today’s comparisons it was not an easy life sent to work at 15 down into the depths of a coal mine where he laboured for over 40 years. It was characteristic of him to support my mother during a devastating diagnosis of dementia to be able to live and die at home. The geography of life shifted and there are new and surprising things to navigate at least a deep and profound reminder of mortality together with the complicated emotions of grief and sorrow. This is part of my story but elements of it are universal. We age. We work. We retire. We live with both the possibilities and limitations of our bodies and health. Eventually all of us will die. This is my own fragment of narrative, and the story of its consequences is still being written. It is however also a universal narrative. Each of us must travel through the stages of life towards maturity, old age, and death. This lived life is the substance within which we make meaning, aspire for the best for our families and communities and hope that the course of our journey is reasonably pain free.

I think it would surprise my father to imagine that he might be the subject matter for a chapter on mission. There was, in him, some deep ambivalence about the church. His views of those who participated in the life of the local church were informed by years of recognising the gaps between participation and practise in Christian discipleship. His life story and working-class roots were shaped by the mining industry and its fortunes. During the Thatcher government he articulated some fundamental questions about the purpose of the church and where it's preference and bias might be rooted. While Bishop David Jenkins offered a robust defence of the miners during the 1980s from the pulpit, Dad echoed a strong belief that English Anglicanism was essentially deeply disconnected from the working classes. [[2]](#footnote-2) Marginalisation, injustice and meaningless ideology were part of the purposes of established religion in his world view. Lived mission meant very little to those who were cast aside in the free market.

***Sister Margaret - a challenge from the other side of the world.***

Over 20 years ago I made a visit to Sydney, Australia to discover more about their provision of housing and care for older people. The range and scope of their provision across the city and suburbs was impressive. Some of these retirement villages were run by Christian charities. A great deal of thought and investment had gone into the design and purpose of the variety of space and approaches to support and care for older people. I was especially impressed with the space provided for those living with dementia and memory loss. The attention to quality of the environment and especially their sensory gardens was clearly transformative for the flourishing of those living there.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In one home I was privileged to spend some time with a Roman Catholic sister who has dedicated much of her life to working with older people but especially those living with dementia. Over tea one day I asked Margaret why it was that we were so seemingly incapable of thinking about age and older people through a more generative lens. Her reply has shaped much of my thinking ever since,

‘I think that most of us, James, have still yet to befriend the elderly stranger in ourselves’.

***The state and story of things? Explaining and accounting for where we are and what we look like.***

One of the gifts of my present work is a very wide variety of contact with the local church across denominations.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is always good to see how community works and especially the resilience honesty and energy that has gone into coping with the pandemic and building back in the service of others especially those in need. In the places where we have had the opportunity to gather and reflect together on the present gift and the future possibility of Christian witness and mission there is one recurring theme. Sometimes it is expressed as a passing matter of fact but more often it is a judgement on the shape change has taken in a particular place. Here is what is said: ‘Look at us – we are all getting older’ ; ‘ we are worried about the future - the church is growing older and ageing rapidly’. Occasionally it is put too sharply ‘there are just too many older people in this place’.

These are some starting points for this chapter to explore what we might discover as we listen to the narratives of older people. As we listen, we become aware that there is complexity, limitation, truth, prejudice, revelation, and wisdom.

1. ***Paying attention to the Context - An ageing society?***

We are experiencing a revolution in human longevity. There has been a steady increase in life expectancy in recent years. In 2014 there were 10 million people in the UK over 65 years old. By the year 2030, this figure is projected to rise to 15 million. Although there are some indications of a slowing down of life expectancy some estimate that by 2050 the number will have nearly doubled to 20 million.[[5]](#footnote-5)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Today there are more than one in 10 people who are over 60 years old. The number of very old people grows even faster. All this has significant implications for the way any society organises its wealth and provides benefits and pensions. While the UK might not be representative of a global picture of age and ageing all political and economic systems face the challenge of ageing populations on health, welfare and social insurance systems. In this gift of modernity we also face the paradox that we seem either unprepared or lacking economic will to make appropriate provision for older people. [[7]](#footnote-7)

The statistics have long posed financial and political challenges to how we care for older adults particularly those who do not have the financial resource is to support themselves with appropriate housing and care in third and fourth age. Successive governments have failed to make appropriate decisions to support the most vulnerable of older adults in our society today. The more politicised the discourse has become it seems the less able we are to place these challenges and opportunities into a broader historical and cultural horizon. In the pandemic, for example, one of the main groups that were most affected were older people. Many died in care homes and the sheer variety and diversity of provision of care across this country was laid bare. A lack of consistent and reliable social policy left many vulnerable people at severe risk.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is fair to point out that there have been many attempts to solve the challenges of funding for social care for older adults but none have been adopted. In the present financial situation there is a justice issue in achieving the right balance between individual responsibility and publicly funded provision.[[9]](#footnote-9) Lived mission must always be aware of the ways in which a particular context, inheritance, class or economic status shapes the lives of those who find themselves less advantaged within society. Lived mission is always shaped by geography, human prejudice, economics, class and culture.

Language shapes the way we think and act. Culture can have a powerful and abiding influence on how we think about ageing. The World Health Organisation to defines ageism as the way stereotypes of older people affect how we think and feel both towards others and indeed ourselves based upon age. This has and can shape how we act which may be a form of discrimination. It follows then that if we internalise negative stereotypes about the shape age takes in individuals then we run the risk of devaluing and discriminating against older people. In this sense ageism can intersect with other forms of disadvantage which include sex, race, and disability. [[10]](#footnote-10)

There may be several consequences to our fear or prejudice about our own age and ageing process alongside older adults in our families, communities, or organisations. There may well be part of all of us that fears older age in such an acute way that it has a detrimental effect upon our well-being and flourishing. This may impact on our health and longevity. It may also erode solidarity between generations.

Several agencies and research units have engaged with ways in which ageism might become combated. The work of the centre for better ageing has offered several resources to enable discrimination and equality on the basis of age to be challenged. Educational activities can work in enabling people to consider the way in which some of the language around age and older people perpetuates inaccurate information and stereotypical judgments. Work across the generations can help also reduce stereotypes and prejudices.[[11]](#footnote-11) [[12]](#footnote-12)

There is some further work to be done in engaging in ageism in religious organisations. In this area those working in and between world faith traditions may have much to learn from the ways in which Islam, Hinduism and Judaism make provision for older people both within their theological thinking and pastoral practise.[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14)

1. ***Paying attention to the lived experiences of older people***

Ageism has the potential of both overlooking and marginalising the importance of older people and their ageing journey. Ageism perpetuates negative stereotypes and may even work to prevent us from some of the inner work of befriending age in others and ourselves. The ‘spiritual’ may be obvious, but it may also remain hidden and unarticulated. There are many people who are spiritually curious but have to discover places, communities, or languages within which this curiosity can be expressed and explored.

Erik Erikson’s concepts of ‘generativity’ (the capacity to give of oneself to the next generations) and ‘integrity’ (acceptance of life in the face of death) are influential in the shaping of some literature in the area of spirituality and ageing. We should note that these concepts were formulated more than fifty years ago but have yet to be put to work in deepening wisdom about our human condition and developing learning through research.[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16)

Accounting for such views and understanding the complexity of how we make truth claims especially in our understanding of human nature is a key part of our theological task as part of the practice of mission. Perhaps in the area of ageing we might seek to defend and encourage interdisciplinary engagement and dialogue as part of a conviction that all knowledge is unitary, not separate, and disciplinary. The late Michael Argyle, who was one of the few practising Christians in the Oxford psychology department, once told an audience, provocatively, that most people who studied psychology did so because they wanted to obliterate their religious upbringing and any lingering traces of religious hold on their thought and emotions. Psychology offered the prospect of an alternative understanding of human nature in which religious faith would be superfluous. It seems that psychology along with other disciplines have a deep discomfort of religion. [[17]](#footnote-17) this is often a much-overlooked area of reflection on the nature of missiology and the practice of mission. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that much of our language of mission remains obtuse, intangible and for some simply irrelevant for modernity. Theology may need liberating from its own internal anxieties and psychodramas. Lived mission might take as its starting point a contemplative attention to how others hear and see who we are, what we do and what we say.

In Erikson’s well-known account of the life cycle, he demonstrates his commitment to and sympathy for religion. He describes religious faith as the mature adult virtue, which grows out of trust. In this country, Peter Coleman and his work at Southampton University has engaged in some fundamental questions relating to the widespread existence of spiritual experience and to its consequences for the person’s life. [[18]](#footnote-18)

***The challenges and complexities of growing older***

The last decades have seen the apparent triumphal entry into human history of the ‘Third Age’, a time of life when people are free to be themselves, to pursue their own chosen interests, not necessarily for selfish ends. Given reasonable health and economic conditions, this can be the optimum time of life. US studies on self-esteem across the life-span demonstrate the seventh decade of our 60s to be the peak time of high self-satisfaction. For many people the third age can begin in the 50s and continue well into the 80s and perhaps beyond if they are fortunate. But the third age comes to an end, often abruptly as the result of a severe health event like a stroke or a key bereavement, such as the death of one’s spouse. Older people are often not prepared for the dramatic changes in their lives, and perhaps because the preceding period has been so positive, the latter stages of life, the fourth age, when control is increasingly taken away from the individual, can be experienced very negatively. The sense of loss of meaning and purpose, which this engenders, can cast a shadow over the preceding years as people begin to envisage a bleak future. [[19]](#footnote-19) [[20]](#footnote-20)

Human culture has failed to keep up with changing life expectation. [[21]](#footnote-21) As a result, the negative features of ageing have been enhanced rather than counteracted. Comparatively speaking, we live at a period of history when ageing has lost much of its earlier dignity. Perhaps we sense that an older culture gave dignity which we have lost and not yet replaced? Although older people were a small proportion of the population in previous societies, they were a significant part of most cultures that have existed in historical time. It may be the moment for our missional culture to recover the voice and experience of older adults.

Although it is misleading to paint an over-idealised picture of the past, there is strong evidence that in traditional societies older people had more valued roles as tenders of the family, community and culture, and their mental health was better as a result.[[22]](#footnote-22) But the more important point is that personal well-being, the pursuit of individual happiness, was not the objective of such cultures, rather the well-being of society as a whole, and in this older people were seen to have a vital role to play. Thus whereas one can depict biological change as the natural enemy of ageing, (and in this context I understand ageing well as meaning ‘fulfilled growing old’). with its greater appreciation of the double-sided character of experience, a friend in disguise who awakens us, by means of the problems and pains it brings, to give more attention to the spirit), culture has always been the natural friend of ageing. Culture has provided the social and environmental means whereby older people have been enabled to continue functioning and contributing at a high level.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The failure of western post-enlightenment culture to adapt to the rising tide of older people in its populations could also be understood as a failure of religion. Some authorities have even attributed the problem to Christianity. Christianity, of all the great religions, gives apparently little significance to ageing. Partly this is because Christ died in early adulthood at an age that came to be seen as the perfect age, and also because Christianity - compared with Judaism -gives much more attention to continued life beyond death. The length of one’s life ceases to be an important matter. Wisdom also is no longer the prerogative of the old. Although this argument is crudely put – and it is important to recognize the witness that older figures such as Simeon and Anna do give in the New Testament, and that Christian churches, as most other social institutions, have functioned as gerontocracies up to the present day – the relative lack of privilege given to age by Christian churches deserves further consideration.[[24]](#footnote-24) [[25]](#footnote-25)

***The increased importance of religion with Age***

The evidence provides a consistent picture of the increasing importance of religion with age. Religious beliefs, behaviour, and experiences that reflect spirituality all increase with age. The only exception is diminished attendance at religious services among the very old and this is understandable in terms of reduced health and mobility, but this is often compensated by increased rates of other forms of religious and spiritual activity. Moberg emphasises that this pattern of results has been consistently found over the last fifty years as successive generations have aged and died, despite the predictions that it would diminish as secularisation sweeps through society. [[26]](#footnote-26)

***How might we discover and nurture meaning and purpose in older age? The work of Gutmann, Carstensen, Thornstam and Coleman.***

It is David Gutmann’s psycho-anthropological work in traditional societies that opens up the importance of religion in the life of some older people.[[27]](#footnote-27) In a series of longitudinal studies in societies around the world, he demonstrated the important role of transmission that older people played in demonstrating religious practice and communicating religious injunctions. There seemed to be a moment of transition, particularly in older men’s lives, when they came to take on the role of elders, often dressing and shaving differently, spending more time in prayer, ceasing to be involved in practical matters, but by their change of behaviour and their more passive orientation becoming persons of greater respect and even awe. Carstensen and Thornstam both build on and develop this research. [[28]](#footnote-28)

Carstensen and her team reach several perhaps surprising conclusions about older people. This work is part of a movement away from decline models of ageing to a lifespan developmental model, which considers how particular processes and strategies facilitate adaptive ageing. We note a contrast between a picture that demonstrates decreased biological, physiological, and cognitive capacity alongside evidence that suggests that people are generally satisfied in old age and experience high levels of emotional well-being. Carstensen offers a view of ageing as adaptation, which shed significant light on resilience and well-being across adult hood. We note that older people are less likely to experience persistent negative emotional states and can regulate their sense of equilibrium and well-being. In other words, older adults can embrace complexity, paradox and ambiguity in the experience of life. Older people were more able to experience poignancy of both positive and negative emotions.

 We should note these challenges to older people’s flourishing alongside the significant contribution by Carstensen to gerontology, of the argument that we should be freeing ourselves from the presumption of decline.

The research work of Tornstam originated in Sweden in gerontological sociology in 1973. The model of Gerotranscendence suggests that human longevity includes the potential for a transcendent movement away from the materialistic and rational point of view common in the first half of life. His research suggests that successful completion of such a shift is accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. In this respect it sits with and complements the work of Carstensen. Put quite simply, this research suggests that older people become more open to the transcendent and the spiritual in older age. This has the capacity to help us all to age well.

The theory of gerotranscendence grew from the decades Tornstam spent in making careful observations of people living in old age. Tornstam argues that in older age there is a process of discovery, of coming to terms with the complexity of life and self. There is a decrease in self-centeredness and a movement from egoism to altruism.

Associated with these findings is a mapping of the changes in relationships. Older people become more selective and less interested in superficial relationships. There is an increased need for solitude. There is a distinction between one’s self and one’s role. Attitudes to wealth change. There is less acquisitiveness and a greater awareness that possessions can ensnare and confine a person.

The combined work of Carstensen and Thornstam challenges us to reconsider the spiritual prospects of older age and to see within our life span the possibilities of creativity and power. We will remain ignorant of the depth and breadth of this potential and power as long as we insist on simply comparing youth to age. These findings bear out much of my own pastoral experience over the last three decades. Many of our churches are populated with older adults because they become more aware of the spiritual and religious dimensions of their lives in 3rd and 4th age. They bring into our ecology a lived experience which can be used to deepen wisdom and build community. Older people our elders holding wisdom and spiritual treasure.

Peter Coleman has argued that we cannot understand religion’s influences on positive psychological processes or promote such processes if we do not understand the phenomenon of being religious.[[29]](#footnote-29) Psychologists, he argues, must learn from religious practitioners themselves about the nature of religion, its function, the costs, and benefits of membership.

There are several key findings from Coleman’s research that we might bear in mind when considering the nature of meaning and purpose in later life through the lens of lived mission.

1. Death and bereavement are a major challenge to coherent meaning and mental health. The pattern of bereaved spouses, following them from the first to the second anniversary of death showed more uncertain and unsupported belief being associated with poorer outcomes in terms of depression and low levels of personal meaning.
2. Participants were asked to describe their own experience of religious institutions. Coleman’s study’s findings confirm that, for this generation of British older people at least, personal spiritual experience appears more significant and indeed more frequent than communal church life, and that spiritual questioning increases.
3. This greater individualising or rather personalising of faith is accompanied by greater needs for spiritual education. Coleman discovered that many older people hold significant reservations about many of the tenets of the Christian creed.

There are some important organisational and even ecclesiological implications for Christian communities considering Coleman’s work. We note the reality of the spiritual uncertainty, questioning and lack of rootedness present in many British older people reflected in this research. Within the frame of our commitment to mission we certainly need to explore further the question of how we understand the ways in which faith is transmitted. The traditional model suggests that the older person (amongst others) is a reliable transmitter of religious models of thought and practice.

***Conclusions: Building Intergenerational Communities of spiritual Friendship?***

1. *Building Friendships across the generations.*

There is an increased acknowledgement of some of the implications for individuals, families, and communities to what might be described as a loss of the relational and Pastoral as a serious threat to our human flourishing. Some of the work at a national level on loneliness[[30]](#footnote-30) reminds us that friendship is one of the most indispensable requirements of life, indeed a necessary means of and for our flourishing.

We have already noted the destructive possibilities of ageism and we would do well to explore the extent to which ageism in the churches has contributed to what Coleman describes as, ‘a period of history when ageing has lost much of its earlier dignity’. We need each other and have much to learn from one another as friendship is nurtured and we share our desire to support, engage and deepen wisdom for living.

1. *A renewed interest in spirituality and religion?*

Experience here in this community of learning, at Sarum College, shows us that there is no loss of interest or energy in a spiritual quest today. There may be some loss of confidence in aspects of institutional religion and organised church but both individuals and groups are no less spiritual. Their search and journey continues. There are many individuals who given the right context and relationship wish to narrate their journey of faith and explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives. A new enlightenment may be dawning. It may be that we need to be in a position where curiosity is nurtured and a different kind of religious journey offered. For too long religion has been over dominated by combination and process of binary arguments about either proving or disproving truth, whether outside or inside of the church. In this consumerist and often superficial culture of doing we have lost the ability to engage with the idea of mystery or wonder – quite simply ‘curiosity’.

1. *Who and what sustains the spiritual?*

The wider European and especially Russian narratives offered by Coleman may be a pointer to what sustains and deepens the spiritual. When we consider some of the brutalities exercised during the Communist era it is significant to note that there is a life changing strengthening of faith when it is under fire. One of the lessons to be learned here might be how we nurture a sense of the spiritual that can carry individuals at points of crises in their lives – when there is greater uncertainty and adversity. Any theology for lived mission needs to engage with pain, loss, vulnerability, the hope for wholeness and the reality of death and doubt and uncertainty. Popularism and superficiality may have some power in attracting new adherents to faith but are we nurturing a faith, which can sustain some of the more problematic, and challenging experiences of living?

We might remind ourselves that the themes of love, friendship and social trust are fundamental to what older people need from both life and religion. Could it be that the more complicated life becomes in this modern age of fragmentation and the breakdown of community, the more religion might have to offer in these areas?

1. *Good and Bad religion?*

The ways in which religion might be destructive to human well-being need to be articulated and explored. What are the legitimate objections to belief as they shape an individual’s self-image and sense of destiny? Is religion enabling of a fundamental self-love? In relation to our work with older people, does religion help them cope with diminishment, change and death? There is some research which suggests that there is plenty of evidence that religion has a positive contributing influence on well-being. In the light of this, is it possible to make a distinction between good religion and bad religion? Might we learn from older people themselves and their experiences of community, faith and pilgrimage as we gain a greater sense of the limitations and possibilities of religion?

It may be very hard to overestimate the sheer effect of the decline of religious affiliation. The 1980s and 1990s therefore became a very significant period of difficulty in relation to the shape and influence of religion over people. Churches must bear some responsibility in the strategies that they have employed to cope with this decline – especially in the emphasis on work among young families and children. Is it possible to be objective about the marginalisation of older people because of these mission and evangelistic strategies?

Finally, surely despite this decline there is still some measure of authenticity about the kind of spiritual questions people ask in old age. There are of course interesting issues about whether religion in the end answers our needs and yearning and spiritual questionings. Do we need to liberate religion from structure and institution into a more radical counter-cultural movement? Will it ever be possible to do this without the baggage of ideology and fundamentalism?

1. ***Paying attention to pastoral presence in the practice of lived mission.***

Andrew Root in his exploration of pastoral ministry argues that that we must connect and be in relationship with others as the basis for lived mission; ‘our relationships are the very field, the very place, where God is encountered. Pastoral ministry can be nothing more and nothing less than making space for people to encounter the very presence of God. Space is created in the sharing of relationships of persons’ [[31]](#footnote-31)

It follows that the pastor is invited to join in God's continued action in the world. In this framework of relationality, Root reminds his reader that the pastor is a storyteller performing and protecting the stories of her of his people. This chapter argues that in the life of lived mission we ought to attend to those stories that are so often ignored or overlooked. We have noted an increase in religious and spiritual awareness in older adults which has generative potential of sharing wisdom and faith. Too many of our cultural norms in Christian communities’ nurtures and perpetuates ageism. We should examine therefore what shapes the values and practices of missional engagement. What would a commitment to older people look like for lived mission? How far would it challenge any model of evangelization colludes with the dominant culture and power structure of both society and church.

Root draws upon the work of Giddens who has explored the development of independence and relationship within a developing culture arguing that relationships with other human beings became not a necessity but an individual choice.[[32]](#footnote-32) We live in a culture where we have become obsessed with ourselves as autonomous feeling subjects and so our relationship with other people and indeed our dependants upon them has shifted. Technology has both liberated us and imprisoned ours into what route describes as an obsessiveness and a ‘therapeutic self-help consciousness.’ Self-help is soaked deeply into ‘an unquenchable individualism’.[[33]](#footnote-33) it may therefore not be surprising that within this cultural, social and relational change the realities of age and the numbers of older people in our families and societies have ceased to become a priority for our time and organisational life as Christian communities. In this picture ministry is turned into a system of programmes of intervention which are designed to draw people into membership. In an anxious and declining ecology, a commitment to older adults is either marginalised or overlooked.

Lived mission might explore support and engagement that would enable people to connect with their spiritual life. This mission would recover a valuing of age and older adults as teachers of wisdom, examples of spiritual generativity, embodied faith bearers. The adults can be space for people to rest in relationships as human person to human person. Being and listening are profoundly affirming and bear much fruit. We are our lived relationships. We are no longer objects or statistics but people and persons.

Root goes on develop how lived mission might be essentially connected with the sharing in the life of others. In this context we need to recover how our engagement with older people at a deeply personal level can explore what human flourishing might look like in the face of change fragility and human vulnerability. It is perhaps only in such relationality that we ourselves can really be ourselves. In this life we understand, grasp and name the grace of relationship as we always open ourselves up to the other as a place of the indwelling of God's grace. This is inextricably linked with power participation in the incarnation. We cannot share in the life of others if we refuse to connect and engage with them. This is true of all pastoral ministry and mission. That mission, that lived mission may be compromised if there are people or groups that are simply overlooked. Root concludes, ‘We cannot share in the life of others if we refuse to act for them. We are given the gift of our personhood by action done with and for other persons.’[[34]](#footnote-34)

Pastoral presence might be defined as the exercise and commitment to empathy. It is the experience of feeling that help us to make us a person. Empathy is the spiritual reality that takes us into, that moves us towards another. Empathy is the surest lens of seeing each other is all our limitations and vulnerability. What do we see when we look and attend? How might lived mission develop this empathy as imaginative feeling? Lived mission is perhaps then the facilitation of empathetic encounter. We might be called into creating space that allows for gentle, slow, attentive sharing in others lives. This is about becoming human within the context of God's encounter with us.

It is an observation which maybe both subjective and limited but there is a sense in which organised religious life in these post pandemic months seems somewhat at a low ebb. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of people have not returned to churches which may result in increased anxiety about sustainability for Christian witness and mission. It is within this context that we need to ask where do we place older people? How do we relate to older people? What do we see as we look at one another's face? Where do we see transcendence in each other’s personhood? How might lived mission nurture encounter, creativity, depth, and compassion.

 Within this relational commitment there is a culture change both for the theology and practise of mission. This chapter may have opened a simple definition of lived mission as our supporting the enabling of stories to be heard. There is a radical spirit of a commitment to giving voice to those who have been marginalised by our functional and capitalist spiritual ecologies. In this story is the hook of a personal connection and into a deeper connection. Listening to each other and the range and complexity of human experience can help nurture gratitude and deep and emotional intelligence. Root shows us that sharing is the heart of a pastoral ministry and in this sharing of the humanity of each other we are joyously celebrating the very sharing in the life of God.[[35]](#footnote-35)

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**Biography**

James Woodward is Principal of Sarum College and a Visiting Professor of Theology at the University of Winchester. He is a teacher and writer of pastoral and practical theology. He has had a particular interest in age and the place of older people in our society over the last 30 years. Presently he is engaged in some reflective writing on theological reflection and is interested in narratology and its potential for nurture flourishing.

For further information about his work and publications see: [www.jameswoodward.online](http://www.jameswoodward.online)

1. This chapter is dedicated to memory of my Father Colin Woodward 1936-2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. LBC/IRN, "David Jenkins sermon on miners strike". http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0010800203004 (Accessed 10 Oct 2023) The Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, makes his inaugural sermon (1984) about possible solutions to the miners’ strike, suggesting National Coal Board Chairman Ian MacGregor should step down. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See <https://forwardwithdementia.au/news/gardening-and-people-living-with-dementia/> for evidence of innovative practice of support and care for people living with dementia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For further information about the work of Sarum College see <https://www.sarum.ac.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/whats-happening-life-expectancy-england> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bytheway, B. (2011) Age and Time in Unmasking Age. Bristol: Policy Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a global perspective see <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the Report Covid-19: Neglect was one of biggest killers in care homes during pandemic, BMJ 2021;375:n3132 and from the Quality Care Commission <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-reports/publication-statistics-deaths-involving-covid-19-care-homes-england> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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