



Ageing Well: A model of support for religious orders in Hexham and Newcastle Diocese

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Introduction

The concept of “ageing well” has gained attention in literature as an approach to health and well-being that incorporates a range of factors in the lives of older adults. These factors encourage an understanding of older adults that promotes physical and mental health, and wider social elements.

On October 7th 2023, 30 members of Catholic religious orders in the Hexham and Newcastle diocese took part to a workshop organised by Saint John of God Hospitaller Services (SJOG). The aim of the workshop was to meet, discuss, and reflect on the process of aging, and on how this impacts religious community and the wellbeing of the members as they age.

Hexham and Newcastle diocese comprises of the counties of Northumberland and Durham and the unitary authorities of Newcastle upon Tyne, Darlington, Gateshead, Hartlepool, North and South Tyneside, Sunderland, and Stockton on Tees (north of the river Tees).

Structure of the workshop

The workshop was structured to gather insights into the concept of ageing well.

Of the 30 participants present during the day, 27 were women. The question of gender equality within the pastoral life was discussed alongside challenges and opportunities for better shaping societal and institutional changes.

The introduction to the day was presented by Brother Robert Moore (SJOG) and focused on the concepts of “identity” and “aging”. It contemplated the relationship between the two - aging is not simple a physical transformation, but also a spiritual one, consisting in becoming aware and adapting to the process (Sternard, 2021).

The participants, working in groups of 4-5 people, reflect on the following questions:

- **Question 1.** What challenges do you see in religious life in general and in your congregation/community in particular?
- **Question 2:** What challenges do you see in the world and the church? What opportunities do you see in both?
- **Question 3:** Considering these challenges, what might make life more worthwhile? Considering these opportunities, what might make life more worthwhile?
- **Question 4:** What if anything, do we need to let go of, to grow? What if anything, do we need to take hold of, to move forward?

Each question was facilitated by the workshop leaders and each group was asked to note their views and thoughts on paper worksheets. Worksheets were analysed to draw out themes which offered the opportunity for comparison and contrast.

Through analysis, insights and comments have been mapped out into core themes, explored in this report. The themes that emerged were reviewed by two researchers at SJOG to ensure accuracy.

Summary of findings

Inspired by the conviction that older people have a lot to say and a lot to give to the life of society and the church community, participants spoke of the importance of collaboration, mission, spiritual growth, and personal wellbeing as fundamental rights to be respected. Discussions reflected:

- Aging with dignity means continuing to practice the biblical teachings and to share faith - both within the religious and lay communities.
- That there is an understanding and concern regarding the rapid and continuous economic and cultural changes which appear more secular in nature. Groups spoke of creative and flexible ways for modelling customs to tackle these changes whilst maintaining the Charism of the religious community.
- That by providing the necessary resources to meet the new needs that communities face through age-based activities, supported care, and governance structures, an effective sense of achievement and wellbeing can be achieved to continue vocation.

Discussion

Mission, faith and institution in society

All participants considered the secularisation of society and the challenges that can result such as shortage of priests, perceived lack of freedom to speak about faith, restrictions in actions, resistance to teachings from religious perspective, fewer people going to mass, closing of churches, and a decreasing number of members joining the religious communities.

As societies develop and become modernised, religion has been placed in the private sphere and has become less and less important in public and political life - consequently it has ceased to play an active role in many people's personal lives. This led participants to question where they saw their mission or at least, how to deliver on their mission.

The mission to serve the poor and marginalised communities remain. Mechanisms, such as funding specific projects delivered by the lay community which meet specific needs, offer a means to engage in wider communities, yet deliver on the mission of the Orders.

Bridges between laity and religious community

When asked what opportunities participants see, they expressed hope for a renewed vision of spiritual values, open to the vision of working with lay members to deliver on their mission and values. In their view, a shared missions based on common needs would set the base for improving collaborations and partnerships outside the religious community.

Partnerships of mission between external organisation, such as charities aligned to the values of the Orders, and religious practices, was spoken as potentially providing a personal sense of fulfilment.

Three aspects can be considered for achieving this:

1. The relationship between faith-based organisations and the wider civic society.

While embracing the values of laity, participants recognised the opportunity for expanding skills and expertise. This capacity building results in the promotion of collaboration, unity, justice and peace. By improving partnerships with individuals and charities, churches can come together and offer support

to those in need. Creating opportunities for volunteering would be a helpful step in this direction along with more strategic partnerships with charities that develop and deliver services with Orders.

2. Working across communities

The need to engage young people in meaningful ways was discussed. There was a recognition that this was not evangelism but providing meaningful activities in a society which can be challenging. Participants spoke of projects that could be open to families and young people, addressing relationship dynamics, life challenges, or topical societal concerns. Such approaches may build bridges between the individuals and the collective experience of spirituality and faith whilst also linking religious communities. This was encouraged by the groups to share mission and vision.

3. Faith in community

The separation between faith and values in a secularised society is not straightforward. It is commonly agreed that, even among believers, personal and collective values will differ culturally and geographically. To understand the development processes taking place in society and to find common ground, faith-based organisations must engage with each other and communicate through necessary formats and platforms. For example, religious organisations, charities, and NGOs often look to support society's most pressuring needs.

While faith and spirituality can take different shapes among laity and religious groups challenges in belonging, human rights, equality, reproductive health, climate change, can be seen as issues that are sensitive among all communities. Sharing wisdom from the work of religious Orders is a mechanism to bridge the gap. Faith-based activism could play an important factor in public debates and policy making discourses.

Sharing church teachings (innovation, social media, leadership)

Participants spoke about a wish to disseminate religious teachings to communities to share their faith. Contemporary challenges were acknowledged along with the importance of renewing the message of faith.

It is common for young people to embark on the adventure of constructing their own life in their own terms where faith sometimes does not have a place. Participants spoke of the wider church needing to understand how and why people engage in religious practices, to move teachings into practical action.

It is important, therefore, not only to find the right instruments to communicate with people, especially young people, but also to make religious teachings accessible in the context of contemporary life. Ideas such as sharing the word of prophets in a more sympathetic way, finding creative ways of praying together and making use of social media as means of sharing and receiving information (streaming, drop chats), were some of the suggestions emerged during the workshop.

Governance, recognition, procedure and policies to adopt – going beyond mission

Alongside developing collaboration between laity and religious community to meet need, another topic that emerged from the workshop was the church institution.

Findings from the discussions covered the structure of dominance and deference within the church, and the need of recognising women’s experience and contribution. Hierarchical governance that might lead to unilateral decisions and excluding the voice of members were also mentioned.

The need for connection, being together in the name of God, praying together, and appreciating each member of the religious community, was voiced as even more important when the institution itself is affected by external and internal changes.

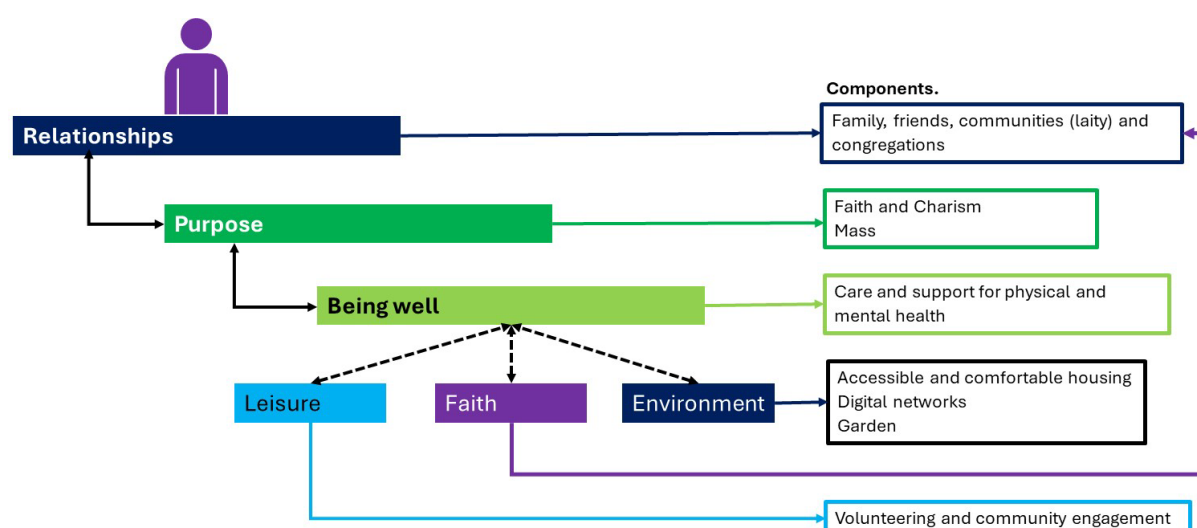
There was a strong desire by participants to be involved in various activities and to continue being at service through their mission and vocation. Participants spoke of the need to receive the necessary support and guidance to navigate drops in memberships, transformations in terms of leadership, and increase responsibilities of administrative tasks.

Just as Joan Chittister supports the contribution and resilience of women in the history of Church¹, the Sisters present at the workshop remain optimistic in front of challenges. The common belief among participants was there is a season for everything, and nothing is wasted but renewed. Learning from the past, adapting, and identifying potential for new ways of contributing to communities was expressed. Support from external organisations in managing governance and meeting the administrative requirements necessary to support the Orders work is one way to allow time to focus on vocation.

Aging well

The main objective of the workshop was to better understand the needs of the religious Orders in Hexham and Newcastle diocese, when transitioning to another stage of their life. A model of support, using the themes that emerged above was developed (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – A model of ageing well for religious communities.



Traditionally, the Church has always reaffirmed the primary importance of recognising and fostering the intrinsic value of people of all ages. The reserves of experience and wisdom accumulated during

¹ Chittister, 2022

people's lives are seen as qualities to be preserved and not lost. Participants expressed that they are no different.

Participants spoke of the importance of being seen, valued, and appreciated by the community and expressed awareness and willingness to *"keep the mission and be prepared to change the way we do it"*.

Communities of religious orders are ageing in the UK due to longer life expectancy and fewer people entering religious orders each year. As the average age is increasing, it makes it more difficult for older members to receive care from their younger counterparts, as was previously the case. Making sure that members have access to options for their day-to-day support is important. Depending on their level of need, support for daily tasks such as using the telephone, doing housework and shopping, meal preparation, managing medications and personal finance, and using transportation² would be beneficial.

A model of support (see figure 1) for religious Orders should also be taken into consideration:

- the creation of purposeful activities when aging (including leisure activities),
- the creation of environments that facilitate independence but also connections and support members to achieve new objectives
- continued sharing and practicing their faith and mission.

While some of this could be achieved through direct, personal support, and indirect support in administrative and governance duties is also important.

Conclusion

The workshop was successful in exploring ageing in the communities the participants represent. Relationships within and between Orders and the wider community is essential. Where challenges such as secularisation, governance, decreased number of members have been identified, new ways of interacting and building bridges through shared common values, dialogue and collaboration were discussed.

Collaborating and partnerships with organisations aligned to the mission and charism of the Order(s) is a route to developing and addressing the areas. Project aligned to mission, volunteering, or adopting new technologies as ways of communication are all possible. Aging members can act as spiritual guides between ethical values and civic action, either by influencing public debates or offering religious literacy and support to young people and families.

Finally, in terms of ageing well, members can be supported through practical help with day-to-day tasks, domestic and institutional administrative requirements, together with access to recreational activities.

Whilst implementing the findings in practice requires further work avenues to explore support for religious orders in Newcastle and Hexham Diocese have been identified.

² Anchisi et al, 2016

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