

Quick Guide...

Dementia Friendly Church Buildings

Professor June Andrews

Introduction

Being a dementia friendly church is about much more than the physical building. It is about how the church welcomes people with dementia and their carers. It is about how you support them and help them to worship in spite of the common trials and tribulations that dementia brings.

You can do this very well in a building that is not very well designed for dementia. However, this guide is about how some attention to buildings can help make coming to church easier for people with dementia and their families and friends.

Dementia

Dementia is the name that is given to the symptoms of a range of diseases. The commonest one is Alzheimer's disease, followed by vascular dementia. Someone in your congregation might have a less common dementia, or they might not yet know their diagnosis. Most people affected are old or very old, and the majority live at home. The key thing is that they will be less able to look after themselves than they once were.

In particular they will have

- Difficulty in remembering things
- Problems with working things out
- Very great stress and anxiety
- Some mobility or balance problems
- A tendency to get lost in once familiar settings or routines

Q. I am losing my memory... Oh, what if I forget God?

A. Whatever happens, he will never forget you! And we will help you all the way.

How buildings can help

There are simple things you can do to an existing building to make it better.

Lighting

Let there be light

Because people with dementia are usually older, they may have the common eye problems that come with age. With time the front of your eye starts to be less clear, and more yellow. It is as if you've got yellow goggles on. Older people therefore need much more light to see anything than a younger person does.

For people with dementia, this problem is very great. They may already be a bit unsure or confused and poor visibility makes this worse. The rest of us can adjust to the poor light level, by moving to a brighter spot, or putting on some reading glasses. The person with dementia might just sit still and feel lost and anxious because they can't see.

Large print hymn books and Bibles will help, but consider having a reading lamp near where the person is going to sit, to help them follow the reading of the Scripture, or the hymns. Paint walls white.

In the church hall, make sure that the room is as light as possible. Keep windows clear and cut back bushes from around them. Make sure that the curtains can be pushed

right back to make the window aperture as wide as possible. If the windows face a dark wall, paint it white to reflect light from outside. Put in light bulbs that are as bright as your fittings will allow and regularly change energy saving bulbs that lose luminosity over time.

A Quick Guide on Church Lighting is available at www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/quick-guides.

Flooring

And make straight the paths for your feet

One of the commonest reasons for a person with dementia getting admitted to hospital is falling over. In many churches the floor cannot be changed, but if you have a choice, make it a smooth, matt, self-coloured surface over which the person with dementia will walk more safely.

All the advice that is available to you on disabled access should be followed, but in addition you need to pay close attention to contrasting colours between rooms, and contrasting threshold strips, and patterns on vinyl that may be misinterpreted by a person with depth perception problems.

Toilets

Let us cleanse ourselves...

People with dementia do sometimes suffer from incontinence, but often it is caused by difficulty in finding the toilet in time. You must make it easy to find.

Make the signs directing people to the toilets bold and unambiguous. Boldly write the word “toilet” on the door in addition to any little toilet symbols. If signs are too high

up on the door or wall, older people with dementia will not see them. They should be below shoulder height. Make the door a bright contrasting colour so it can be easily found. The locks on the door should be able to be opened from the outside in case of falls.

Choose traditional cross head taps, and familiar classic toilet furnishings that people remember from earlier days. People with dementia will be better able to take care of their own needs if everything looks familiar. Make sure there are grab rails in contrasting colours, and if you think people are using the toilet roll dispenser for support in the closet, remove it. If the closet is big enough for a carer to go in to assist, that can help.

Resources

If you are creating a new building, visit www.dementia.stir.ac.uk/design to get advice on an ideal design from dementia specialists and architects. There are low cost and free to download resources on dementia friendly design at the University of Stirling Dementia Services Development Centre (www.dementia.stir.ac.uk). You could consider sending a delegate to the three-day Design School and they would be a resource for the Presbytery.

About the Author

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