

‘And Are We Yet Alive’: Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministry:

A Methodist Response to Changing UK Demographic

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Introduction

Whilst Methodism began as a renewal movement and grew through the harvest of the Great Revival, the current narrative of British Methodism is typically one of decline and shrinkage. Seeking a fresh revival and renewal in this new age, the British Methodist Church through successive initiatives, Presidents and Conferences has sought to restructure, refocus and reprioritise its resources, with the goal of evangelising ‘the missing generations’. Every year reports cite, with increasing concern, the worries over ageing, dwindling congregations and limited engagement with young people and families. In a 2006 article for *Rethinking Mission*, Rev. David Deeks, then General Secretary for the Methodist Church, stated “we have become an increasingly older Christian community...so we need to act urgently, before it is too late, to find radically new ways of engaging with our society, which is more and more distanced from the Christian movement.”¹

However, whilst British Methodism has heavily emphasised mission and evangelism in favour of the younger end of the spectrum, the UK population has undergone a dramatic ageing process, experiencing a significant increase in individual life expectancy and the proportionality of older people. Whereas older age was once typified by physical and mental

¹ David Deeks, “Priorities of the Methodist Church,” 2. [cited: 17/July/2018]. Online: <https://rethinkingmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/rmdec.pdf>

decline, and retirement short-lived, many now experience a lengthy and largely healthy, active retirement, greatly increasing the importance of this life stage. In short, the UK has gotten old.²

Since the beginning of the 20th century individual life expectancy has increased dramatically, as has the quality of those latter years.³ Increased life expectancy means retirement has moved from the experience of the privileged few to an expected right for all.⁴ Older people are enjoying and exploring their latter years as never before, giving rise to the need to reassess traditional conceptions of ageing and older people. The idea of the '3rd Age' seeks to recognise the distinction between the more independent and dependent stages of older age, a time of life following 'retirement' from work/family care (2nd Age) but not yet marked by the physical/medical dependence traditionally associated with elderliness (4th Age).⁵

The experience is not all positive however. Debate continues to abound regarding media representation, access to the labour market, and personal and social identity in older age.

The persistence of societal prejudices and negative ageing stereotypes continue to be problematic.⁶ Healthcare and welfare provision in later life regularly enter media and political discourse, often in the negative if not near-apocalyptic.⁷ Whilst an extended life of

² Sheila Peace, et al., "The Ageing World," in *Ageing in Society* (3rd ed.; ed. John Bond, et al.; London: Sage Publications, 2007), 1-5.

³ Office of National Statistics, "Health Expectancies at Birth and at Age 65 in the United Kingdom: 2009-11," 1-16. [cited: 29/July/2016]. Online: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/healthexpectanciesatbirthandatage65intheunitedkingdom/2014-11-18>

⁴ Roger Grainger, *Change to Life: The Pastoral Care of the Newly Retired* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1993), 1-3.

⁵ Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (2nd Ed., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3-5.

⁶ Peace, *The Ageing World*, 12-13.

⁷ Michael Apichella, *The Church's Hidden Asset: Empowering the Older Generation* (Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew LTD, 2001), 87.

active retirement is the experience of many, for others it can also be a time marked by tragedy, loss, impoverishment and depression.

This paper aims to provide an overview of recent developments in the UK demographic, focusing on the rise of the 3rd Age, as a background for critiquing the Methodist Church's missional prioritisation of 'children and young families'. Therefore, this paper seeks to develop a more accurate understanding of current trends and patterns in ageing, giving consideration to the experiences and expectations of those in and approaching their 3rd Age. Such an improved understanding provides a rationale for giving equal priority to 3rd Age mission and evangelism, acknowledging the potential for revival amongst this growing demographic.

3rd age – growth and definition against other ages

When referring to older people we have no shortage of potential titles and epithets; from the broadly neutral 'older person/people', to the more overtly negative/offensive 'coffin dodgers'. In more recent years two new terms have been added; 3rd Age and 4th Age. Taken with the 1st Age (adolescence) and the 2nd Age (adulthood) these two descriptors refer to the latter stages of adult life, as Elizabeth MacKinlay states "[if] the third age is defined as being older and still remaining independent..., then the fourth age is the age of frailty, dependency and being in need of care."⁸ Peter Laslett describes them thusly, "First comes an era of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education; second an era of

⁸ Elizabeth MacKinlay, *Spiritual Growth and Care in the Fourth Age of Life* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 11.

independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and saving; third an era of personal fulfilment; and fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death.”⁹

Whilst a purely chronological basis for delimiting the 3rd Age is generally avoided, ‘age’ remains a key factor as some form of retirement is common to most definitions. Where retirement was once short lived and often marked with chronic ill-health, people are not only living longer on average, but they can also expect to live more of those years free of life-limiting or serious illness. This means that the years of retirement are likely to not only be longer than those experienced by previous generations, but they are also likely to be more active and healthier years.¹⁰

Accompanying the greater expectation of retirement is an increased and vastly different expectation about retirement, that permeates all life stages. The last century has seen an unprecedented level of social and cultural upheaval, and those experiencing and entering their 3rd Age are those who lived through and led the way in those changes.¹¹ As a result, today’s retirees tend to be more physically active, socially engaged and interested in worldly affairs and travel opportunities.¹² Thus, any conception of the 3rd Age must attempt to account for the greatly differing expectations of retirement held by those experiencing and entering their 3rd Age from their predecessors.

⁹ Laslett, *Fresh Map of Life*, 4.

¹⁰ Carol Jagger, “Trends in Life Expectancy and Healthy Life Expectancy,” 4, [cited: 31/July/2016]. Online: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/464275/gs-15-13-future-ageing-trends-life-expectancy-er12.pdf

¹¹ Maria Evandrou and Jane Falkingham, “Looking back to look forwards: lessons from four birth cohorts for ageing in the 21st century,” *PT* 99:1 (2000): 28-29.

¹² Rob Merchant, *Pioneering the Third Age: The Church in an Ageing Population* (Paternoster Press: Carlisle, 2003), 44-46.

For the purposes of this project the following working definition of the 3rd Age was developed:

The extended period of life following middle age, marked by the experience of some form of active retirement, and typified by a high level of personal independence and the pursuit of various leisure and pleasure oriented activities and experiences.

Changing demographic

Whilst few could expect to survive much beyond current pensionable age at the start of the last century, it is now considered as normative. As of 2015 those aged 65 and over accounted for 17.8% of the population, around 11.6 million people. Further, those aged 85 and over accounted for 2.3%, around 1.5 million people.¹³ When considering those aged 60 and above, thereby including many taking advantage of early retirement and allowing for the traditionally lower age of female retirement, the proportion of the population accounted for increases to over 25%, with 14.9 million people. Meanwhile, over one third of the population, 23.2 million people, is currently aged 50 and over.¹⁴ At the higher end of the age spectrum, the 2011 Census records over 12,000 centenarians.¹⁵ Rising from 2,000 in 1980 and less than 150 in 1958.

¹³ Emily Shrosbree, "Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2015," 2, [cited: 2/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2015>

¹⁴ Age UK, "Later Life in the United Kingdom: June 2016," 3, [cited: 3/August/2016]. Online: http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Factsheets/Later_Life_UK_factsheet.pdf?dtrk=true

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics, "pp01uk: Usual Resident Population by single year of age, unrounded estimates, local authorities in the United Kingdom," n.p. [cited: 29/July/2016]. Online: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestima>

According to recent ONS figures cohort life expectancy for someone born in the UK in 2016 is just over 89 years for a man and around 92 years for a woman.¹⁶ This represents an increase of around 6 years for a man and 5 years for a woman since 1980.¹⁷ Whilst representing an overall growth in average life expectancy for men and women, these figures also represent a narrowing of the gender difference between their average life expectancies.¹⁸

The UK demographic can, therefore, be shown to be increasing both in its upper limits and in the raw numbers of people reaching these higher ages, once considered a rarity.

However, this is not the only way in which the UK's age demographic is changing. In the 40 years between 1974 and 2014 the median age of the UK population, as a whole rose from 33.9 years to 40. Over the same time period the lower and upper age quartiles also changed, increasing from 15.9 years to 21.1 and 54.8 years to 58.3, respectively.¹⁹ This proportional change means that "[there] are now more people in the UK aged 60 and above than there are under 18."²⁰

tes/datasets/2011censuspopulationestimatesbysingleyearofageandsexforlocalauthoritiesintheunitedkingdom/pp01uk_tcm77-320922.xls

¹⁶ Sophie Sanders, "Period and Cohort Life Expectancy Explained: December 2017," 2, [cited: 17/July/2018]. Online:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/methodologies/periodandcohortlifeexpectancyexplained>

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics, "2016 based England and Wales cohort mortality rates and life expectancies, 1945 to 2016," n.p. [cited: 17/July/2018]. Online:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/adhoc/0082052016basedenglandandwalescohortmortalityratesandlifeexpectancies1945to2016>

¹⁸ Rebecca Wright, "National Life Tables, United Kingdom: 2012–2014," 3-7, [cited: 3/August/2016]. Online:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifetablesunitedkingdom/2015-09-23>

¹⁹ Phil Humby, "Overview of the UK population: February 2016," 7-8, [cited: 3/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/february2016>

²⁰ Age UK, *Later Life in the United Kingdom*, 3.

In considering the Methodist Church's response to these demographic changes, particularly the rise of the 3rd Age, it is important to consider the demographics of UK Church life itself; however, this is not without its difficulties. According to the 2011 *Going on Growing* report "[although it] is widely recognised that church congregations tend to have a higher age profile than the wider public...national statistics relating to this have not been regularly collected..."²¹ Following the inclusion of an 'age breakdown' as part of the annual October count, the Methodist Church identified "approximately 50%...[of congregants] as being between the ages of 66 and 80, and around 17% over 81 years of age."²² This tallies with the results of the various other recent surveys which identified both the Anglican and Methodist churches as having significantly higher age profiles than the general UK population.²³ Therefore, despite limited availability of reliable data, it appears safe to conclude that the Church is ageing along with the UK's population, with both Anglicanism and Methodism showing a substantially older age profile.

Church attitudes and engagement

It should come as little surprise that the Church shows noticeable signs of having been impacted by the cultural and societal revolution of the latter half of the 20th century, regardless of its sometimes unyielding, static reputation.²⁴ Arguably, nowhere is this more noticeable than with the development and rise of youth-culture, which has influenced congregational attitudes, church policy, missional theology, and the utilisation and

²¹ Joanna Cox, "Going on Growing: Later Life in the Church: Developing Faith, Learning, Spirituality and Service," 6, [cited: 8/January/2015]. Online: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2064101/goinggrowing.pdf>

²² Jude Levermore, "Third Age Discipleship: MC/13/40," 2, [cited: 5/January/2015]. Online: www.methodist.org.uk/.../coun-MC1340-third-age-discipleship-april-2013.doc

²³ Cox, *Going on Growing*, 41.

²⁴ Apichella, *Church's Hidden Asset*, 13.

deployment of Church resources.²⁵ Reflecting particularly on the situation observed in the United States, Andrew Root claims “[we’ve] become obsessed with youthfulness in our desire to win authenticity.”²⁶

Although Archbishop George Carey’s comment about the church being a generation away from extinction was in part hyperbole, it emphasised the need for evangelistic action.²⁷ The evangelistic emphasis was subsequently directed predominantly towards younger people, children in particular, who were viewed as being generally more open to the Gospel not yet having built up years of resistance, resentment or objection.²⁸ This was arguably supported by the work of the Church Growth Theory, which identified young people as being generally ‘easier’ to convert, thereby requiring less resources, and suggested that families were a key form and sign of a ‘healthy church.’²⁹ When combined with the dominance of youth-culture in society this coalesced into the still widely accepted notion that ‘youth are the future of the church.’³⁰

Whilst it is now quite common practice for a church to engage the services of a youth or ‘young person and families’ worker, it is an extraordinary rarity for a church to invest in a dedicated worker for older people.³¹ According to a recent Evangelical Alliance report, this focus on youth and young people is coming at the expense of older age groups: whilst “72

²⁵ Rhena Taylor, *Three Score Years – and Then? How to Reach Older People for Christ* (London: Monarch Books, 2001), 51-60.

²⁶ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Ministry in a Secular Age; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 200.

²⁷ Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out: What the English Church Attendance Survey reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2000), 93.

²⁸ David Voas and Laura Watt, “The Church Growth Research Programme Report on Strands 1 and 2: Numerical Change in Church Attendance: National, Local and Individual Factors,” 2, [cited: 5/August/2016]. Online: http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report_Strands_1_2_rev2.pdf

²⁹ Voas and Watt, *Church Growth Research Programme*, 17-28.

³⁰ Merchant, *Pioneering the Third Age*, 138.

³¹ Jonathan D. Stubbs, “Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministries: A Methodist Response to the Changing Demographic” (MA diss., Nazarene Theological College, 2016), 65-77.

per cent [of respondents] said their church runs a crèche and 71 per cent have classes and groups for primary school age children...[only] 14 per cent...[identified] ministries for frail, elderly/dementia support.”³² At the time of writing, just over half of the 21 jobs advertised on the British Methodist Church website were for young people and family related work, whilst the one chaplaincy vacancy was based within a university working with students.³³

The practice of disproportionately heavy resource investment in younger people is also evident within theological training, both lay and ordained. Whilst training opportunities for working with younger people abound, lay workers and ordained ministers are highly unlikely to receive any dedicated training for engaging with and ministering to older people, owing to the limited availability and prominence of such courses. Where such training is available it is likely to focus almost exclusively on the needs of the 4th Age, those enduring failing health, in receipt of either residential or community care, and those facing the imminence of death.³⁴

Further, whilst young people and families are typically positively connected with the health and growth of the church, older people tend to be associated with its decline and with a resistance to change and thereby ‘modernisation’ – often seen as necessary to the evangelisation of young people and families.³⁵ This view was reflected in a survey carried out for this study, in which nearly 80% of respondents agreed with the statement; ‘Older people are generally resistant to change’, whilst over 80% agreed with the statement; ‘Older

³² Joanna Wright, “Millennials to Boomers: Is the Church Really One Body in Christ?” n.p. [cited: 5/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.eauk.org/idea/millennials-to-boomers-is-the-church-really-one-body-in-christ.cfm>

³³ The Methodist Church in Britain, “Jobs Around the Connexion,” n.p. [cited: 19/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/connect/jobs-volunteering/jobs-around-the-connexion/>

³⁴ Jeffrey W. Harris, “To Live is to Change,” in *Spirituality and Ageing* (ed. Albert Jewell; London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, 1999), 20-21.

³⁵ Albert Jewell, “Introduction,” in *Older People and the Church* (ed. Albert Jewell; Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2001), 4.

people prefer traditional forms of worship and spiritual practices'.³⁶ Such a notion, of older people being resistant to change and representative of tradition (often interpreted as irrelevant or outdated), regularly depicts older people as barriers to change within church life; irrationally entrenched within a status quo of decline.³⁷ The material on the Fresh Expressions website demonstrates this trend. Their sole reference to older people effectively problematises them, before suggesting that higher numbers of older people than children and young adults is a key factor "leading to speedier decline in church attendance in rural areas."³⁸

Thereby, older people are often overlooked within both the life and mission of the church, with its resources regularly being devoted elsewhere. According to Rob Merchant this is at least in part because of two prominent myths regarding older people and the church, namely "that older people either 'return' to the church or in some way become 'more' spiritual as they age, so becoming more open to specifically Christian belief."³⁹ However, recent research suggests that many older people are actually leaving church, seeing it as increasingly irrelevant to them and their needs, this is particularly the case in Evangelical churches engaged in high profile youth ministries.⁴⁰ Merchant further challenges these 'myths' remarking "future generations rejected Christianity and the church in their youth; they have grown and developed without it and seem happy to continue that way."⁴¹

³⁶ Stubbs, *Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministries*, 63 – see Appendix 2 Figure 3.

³⁷ Merchant, *Pioneering the Third Age*, 125-142.

³⁸ Fresh Expressions, "Rural Hub," n.p. [cited: 15/ July/2018]. Online: <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/connect/rural-hub/>

³⁹ Merchant, *Pioneering the Third Age*, 130.

⁴⁰ Ben Summerskill, "Elderly Lose Faith in Religion," n.p. [cited: 8/August/2016]. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/03/religion.world1>

⁴¹ Merchant, *Pioneering the Third Age*, 34.

As with the 'attitudes in society' to ageing and older people, those within the Church are not wholly negative. Within Scripture, increasing age is often associated with increasing wisdom, and is seen not as a burden but as a sign of God's blessing.⁴² Whilst the frailties and physical decline often associated with older age are not avoided within Scripture they can also possess a more positive aspect worth embracing; "Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life." (Proverbs 16:31 NRSV) This sense of increased respect for older people can be seen in the traditional Christian role of the elder and the mentor, positions of responsibility in teaching, discipleship and leadership that are still generally occupied by older people within Church today.⁴³ It is also worth highlighting the positive role of active engagement that many churches have with those in their 4th Age, through pastoral visits, luncheon clubs, care groups/homes and appropriately organised activities and events; many of which rely on the involvement of, and organisation by, the Church's 3rd Agers.⁴⁴

Spotlight on the Methodist Church

In the remaining time I want to briefly turn to considering the Methodist Church's response to the UK's changing demographic. Owing to constraints of both time and the scope of the paper this will neither be comprehensive nor exhaustive, but will provide an overview of the current state of play.

Arguably, one of the most prominent and influential roles of the Methodist Church, or indeed any Church, at a national level is the provision of training for its workers, particularly for its ordained and lay ministers. Their training and ministerial formation can prove essential in setting the agenda for the local church; whilst illuminating the priorities of the

⁴² Taylor, *Three Score Years*, 37-40.

⁴³ Jenny Goodman, "Harvesting a Lifetime," *Spirituality and Ageing* (ed. Albert Jewell; London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, 1999), 67-69.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Three Score Years*, 65-77.

Connexion. It is therefore of great interest that there is a dedicated Certificate in Mission and Ministry (Third Age) available through Cliff College; one of the Methodist Church's two training colleges.⁴⁵ This becomes even more remarkable, when considering how few accredited courses or modules exist for ministry with older people. However, presently within the British Methodist Church all ordination training takes place exclusively at Queen's Theological Foundation, in Birmingham, which has no comparable course.⁴⁶

Therefore, despite tending to predominantly 3rd Age congregations, ordained Methodist ministers will receive little to no dedicated 3rd Age ministry training. Even 4th Age training is typically limited to modules addressing chaplaincy and pastoral visiting. This is suggestive that such ministry is not considered to be a priority area for the Methodist Church. This was highlighted to Ian White, then Cliff College's 3rd Age Ministry programme leader, following a guest lecture to final year ministry students at Queens when one student remarked: "this is the only seminar we've had on the 3rd age in our 3 years here."⁴⁷

With the increasing prominence of digital technology and internet accessibility, virtual presence has quickly become an essential platform for engaging with the public, of all ages.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is important to consider what the Methodist Church website says regarding 3rd Age ministry, and how it seeks to engage with 3rd Agers. From a brief perusal of the Methodist Church's website it quickly becomes clear that once again 3rd Agers, and older people in general, don't appear to be considered a priority area of mission or

⁴⁵ Cliff College, "Certificate in Mission and Ministry (Third Age)," n.p. [cited: 18/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.cliffcollege.ac.uk/students/undergraduate/parttime/>

⁴⁶ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Pathways for Preparing for Ordained Ministry in the Methodist Church," 1-4, [cited: 2/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.methodistlondon.org.uk/sites/default/files/pathways-for-preparing-for-ordained-ministry-0114.pdf>

⁴⁷ Stubbs, *Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministries*, 65-77.

⁴⁸ Mark Curtis, *Distraction: Being Human in the Digital Age* (London: Futuretext Limited, 2004), 152-153.

outreach. Whilst younger people, children and families, and their associated work, receive several dedicated sub-pages accessible through the 'Our Work in Britain' sub-page of the 'Our Work' section, older people, and their associated work, receive no mention.⁴⁹ This prioritisation of young people and families is particularly evident on the 'Fresh Expressions' sub-page, which outlines the 12 forms of Fresh Expression outlined in 2004's *Mission-Shaped Church Report*, adding three extra forms: "Fresh expressions focused on children, Fresh expressions focused on under 5's and their families, [and] Other new developments."⁵⁰

By comparison, the only mention of any dedicated work with older people is to be found either in the 'Death and Dying' sub-page, located in the 'Life and Faith' sub-page of the 'Our Faith' section, or in occasional mentions scattered around the site of MHA (formerly Methodist Homes for the Aged, now simply Methodist Homes).⁵¹ Prior to the recent website update, MHA had its own dedicated sub-page, however, since the update it is now simply included as a weblink in the list of 'Other Methodist Websites,' as one of many 'National Methodist Organisations'.⁵² Whilst the work of MHA may be considered a positive example of the British Methodist Church's work with older people, at a national level, it must be remembered that MHA is an independent charity and not a Methodist mission initiative. Further, this is distinctly an area of 4th Age work rather than 3rd Age, and so cannot be counted as wholly sufficient for engaging with the UK's older people, despite a tendency for Methodist training conferences on older persons' work to draw heavily on MHA resources

⁴⁹ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Our Work in Britain," n.p. [cited: 14/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/>

⁵⁰ The Methodist church in Britain, "Fresh Expressions," n.p. [cited: 14/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/fresh-expressions/>

⁵¹ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Death and Dying," n.p. [cited: 14/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/living-and-faith/death-and-dying/>

⁵² The Methodist Church in Britain, "Other Methodist Websites," n.p. [cited: 14/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/connect/other-methodist-websites/>

and workers (e.g. the 2014 'Where is my Older Neighbour?' conference).⁵³ Such a ministry mentality also tends to focus principally on the physical needs associated with ageing, rather than the continued and changing spiritual needs of individuals going through this often difficult and challenging life stage.⁵⁴

This imbalance in the apparent focus of the British Methodist Church towards a near exclusive prioritisation of younger people and families over and above older people is further highlighted by a 2004 Conference Report, entitled *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, accessible through the 'Our Calling' sub-page, located within the 'About us' section. Within this report special attention is given to the urgent need to focus on outreach to, and engagement with, "young people and adults under 40."⁵⁵ By contrast, 'traditional structures', and by inference the older people who are usually associated with them, are painted as "fearful of change or discouraging, curled in on themselves and able to consider only the faithful maintenance of the way things have always been."⁵⁶ With such an indictment of older people in a key Conference document it is hardly surprising that older people, particularly 3rd Agers, do not seem to rank highly on the list of Methodist Church priorities.

On a more positive note the Discipleship and Ministries team's 2013 conference paper entitled *Third Age Discipleship*, aimed to consider the present issues facing the Methodist Church regarding its ageing population and how to move forward.⁵⁷ The results of this are

⁵³ Keith Albans, "Where is my Older Neighbour?" n.p. [cited: 9/August/2016]. Online: http://www.mha.org.uk/news_archive/where-my-older-neighbour/

⁵⁴ Stubbs, *Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministries*, 65-77.

⁵⁵ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Methodist Conference Report 2004: Priorities for the Methodist Church," 10-11, [cited: 9/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-priorities-for-the-MC-2004.pdf>

⁵⁶ Methodist Church, *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, 7.

⁵⁷ Levermore, *Third Age Discipleship*, 1.

still very much a work in progress, which seems to have largely settled around the Learning Network: North West and Mann (as one of only two 'network regions' citing engagement with older people as a priority, and the only region to specifically cite 3rd Agers).⁵⁸ Whilst a couple of 3rd Age specific regional gatherings were held over the course of 2017 in the North West and Mann region, the promised church-based resources have been somewhat lacking.⁵⁹ The only 'older person-specific' (feasibly covering 3rd and 4th Age) resource to-date is *Seasons of my Soul: Conversations in the Second Half of Life*, a joint publication with the CofE, published in 2014 and now out of print. Taking the form of a 'small group resource', *Seasons of My Soul* provides discussion starters and reflections on a variety of themes aimed towards addressing older people within a church setting; including Identity, Memories, Wisdom, and Death & Dying. However, whilst a positive step forward, this resource is primarily aimed at those 3rd (and 4th) Agers with an existing Church connection and faith background, inviting participants to consider 'their journey with God,' and reflect on their discipleship and how "we can hand on the wisdom of Christ throughout each generation."⁶⁰ Therefore, whilst this resource may prove useful for discipleship it arguably continues the existing paradigm of implicitly excluding 3rd (and 4th) Agers as a low priority for outreach mission activity.

⁵⁸ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Network Regions," n.p. [cited 19/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/learning/network-regions/north-west-mann-region/key-areas-of-work-in-the-north-west-mann-region/>

⁵⁹ The Methodist Church in Britain, "Snapshots from 2017," n.p. [cited: 9/August/2016]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/ministers-and-office-holders/the-learning-network/snapshots-from-2017>

⁶⁰ Fleur Dorrell, et al, *Seasons of MY Soul: Conversations in the Second Half of Life* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 2014), 41.

Conclusions

Despite having a higher average age than the population as a whole, the Methodist Church has been slow to respond to this change in UK demographics. Rather than embracing the potential of older congregants and viewing the 3rd Age as an active mission field, it has continued to operate on a broadly outdated understanding of older age, focusing its attentions on the physical needs of those in their 4th Age. When combined with a clear prioritisation of youth-oriented ministry, as seen through present ministerial training practice, national and local resource allocation and active engagement by local churches, this tends to cause the implicit exclusion of 3rd Agers. Whilst many Methodist churches make considerable use of 3rd Agers within prominent church/Circuit roles this can often be necessity driven rather than forming part of a cohesive strategy of 3rd Age engagement. The recent publication of the *'Third Age Discipleship'* report recognises these existing short-falls and clearly attempts to bring the 3rd Age to a more central position on the Methodist agenda. The commitment to publication of dedicated 3rd Age resources, though promising, has been limited. With their only dedicated resource now out of print, and just two of the eleven network regions acknowledging a need to prioritise any form of engagement with older people, only one of which identifies 3rd Agers specifically, there is still considerable room for improvement.

Based on the above research the following five suggestions provide possible, positive ways forward in the British Methodist Church's engagement with 3rd Agers:

1. In order to better engage with 3rd Agers the Methodist Church needs to develop a more accurate understanding of current trends and patterns in ageing, giving consideration to the experiences and expectations of those in and approaching their

3rd Age. At a denominational level serious theological reflection must be directed towards the ageing population and the rise of the 3rd Age in particular, precipitating an increase in attention given to the priority of 3rd Age mission and ministry. Whilst this should not replace an emphasis on youth and family ministry, it should seek to recognise the equal importance in engaging 3rd Agers. Subsequently this needs to be reflected in the provision of training and education within the Methodist Church with appropriate modules developed, for both ordained and lay ministries. This should not be treated as a fringe ministry or ‘fresh expression’, but as a core aspect of ministerial formation. In turn such ministries need to be properly resourced and equipped, making them fit for purpose and in this way releasing both the laity and clergy to engage more effectively with 3rd Agers, and other older people.

2. Within local church settings this could feasibly begin by first recognising the existing involvement of 3rd Agers within the life of the congregation and learning to celebrate it rather than see it as a cause for concern. In celebrating the work of 3rd Agers it would also be important to challenge the prevailing negative narratives around such involvement. For example, avoiding the tendency to focus on recruiting ‘young’ worship leaders and preachers – as young retirees, 3rd Agers may be more likely to have the necessary time to undertake such training, though this should never be assumed.
3. The Christian tradition has a long history of older, mature Christians serving as mentors. Such a role could feasibly be developed in conjunction with the recent move to reclaim the Methodist ‘small groups’,⁶¹ enabling spiritually mature, 3rd Age

⁶¹ Methodist Cell UK, “Resurrecting the Classes: An Introduction to Cell Churches for Methodists,” 1-8. [cited 20/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/disc-new-resurrecting-the-classes-180610.pdf>

Christians to mentor newer Christians. However, it should not be assumed that merely because one is older that they are a mature Christian, discipleship is a lifelong journey and any church engaging actively with the 3rd Age should be looking to make new 3rd Age disciples.

4. Whilst the idea of 'retirement' is inexorably linked to notions of the 3rd Age, it is not always welcomed or voluntarily entered. Despite being a major life transition, retirement is something that the church does little to help people prepare for, a sentiment confirmed in research undertaken for this project.⁶² Given the wealth of experienced 3rd Agers within the Methodist Church one possible avenue of positive 3rd Age engagement could be to provide resources geared towards preparing people for retirement, making this transition a time of celebration rather than loss. However, as Merchant cautions "[do] not assume that...[they] automatically become available for all the jobs in the church that no one else wants."⁶³
5. Whilst older people may have once largely been understood as the recipients of church ministry, 3rd Agers tend towards a greater level of activity and personal engagement requiring a more creative approach that seeks to engage with and draw on their desires and passions. The Methodist Church has a long tradition of social engagement and action, demonstrating a propensity for creative acts of care, compassion and charity that 3rd Agers could be enabled to actively participate in, as many indeed do. This need not be restricted to work in the UK, but could build on the suggestion in the *Consolidated Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended August 2017*, regarding "devising programmes that will provide short-term

⁶² Stubbs, *Critical Considerations of 3rd Age Ministries*, 60-64.

⁶³ Merchant, *Pioneering the 3rd Age*, 168.

service opportunities for British Methodists to engage with partner churches overseas.”⁶⁴

In developing a more informed understanding of ageing in the UK it is essential that subsequent engagement seeks to meet 3rd Agers where they are, recognising that an increasing majority are un-churched rather than de-churched, and that the patterns of engagement with previous generations of retirees may no longer be suitable. Any 3rd Age engagement will have to be flexible amidst the diversity that the 3rd Age represents, just as younger people cannot be viewed as a static and homogeneous grouping neither can 3rd Agers. Therefore, if the Methodist Church’s mission and ministry with the 3rd Age is going to be effective it will need to be dynamic, contextually relevant, flexible, appropriately resourced and equipped, and built on an informed understanding. Such a fundamental shift could affect a revolution in mission and evangelism by reversing the traditionally accepted focus on ‘children and young families’, serve to empower existing 3rd Age congregants and acknowledge that they ‘are yet alive’.

⁶⁴ The Methodist Church, “Consolidated Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 August 2017,” 15. [cited 14/July/2018]. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/6686/signed-consolidated-report-and-accounts-2018-final.pdf>

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