



Diocese of Leeds

Visiting People with Dementia

I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Isaiah 49:15-16



People living with dementia and their significant others/ carers may receive few visitors because people are unsure of how to approach them. There may be a mistaken belief that visits are not welcome or not worthwhile – and because visitors don't know what to say or do.

Communicating with others is a basic human need and people with dementia need nourishing love and relationships and to know they are not forgotten.

People with dementia may require a different approach to the usual style of visit. As well as offering them the opportunity to be listened too, they may appreciate the visitor prompting them with topics of conversation which they can relate too. The challenge is to communicate in ways appropriate to the person's changing needs; this may involve offering periods of prayerful silence, focused activity appropriate to their needs and just being there with them.

The following suggestions are just that and need to be adapted depending on the degree of dementia experienced by the person.

Practical suggestions for everyone

Building a picture of the person and their life situation before visiting will help to ensure that the visit is comfortable for everyone.

If the person has a carer, partner, relative

- ◇ find out a little of the persons background; family, work, hobbies , holidays before visiting.
- ◇ Ask about any challenges/ worries the carer may have.
- ◇ Check how a carer would benefit from a visit , or future visits, e.g. time out, being present.

If the person lives alone

- ◇ Check with a carer/ social worker, neighbour when is a good time of day to visit.
- ◇ Talk about the local church- share memories if a long term parishioner.
- ◇ Talk about family, bring ones own family photos to share.
- ◇ Talk about the area, likes dislikes, shared memories of the place.

- Pray for the person, their family, and friends and for yourself before you visit.
- Approach from where they can see you and make sure they are aware of your presence.
- Try to be on the same level and to make eye contact as this will help to focus their attention. Remember many people respond to a smile.

- Take something with you to cue long-term memory. For example, flowers or music (smells and sounds are powerful cues) or a photograph album. (When possible check with the person living with dementia and/or Carers/ family members so they can advise on what is appropriate).
- Use simple sentences, speaking slowly and clearly but not in a patronising manner. Make only one comment at a time allowing time for their response and be positive.
- Be aware that the person may also have a visual or hearing impairment. Don't always blame the dementia for lack of understanding. (Check if they have specific communication needs such as a hearing aid/ glasses/ large print or if they require visual cues to prompt communication)
- Avoid asking too many questions, and allow time for their response. Encourage the expression of feelings by reflecting on their perceived mood, happy sad etc. Some people with dementia may only be able to express themselves by saying yes or no and others may not be able to

Communication is

- more than words
- the smile on your face
- a friendly approach
- listening thoughtfully
- the warmth of your voice
- a gentle touch

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express themselves by saying yes or no and others may not be able to express what they mean. Avoid limiting their response by only expecting a 'yes' or 'no' and consider they may respond non verbally or with a gesture. Give time for the person to respond to what you are saying.

- Respond to expressions of happiness, sadness, anger or indifference rather than trying to make sense of their words. Be tolerant of unusual behaviour.
- Accept that for some people your visit may need to be short or focused on specific activity as in the moderate to advanced stages of dementia concentration may be difficult. Be led by the needs of the person themselves as this will differ for different people
- Indicate your intention to return if this has been agreed and whenever possible, keep your promise. Suggest putting a date in their diary or calendar. Some people use a white board and a day date clock to remind them when people are calling. Let them know if you have to alter this at a later date.
- Be guided by the person living with dementia about appropriate touch, some people may not want an embrace or kiss as you leave.
- Remember that although you and your visit may be quickly forgotten, the feelings generated will remain. People with dementia continue to respond emotionally, even when they can no longer reason.

A prayer for visitors

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

May God also be in us, continuing the work of reconciliation.

May we see Christ in people with dementia

as they seek to reconcile their fragmenting understanding with all the confusing activities of the world around them. **Amen.**

Practical suggestions for parish visitors

- Find out about the persons faith background either from them, if they are able, or from family or friends.
- Let their family know that you are planning a visit if that is possible and relevant.
- Wear or take something which may remind the person who you are, for example a clerical collar, name badge or cross.
- Introduce yourself clearly, explaining who you are and your connection with them. For example, "I am Alison. I come from the Holy Name Church."
- Read, where appropriate, a familiar passage from the Bible, which will often evoke a response – for example, Psalm 23, the Beatitudes or a Gospel story. Focus on a line of scripture rather than a whole reading if concentration is difficult.
- Pray using the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary or using short sentences and, where this is welcomed, gently hold the person's hands.
- Take with you a cross or Rosary Beads which can be held. This often helps the person to centre on God.
- If possible keep in touch with the family as they may not know that you visit their relative, particularly if the person with dementia forgets you have been. Make sure you have consent to do this.

"I need you to be the Christ-light for me, to affirm my identity and walk alongside me. I may not be able to affirm you, to remember who you are or whether you visited me. But you have brought Christ to me. If I enjoy your visit, why must I remember it? Why must I remember who you are? Is this just to satisfy your OWN need for identity? So please allow Christ to work through you. Let me live in the present. If I forget a pleasant memory, it does not mean that it was not important for me."

Christine Bryden speaking at a Conference in 2002. Christine was diagnosed with early onset dementia at 46 in 1995, and is still offering a unique insider's perspective to living with dementia. <http://www.christinebryden.com/>