

Executive Summary

Strategic Plan 2021-2026

Growing old Gracefully was formed to challenge the misconception that an ageing Church is a failing Church and to support parishes in becoming more and more later life friendly.

We take inspiration from Pope Francis who in his general audience in March 2015 said:

‘Old age is a vocation, with its own challenges and opportunities for discipleship. From the perspective of secular history, old age is the final phase of a life in decline, a life with no future. From the perspective of the Christian faith, it is one stage in a human story that continues into eternity: there is no point in this life at which the Christian pilgrimage ceases.’

British society is going through a period of significant change in the age structure of the population as people live longer. This longevity is a blessing for older people, for society at large and for the Church. It also presents us with new challenges.

- As ‘later life’ becomes longer for more people, it covers a wide spectrum of stages, from *active later life* with many opportunities and room for contributing/volunteering moving through many steps into *frailer later life* when increasing adaptation and support is needed; we need to recognise all of this diversity.
- One of the tasks of later life is to make sense of one’s life and to come to terms with all that has happened and with what is to come. This is spiritual work yet older people tell us that, overall, the Church does not offer much that specifically responds to the issues of ageing.

We regularly do our own research and in 2018 we invited 175 people on our network to complete a survey and we had an encouraging response rate of 40%. The comments received pointed to an appetite and a need for more coordinated and structured support for older people:

GOG has been in existence since 2009, but without doubt our most challenging time, like the rest of society, has been the Covid pandemic.

We adapted deftly and creatively to the pandemic and were pleased to be able to support and connect with many people in a variety of ways. We organised a number of online events, including a series on Life and Death and produced a 12 page booklet of prayers and resources, worked closely with the SVP and the Archdiocese of Liverpool.



Coming out of the pandemic we have learnt there is interest in online activities especially enabling us to reach people from a wider geographical area, and has reinforced a big variation in response where some parishes organised to keep in touch with older people and others left many parishioners isolated and feeling forgotten.

In 2021-22 we have offered a mix of online and face to face events including ones on the theme of adapting to losses in later life as well as celebrating the faith of the late Queen at the time of her jubilee.

All this learning has enabled us to plan our strategy for the next three years.

This includes offering

1. **‘How to be more Later Life Friendly in our parishes’ – a series of six online events:**

We aim to organise and run this series combining our parish guide content with real life examples/stories from parishes, working in partnership with relevant agencies (such as Catholic Care, Saint Vincent de Paul, Caritas Leeds, The Briery, Leeds Bereavement Forum, Dementia Friendly Communities and so on): (see page 6)

This could include sessions on Finding purpose / vocation in later life

How can we be more dementia friendly?

How to enable conversations about end of life

Later Life Champions Support Network (see page 7) key people in parishes who want to engage with older people.

2. **Offer tailored support and learning opportunities to people in parishes,** working in a more intensive way with particular parishes to model good practice with useful tools, and build their capacity to carry on using these themselves. This would include (see page 8).

Resources needed.

We have been grateful for the commitment from the Diocese through Catholic Care of £8000 a year for three years.

Other funding has been received from the Sisters of Mercy, The Harold Hood Trust, The Charlotte Marshall Trust, this year and from the Linley Trust and the Sisters of Charity of St Paul.

We estimate we need just less than £19,000 a year to fulfil our ambitions in our strategy as we increase the hourly rate of our freelancer and plan more travel around the diocese.