

# GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY

Author Marion Shoard tells Shanelle Manderson about her newest book, the issues older people may face and how churches can provide support

**O**LD age can creep up on you. First, that crease on your forehead makes a permanent home and then laughter lines begin to linger. However, old age is more than skin-deep and can bring great challenges.

Marion first became aware of these challenges in 1999. Originally an environmentalist writer, Marion's *A Right To Roam* was being published when her mother lost her sight and developed dementia.

'All of a sudden I was thrust into this world that I'd never really thought about,' she says. 'I was visiting care homes and hospitals and just didn't know which ones were best or where to go for help.'

After securing good care for her mother, Marion became a devoted older people's advocate, involved in various voluntary organisations.

After struggling to find the guidance she needed, she carried out research across the UK and wrote *How To Handle Later Life* – an in-depth guide that, in more than 1,000 pages, covers a wide range of problems and opportunities that can come with growing older.

The book contains information and advice on healthcare, inheritance, social care, end-of-life matters, housing, employment rights, transport and more.

It does not emphasise the role Christianity plays in later life but, as a

Methodist who occasionally visits her nearby Army corps, Marion urges that Christians should have a united front in aiding the ministry and lives of older people.

'You're not supposed to retire from faith work,' she maintains, 'and we should support older people in continuing to develop their full potential as Christians, making sure they can continue to contribute while giving them any help they need.'

Research by Age UK suggests there are now 11.8 million people aged 65 or older, and this is estimated to rise by more than 40 per cent in the next 17 years to more than 16 million.

With an increase in how much longer people are living, Marion suggests we educate ourselves on the needs and challenges facing older people.

'A basic knowledge of the topics in the book needs to be understood, especially by church leaders,' she stresses. 'If somebody is struggling financially, for example, someone should feel equipped to ask if they have thought about getting a benefits check.'

Marion points out that, in some cases, church members will know older people better than their families, and that there are many ways in which they can help them.

When thinking about ageing, physical changes to the body and its capabilities are most likely to come to mind. Marion

believes the fabric of church premises needs to accommodate these changes.

'We need to ask if things are working,' she says. 'Should we keep up traditions? Are we really inclusive?'

We do not want to put up barriers.

'Although a candlelit service might be enjoyable for the majority, an 80-year-old needs four times as much light as a 20-year-old, so an older person may suffer in silence, unable to see properly.'

'Changes to the skin affect the ability of older people to regulate their body temperature, so they are more susceptible to overheating or hypothermia – both potentially lethal conditions – therefore the temperature of the building needs to be appropriate. These aspects can make a huge difference to older people.'

Discussing social contact in her book, Marion explains that isolation can be a big problem, as opportunities to interact with others might diminish and this can have a significant impact on wellbeing. Marion suggests that this can partly be addressed by acknowledging the importance of social groups, both inside and outside the Church.

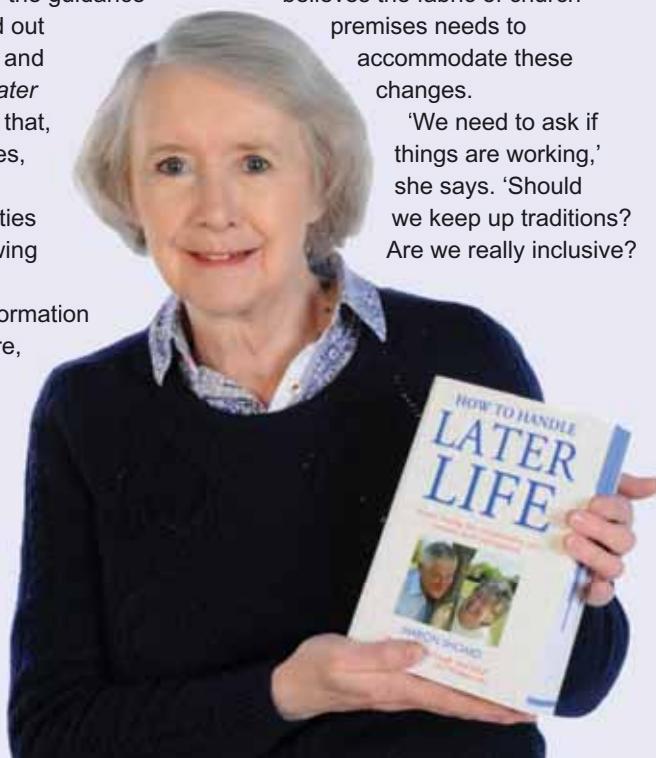
'Older people, like all of us, need the company of others,' she says. 'Church friendship groups are often regarded as frivolous, but they are very important. If you've got a group of people who are grappling with problems or illnesses, the fact they're together gives them this solidarity – a comradeship that can help them cope.'

Marion believes meetings should be held in care homes for residents who are members of the congregation, as this can normalise their lives and make them feel that their contribution is still valuable.

However, the Church can't do it all, and Marion acknowledges this, encouraging the promotion of services like befriending groups, where each older person is matched with someone who has similar interests so they can talk to each other on a regular basis.

*How To Handle Later Life* leads with a quote from Marie Curie: 'Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.' The same applies to becoming older.

● *How To Handle Later Life* retails at £22.99 and is available through bookshops, online suppliers such as Amazon or direct from the publisher, Amaranth Books



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