

Living Liturgies

*Transition time resources for
services, prayer and conversation
with older people*

Caroline George



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*For William, my ever supportive and loving husband, who
brought laughter and carnations to the sages
of the St Peter's Women's Fellowship.*

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Foreword

The best worship ideas are ones which have touched our own hearts first. Those of us responsible for delivering services in care homes, week in, week out, do need a helping hand sometimes when it comes to finding fresh ways of engaging the older people in our impromptu congregations.

Here we have an abundance of tried-and-tested service plans. I like the way Caroline uses everyday objects as themes for liturgies and builds on them. I've lost count of the number of ministers who've said to me, 'What I really need is good ideas for worship, especially with older people', and that applies whether worship is for those in care or still in the community, or those, perhaps, living with dementia. Well, here's the answer to their prayer.

A second-hand idea doesn't mean any diminution of quality. Caroline knows what she is doing because she has been at it a long time, and her experience shines through. The use of items that any one of us has at home as a spring-board for worship emphasises the sacramental nature of the tangible things we take for granted. Like the best worship, they help open our eyes both to what is 'beyond' and what is right in our midst.

Debbie Thrower

*Team Leader of The Gift of Years and Anna Chaplain to Older People
(see page 128 for further information)*

Introduction

It was a simple question: ‘I think you are just the person. Any chance of popping in to the Women’s Fellowship group on Thursday afternoon? They have a devotional service once a month. You know the kind of thing—a couple of hymns, a reading and a few prayers. I know you will enjoy doing it; thanks ever so.’

I smiled and nodded and thought the challenge could be interesting. It was only for one service, after all. Life was busy so I scribbled a few ideas on a postcard, prayed desperately, adapted the ideas as I went along and, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, all was well. The group were generous in their response and asked if I would go again—and so it continued for ten years.

Living Liturgies evolved from my time spent with this group—the St Peter’s Women’s Fellowship in Hall Green, Birmingham—whose members had accompanied one another in worship and fellowship for many years. I became their worship leader in 1996, as they reached their seventh, eighth and ninth decades of life. They were often described by the wider church community as a group of ‘senior citizens’, ‘elderly people’ or ‘retired’, yet none of these titles did them justice. They were women with a vast combined life experience; given the opportunity to express insight from their personal stories, they had much to share and were inspirational in their determination to continue living the gift of fullness of life with a strong trust and faith in God. The word

‘sage’,¹ meaning ‘a person of great wisdom’, would be more appropriate.

The process of ageing is now a popular subject, researched and discussed in political, medical and theological arenas and made visible through the media. In Britain we are constantly being informed of statistics that reveal the increasing number of elderly people within society, resulting from the early years of the Baby Boom plus improved standards of living and advances in health care. The focus of attention is often on the burdens created in the ‘fourth age’ of life through dependency, lack of finance, the problems of finding appropriate and high-quality care, and the scandal of ‘care’ provision without dignity and compassion. There is a more positive perception of the activity and presence of people within the ‘third age’ of life, as the media occasionally acknowledge the significant and integral role played by grandparents in child care, and the extensive contribution of elderly people in the voluntary sector. However, the period of transition from third to fourth age, from independent to dependent living, is, to my knowledge, rarely given attention.

Ageing is a vastly differing experience for each individual: the transition from daily activity within wider society to separation and various degrees of isolation occurs at different ages in different stages and is dependent upon many circumstances. The often-heard comment from friends and family, ‘In retrospect, I wish I had [done such-and-such] when s/he was at home or in better health’, speaks of a need to share and reflect on the experience of transition. Those who can share experiences in this way may offer significant support and hope for others.

It is heartening to see that much more information is now being aired and shared. This development is visible in the

increasing number of books that have emerged during the last two decades, particularly from Christian quarters, covering the subjects of ageing and spirituality, the spiritual care of those with dementia, and death and bereavement. Theological and biblical reflection sit alongside stories of ageing, a good example being Albert Jewell's work, *Ageing, Spirituality and Well-being*. This book includes a powerful chapter by Penelope Wilcock entitled 'The caged bird', which speaks of the experiences of a stroke victim and gives a powerful insight into the reality of life with this condition.² James Woodward's *Valuing Age*³ presents narratives from older adults to inform engagement—a vital ingredient for helpful transition.

As more is published, more questions emerge: there are resources that focus on the condition of dementia, offering guidance and comfort to all parties involved, but I have yet to discover insights into worship and spiritual companionship for those with the lower-profile conditions of Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease or multiple sclerosis. What do Christians in these circumstances long for in terms of prayer and worship as they journey into dependence?

Christian ministry, both lay and ordained, brings a wealth of experience that continues to be gathered but is not always easily accessible to people who suddenly find themselves with a service to lead or a pastoral visit to make in an unfamiliar context. Elderly people with defined mental or physical conditions, or those who have simply become frail, are in a borderland of transition between the land of the active elderly and the land of those who have become confined within residential walls. Therefore, they require a different response. Statistics from Kate Read, stating that '99% of people over 65 years do not have dementia, and even in the

oldest cohorts three-quarters do not have dementia',⁴ reveal the need for carefully prepared worship that is relevant and challenging to those whose bodies are frail but who wish to engage and participate in worshipping God. It is this need that has prompted the liturgies and reflections provided in the following pages.

There are many older adults attending and actively participating in Sunday worship and fellowship, but there comes a point when the need for transition from independent living to a more dependent lifestyle makes it difficult for them to take their place in the body of the church on a Sunday. They are often visible within weekday groups, including Women's Fellowship and Mothers' Union meetings, but they are no longer present at Sunday worship. There may be a host of reasons for this absence, including inconvenient service times, problems in the church related to heating and hearing, and the issue of transport. Meanwhile, the weekday groups become, to all intents and purposes, an expression of midweek church, offering an opportunity for the development of creative liturgy and, in particular, transitional liturgy.

The St Peter's Women's Fellowship (which I began to lead), was one such group, whose membership included feisty octogenarians and nonagenarians meeting weekly, with a devotional service at the beginning of each month. Although the members were predominantly women, a few men occasionally attended. Their service was held for many years in the formality of the church's Lady Chapel, followed by tea in another building. As the group members became frail and the journey arduous, it was decided that the service and refreshments would be enjoyed together in the coffee lounge of the church hall.

The move to the coffee lounge led to a change in attitude

towards worship: it was as if the group's perception of and response to church worship had been liberated. Whereas they had gathered in silence in the Lady Chapel, conversation now began before the service and crept into the service itself. There was an unexpected spiritual development. Questions were asked that would not have been asked in the confines of the chapel; comments were made and worship became far more participatory. There was a sense of a natural encounter with the divine through prayer, conversation and scripture. Trevor Dennis describes the encounter and dialogue between God and Adam and Eve in this way: 'It seems so very straightforward, that it does not occur to us to call it prayer on the man and woman's part... Could it be that here, most unusually, we have prayer presented, without any of the usual formalities, simply as conversation? Is this what prayer in Eden is like?'⁵ There were many afternoons when, through our conversation, it felt as if we had unexpectedly stumbled across Eden.

The Women's Fellowship devotional services had been a time of connection for the group, creating a link to God in Christ and the Holy Spirit, and connecting members to worship they had participated in throughout their lives. Atkins expresses the active relationship that is created in worship: 'Worship can provide the links we need to be in touch again with the foundations of our relationship with God. Through worship our memories will quickly recapture the relationship at the point where we were last conscious of its importance for us.' He goes on to say, in words that relate to times of transition:

Worship assists us to see the present situation in relation to the past and to the future. Worshippers can often be overwhelmed by

*the circumstances of the present. By entering into worship we can link up with the support and guidance we have received from God in the past and feel affirmation in the current situation.*⁶

Although the group became far more relaxed in the coffee lounge, allowing for a helpful informality, there remained a need for structured worship that related not only to the group's worship in the Lady Chapel but to their lifetime's experience of worship, whether occasional or on a weekly basis. The devotional services had followed a pattern of hymns, prayers, readings and blessing—a condensed version of an Anglican Service of the Word—without a service sheet but always including the prayer that they had adopted as their Women's Fellowship prayer and the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer.

As the liturgies in this book developed, that structure was retained, but with the addition of opening conversation that could be woven into prayers, visual aids that could be seen easily and times for silent reflection that developed comfortably. Each liturgy was based on a theme, which wove together experience, scripture and the assurance of God's love and grace. For example, the liturgy entitled 'From fire to radiators' offered an opportunity to remember the warmth and activity of life around fires in earlier years, and made a connection to the lakeside fire where the warmth of Jesus' forgiving love was made known to Peter after the resurrection. The prayer time included the idea of bringing to God the ashes of our discomfort and pain, and the flames of our anxieties about ageing and dying. We then received the assurance of the inextinguishable blaze of God's love.

In our preparation for and presentation of worship within the coffee lounge, we needed to move some furniture to

create a space that was both practical, allowing ease of vision and hearing, and holy. Chairs were arranged in a circle with a small table as a focal point, usually dressed with a tablecloth, a cross, a candle to be lit at the beginning of the service, and objects or pictures relating to the theme.

We rarely used a service sheet, but participation was enabled by carefully introducing prayer responses or repeated lines of prayer, alongside the use of traditional prayers known by heart. Opening prayers, either before or after conversation, were an integral part of the worship, sometimes including a time of silence or prayers of penitence for all that we had allowed, as individuals and as a society, to separate us from God's love. This was followed by a prayer of absolution. Requests for intercessory prayer were invited and space was made for silent prayer or for individuals to name aloud people or places of concern.

This was the prayer adopted by the group as their Women's Fellowship prayer, always included in their worship.

O God, make the door of my home wide enough
to receive all who need human love and friendship;
narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough to be no
stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet, but
rugged and strong enough to turn back all evil.

God, make the door of my home the gateway to
thine eternal kingdom. Amen⁷

Large-print hymn books were made available and a list of favourite hymns, mostly known by heart, was compiled. CDs were useful aids at times, but the group also loved to sing unaccompanied. There was one afternoon when a member

had asked for 'Fight the good fight', but the group knew three different tunes and I thought we might have to call in a mediator to prevent battle commencing! The group also reflected a hidden ecumenism:⁸ the members lived locally, and some were included who had previously travelled some distance to attend a church of their own tradition. These members added a fresh dimension to the group in conversation and in their knowledge of different hymns and choruses.

Music played during times of reflection was also enjoyed and often led to familiar hymns and music being recalled.

'Conversation starters', as well as being a way of addressing difficult issues, offered the opportunity for stories to be told, treasured, remembered and brought again to God, connecting personal experience from the past to the present and taking it to the future. It usually took no more than a 'Do you remember?' or 'What was it like when you...?' to set the ball rolling. A careful eye on the time and on more dominant figures, with extra encouragement for quieter members of the group, ensured a balance and flow of conversation within the service.

Bible readings were introduced simply for their connection to the conversation starters and items on the focus table. 'Storytelling' Bible passages and the technique of Godly Play were also effective and were well received by the group, particularly the second time around when the experience had become familiar.

Although each service ended with a blessing or some music, conversation continued as refreshments were served, and only the arrival of lifts home closed the meeting. Worship and fellowship had become completely entwined.

In 2006, the group made the decision to close. New membership had petered out and several stalwarts of the group

had died, while others were acknowledging that they were at the point of moving from independent to dependent living and soon would not be able to attend. As the time approached, I spoke with members of the group about the shape and format of the closing services. It was agreed that I should devise a set of services to provide food for thought, making connections to faith in daily life that focused on everyday objects such as windows and tables. These features would remain close at hand, no matter where individuals were, and would be a prompt for prayer.

The composition of the final three liturgies in this book—‘Anger and tears’ (a service of lament), ‘Fragile bones’ (a service of healing), and ‘Holy journeying’ (a closing liturgy) is slightly different, in that they offer more directions and comments for reflection and to facilitate adaption to specific contexts. ‘Anger and tears’ and ‘Fragile bones’, though created after the group had closed, reflect the issues that had sometimes created frustration and anger in the group members, as well as their experiences of illness and frailty. A relationship of trust developed over the years, which enabled openness and honesty, in the knowledge that the group was a safe and confidential place to express thoughts and feelings. The final service, ‘Holy journeying’, was developed around the theme of journeying and affirming the presence of God wherever we travel. It records the worship of the group’s final meeting but can also be adapted for a variety of closing contexts.

Using *Living Liturgies*

The opportunity to reflect on my experience with the Women’s Fellowship came when I found myself as an ordinand, immersed in theological study, sharing experiences with

new colleagues and having access to a wealth of resources in the library at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham. Thinking back to the time when I started leading the group, it was the memory of my 'busyness', and my awareness of many people in the same predicament who might need resources, that nudged me into recording more fully the liturgies in this book. Although the St Peter's group has closed, all that its members shared and discovered has not been lost; it remains like yeast, ready to act as a raising agent in a variety of contexts.

These liturgies were written for a specific group of British-born white women, who had been part of church communities throughout their lives. However, I believe that they can be easily adapted for mixed gender and multicultural groups, and for worship in day centres or residential homes. Elements could also be used for pastoral time with individuals, or for conversation and reflection with those who have no church affiliation but who wish to express or explore their spirituality.

Our sages may have uncertain futures, particularly if they are facing limitations imposed by frailty. Do elderly people reaching the end of their independent lifestyles feel a little like injured people left at the side of the road? Do they feel spiritually wounded by anxiety, isolation and change? The use of structured conversation within worship creates an opportunity to consider subjects related to ageing that may be avoided in other contexts, thus providing the chance for healing to take place.

The spiritual needs of older people are no less complex than the needs of any other age group, and it is important to be aware of the traditions in which people have participated. There have been change and innovation in worship, new

methods of creative teaching and a variety of approaches to prayer in recent decades, but the wider landscape remains and we airbrush it out at the risk of disconnecting our faithful sages. *Living Liturgies* offers the opportunity to include readings and prayers from older adults' lifelong journey of worship, perhaps using the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and other denominational prayer books. Suggestions for hymns and other music, too, may need to reflect your group's familiar favourites.

The use of familiar features at the heart of each service relates to the idea of a memory book or box developed for people with dementia⁹ as a spark for conversation and prayer. The features used are also those that will be visible and tangible throughout each day. Transition to a far more isolated lifestyle means that faith connections need to be maintained with church communities, but it is also important to remember the reality of individual needs and the question of how well-equipped individuals are to sustain their faith, when contact with the worshipping community is limited. There must surely be more ways that could be explored, not only to equip people for this period of life but to allow the gift of faith to flourish. *Living Liturgies* offers practical stepping stones for those preparing to enter the fourth age. I hope that you may be able to use these services either as they stand or as an inspiration for developing appropriate services, prayer times or spiritual conversations in your particular context.

As I shared these ideas with friends and colleagues over the years, they requested copies of the liturgies, and then they asked me to add 'something for them'—so I have provided biblical and spiritual reflections at the end of each liturgy, for the benefit of those leading the session. Ministry, whether ordained or lay, is often too busy, and time for

reflection may be squeezed out, so I hope that these reflective elements will provide an easy-to-read and user-friendly oasis in the midst of busy preparation. Of course, you may also find that the reflections act as a resource for an introduction or comment after the Bible reading in the liturgy itself.

In your leading of worship for older people, remember that small gestures often make more of an impact than is realised. My husband William occasionally joined us at the Women's Fellowship service. He has a delightful sense of humour and, with just a few words and a carnation for each lady, would lift their spirits and bring a smile to their faces. They always asked, 'When is he coming again?' I don't think he was ever aware of the impact he made: their appreciation of someone who had chosen to be with them, even though he did not have to be, was heartfelt. Invite family or friends to your group from time to time!

Some time after the closure of the St Peter's group, I visited a member in a hospice. She looked from her bed towards the ward window and smiled knowingly at me; then, together, we recalled the Women's Fellowship prayer and the Lord's Prayer and gave thanks to God, her deliverer.

Liturgies

Keys to the door

Arrange a focus table with a candle and a cross (symbols to be used at all services to represent the love and light of Christ) and a bunch or selection of keys.

Welcome and introduction

Today we think about keys and doors, the people who have opened doors for us, doors of opportunity and doors to our faith.

Opening prayers

Introduce the prayer response, 'God be with us: God be with us.'

Lord, open our thoughts
to share the experience of our lives in your presence.
God be with us: **God be with us.**

Lord, open our minds
to listen and see your presence in one another.
God be with us: **God be with us.**

Lord, open our hearts
to know your grace and love at work in our lives.
God be with us: **God be with us. Amen**

Read aloud a traditional prayer or one that is familiar to the group. You might use Hall Green's adaptation of Thomas Ken's prayer, which is particularly appropriate for this service.

O God, make the door of my home wide enough
to receive all who need human love and friendship;
narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough to be no
stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet,
but rugged and strong enough to turn back all evil.

God, make the door of my home the gateway to
thine eternal kingdom. Amen

Conversation starters

- Who were the people who said to you, 'Have you remembered your keys?'
- Do you have any amusing experiences of forgetting or losing keys?
- Have you ever had responsibility for a set of keys other than for home? How did it feel?
- 'Now you're old enough to have the key of the door.' Was that once a familiar expression when someone reached the age of 21?
- Did you ever hear the expression 'latch-key kids'?
- How did it feel when you had to hand keys back at work or when leaving home?
- What do you think about the saying 'Lock 'em up and throw away the key'? (This conversation starter needs to be used sensitively, with the awareness that there may be offenders or relatives of offenders present.)

- Did family or friends keep the New Year tradition of taking the glowing embers of a fire out of the back door, to represent letting the old year out, and entering through the front door to let the new year in, lighting a new fire for all that was to come? Who carried the embers?
- Who are the people who have opened doors for you, perhaps offering a fresh start or an opportunity that you did not think possible?
- How does it feel to walk through a door for the first time—a new workplace or someone’s home?
- Are there doors you don’t like to walk through—perhaps the dentist’s, the doctor’s or the hospital’s?
- What does it mean to you to open and close the front door of your own home, and how might it feel if you have to leave your home?
- Have you ever found it difficult to go through the doors of a church?
- Who are the people who have opened the door of faith for you?
- Are there people within the New Testament for whom Jesus opened doors of faith?

Prayers

Use an appropriate prayer book or a ‘Kyrie’ confession. Introduce the prayer response ‘Lord, have mercy’ or ‘Christ, have mercy.’

You, Lord, know our comings in and our goings out.

Lord, have mercy: **Lord, have mercy.**

You, Lord, know our mistakes and failures.

Christ, have mercy: **Christ, have mercy.**

You, Lord, offer the gift of forgiveness.

Lord, have mercy: **Lord, have mercy.**

May God forgive us, heal and renew us in Christ's name. **Amen**

Hymn suggestions

- Lead us, heav'nly Father, lead us
- Lord, thy word abideth

Take other suggestions from the group.

Bible reading and introduction

Our Bible reading tells of the time when the disciple Peter recognised Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus metaphorically gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose

on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

MATTHEW 16:13–20

Prayers

Ask for prayer requests to weave into the intercessions. Introduce the prayer response ‘God, who opens the door of love: hear our prayer.’

We give thanks for people who have unlocked doors to opportunities that have made a difference in our lives: family, friends, colleagues, inspirational people whom we have encountered.

God, who opens the door of love: **hear our prayer.**

As we think of the keys and doors to our homes, we give thanks for home as a place where decisions are made, a place to retreat when life is hard, a place for recalling memories and a place to be in God’s presence.

If home has not been an easy place to be, we pray for God to weave a thread of peace into difficult memories.

God, who opens the door of love: **hear our prayer.**

We remember those who have the responsibility of holding prison keys—for staff, for organisations that work with offenders and their families, and for prison chaplains. We pray for all who break laws and commit crimes, that they may turn from all that is wrong and find the key to truth and goodness.

God, who opens the door of love: **hear our prayer.**

As we think of Christ passing the keys of the kingdom to Peter, so we remember those who have unlocked the way of faith for us. We give thanks for the way the word of God has been spoken into our lives. We pray that we in turn will continue to share God's love in our encounters.

God, who opens the door of love: **hear our prayer.**

We think of the ways that we may share our stories of life, our stories of ageing, so that others may be freed to ask questions and to think about ageing and frailty.

God, who opens the door of love: **hear our prayer.**

We give thanks for those we have loved, those who have entered the gates of heaven.

We say together the Lord's Prayer.

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;**

thy kingdom come;

thy will be done;

in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive them that trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil.

**For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the
glory,**

for ever and ever. Amen

Closing hymn suggestions

- O praise ye the Lord
- To God be the glory

A blessing

Christ who entered the homes of the lost and unloved,
Christ who gave the keys of the kingdom to his followers,
Christ who opened the door from death to resurrection,
bless us and keep us in the knowledge of hope, grace
and love. Amen

Take a short time of reflection, with music (perhaps The Lark Ascending by Ralph Vaughan Williams). Finish with refreshments.

Reflections for the worship leader

A biblical reflection

Perhaps the first reading that comes to mind for the theme of ‘keys to the door’ is about Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter (Matthew 16:13–20), although this passage, has been (and, in places, remains) the root of disagreements between and within Christian traditions, including on the issue of women’s ordination.

In biblical times, keys were a symbol of authority. The Gospels tell us that Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees about their hypocrisy in the way they held the keys to knowledge and locked people out of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 23:13; Luke 11:52). In the Bible reading for this service, we hear that the keys of the kingdom of heaven clearly belong to Jesus, the Christ, and Peter received them

because he recognised Jesus as the Messiah. He was given the responsibility, through his ministry, of unlocking the way of Christ to others. It was a special moment, but did it mean that Peter had become the ultimate ‘super disciple’? The very next verses remind us of one of Peter’s misjudgements: Jesus said, ‘Get behind me, Satan’ (Matthew 16:23) when Peter declared that Jesus could not suffer and die. His mind was still locked into the worldly sphere, not the divine. At that moment, could Jesus have said, ‘I want the keys back’?

Peter’s discipleship was full of special moments of clarity, misunderstanding, denial and forgiveness. He was entrusted to open the doors of the gospel for many people, and his work was both vital and successful. But the same is true of many other followers of Jesus. We know little of Joanna, Thaddaeus, Susanna and others who found fullness of life after encountering Jesus, but they too were given keys to open doors of faith for others.

A spiritual reflection: ‘Keys’

Jangling, essential
keys unlocking doors to the
safety of routine.

Silent, forgotten
keys waiting to unlock the
garden of Eden.