



insight

How a dwindling
London parish is
reversing its fortunes

Memory Café

Steve Morris left a career in advertising and marketing to respond to a call to ordained ministry in the Church of England.



St Cuthbert's had a mainly 'eclectic' congregation when he became its vicar. Most worshippers travelled some distance to worship and few locals attended. Very soon after Steve arrived there was a noticeable exodus of these incomers. The congregation dwindled to about ten.

He had little choice but to undertake a radical re-think. His response was an intense effort to get in touch with the local community and understand its people. 'My question was this: where is this community hurting?' He found a neighbourhood where the majority of residents were Hindus, hardly good prospects as potential Anglicans.

It emerged the majority of locals were elderly, many of them single occupants of large houses. No surprise then, that there was a high incidence of loneliness with many reporting they hardly spoke to anyone from one week to another. Digging further, Steve found there was a high incidence of dementia.

Dementia is a group of symptoms that commonly involves problems with memory, thinking, problem-solving, language and perception. The symptoms are caused by different diseases which affect the brain. It is a growing problem in the UK and fills people with fear as aging sets in.



It was the dementia issue that the parish decided it should address. Steve contacted the Alzheimer's Association, a national charity, and found it had crafted a concept called Memory Cafes as a way local communities can work with people with dementia. At first St Cuthbert's targeted only people with dementia. Very quickly however, it decided to widen the scope to include any elderly people nearby.

'Our Memory Café has radically transformed how I understand and practice ministry,' says Steve. 'Getting started was simple', he says. 'All we needed was two sets of quiz questions and light refreshments.' He gathered a group of volunteers, the only stipulation being they should be 'bubbly and welcoming'.



The St Cuthbert's Memory Café runs for two hours every Thursday, 51 weeks in the year. Steve stresses the importance of maintaining a regular meeting time. Ten locals showed up for the inaugural meeting. Now attendance can be as high as 150. The menu is quizzes, chair-based exercises, community singing and craft. Singing was the beginning to starting a choir. A side benefit for the community is that Steve has become alert to scams that fleece older folk. 'I find out about a new kind of scam just about every week,' he says.

The project has borne significant fruit in terms of locals connecting to the worship of the parish. Steve says half of Memory Café attendees are now regular worshippers. The Bishop of

Willesden, the Rt Rev Pete Broadbent, has labelled it 'Messy Church for Oldies.' One important principle Steve emphasises is the need to treat people with dementia as people, not to view them as medical cases.

'It's an entirely no frills operation. No complicated catering, no rides or pick-ups. People come with their carers so there is no need for complicated people protection procedures,' Steve explains. 'There's no heavy religious content. We begin with a simple prayer and I let it be known the vicar is available to pray with guests.'

With a high proportion of Hindus around, are there issues about praying with people from other faiths? 'Not a problem,' Steve says. He makes it clear he offers Christian prayer in the name of Christ and people happily accept this.

'We don't charge,' he says. 'The project ticks many boxes for mostly small grants: mental health, community building. Because costings are so precise it is easy to isolate items out and build grant applications.' It appeals to corporate responsibilities departments on businesses: there is an active link with Lloyd's Bank'.

In Steve Morris's view every parish should offer a Memory Café. 🌱