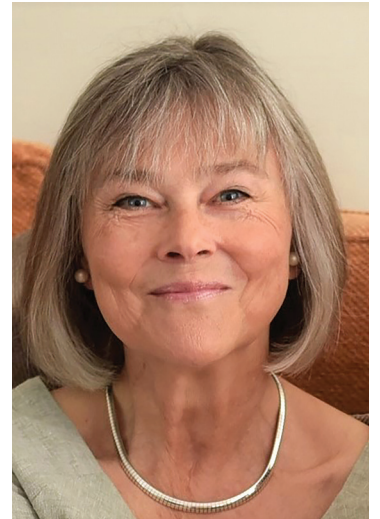


# Ministry to older people is so vital



Anna Chaplaincy pioneer **Debbie Thrower** reveals why Bishop Jonathan loves this concept

MY first reaction on reading a job advert for a ‘chaplain for older people’ was: “that’s exactly what my Mum and Dad could have done with. Why aren’t they everywhere?”

The new role was just down the road from me in Alton, in Hampshire. Anglicans and Methodists in the town had decided to collaborate on various areas of ministry and one of those was working with older people.

I had recently left Meridian TV and was taking stock since looking after my elderly parents for some years, I thought carefully about it over a weekend and sent my form in on Monday. It turned out I was the only person to apply!

What became known as ‘Anna Chaplaincy’ (named after the widow Anna who appears with Simeon in Luke’s gospel) has always been open to both lay and ordained recruits. I’m a licensed lay minister (LLM) or Reader.

A big step change came four years later when BRF, Bible Reading Fellowship, agreed to help us scale-up the concept nationally. They had a great track record of incubating grassroots initiatives. It’s the home of Messy Church, which began in Cowplain and is now an international movement.

So since 2014 I’ve been pioneering the work with my charity colleagues and our network is currently more than 220 strong – made up of women and men, mostly volunteers, working right across the UK.

We offer spiritual care, and support for carers – particularly those looking after people with dementia. Some Anna Chaplains are in their 30s and 40s, most are in their retirement years – typically 60 to 70 when they start. But there are some well into their 80s exercising this ministry, just as the biblical widow Anna was doing at the age of 84.

It is an enormous privilege to be allowed to listen and share some of another person’s story – to hear the ‘ouch points’ of their lives and (where appropriate) offer a fresh perspective.

Each chaplain is fuelled by their own personal conviction of God’s love for every one of us. But they are there for any and every one; whether of strong, little, or no faith at all.

Joan Routledge is a new Anna Chaplain in Carlisle. Through her volunteer work in care homes and her local hospital she felt called to be with people in later life. She says “I feel that God has blessed me with this opportunity and

surrounded me with those who have been an example, and an encouragement.”

Growing older can often be seen in a negative light, but in doing that we lose sight of the treasure brought to our communities by those who have lived long enough to share their wisdom, knowledge, and life experiences.

In care homes, in our churches, in the hospital and in the community, I have met artists, authors, musicians, cooks, florists, people who still have dreams to fulfil. People for whom life “at a certain age” is a start – not a finish – and who have stories to tell and share. Most want to be able to be themselves, to retain and celebrate their unique identity and sense of self.

There was never any doubt in my mind that the vision was to have an Anna Chaplain in every small to medium-sized community across the land. With Bishop Jonathan’s intention to have Anna Chaplains to support older people in every parish, we are seeing that vision coming ever closer to being realised.

Find out more about Anna Chaplaincy at [www.annachaplaincy.org.uk](http://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk) and details of training available by emailing [annachaplaincy@brf.org.uk](mailto:annachaplaincy@brf.org.uk)