

Care for those with dementia is vital

Worshippers are learning how to offer spiritual support to those in our parishes living with dementia

AS the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer are said, there is a spark of recognition on her eyes. Rennie Gillson mouths the traditional words she remembers from her childhood.

She is one of eight residents from the Bluewater Care Home in Fratton who has gathered in the lounge for a dementia-friendly Communion service. Some are in wheelchairs, some relax on sofas around a table laid out with a candle, a cross, bread and wine.

As our Older Person's Advocate Jill Phipps plays songs via her mobile and Bluetooth speaker, each resident gets a chance to shake a tambourine or percussion instrument. Then retired priest the Rev Charlotte Hetherington explains again the significance of the bread and wine before

leading them in a shortened version of the Eucharistic prayer.

As she does so, the eyes of one of the residents fill with tears. He whispers his concerns, and Charlotte and Jill speak quietly to him and gently pray before moving on.

'I think of it as the sacrament of the present moment'

"These people may have lost their memory for certain things, but their emotional memory is still intact," says Charlotte. "They will remember how this service makes them feel. By the time they have lunch, they may have forgotten that they have eaten bread and

drunk wine, but they may eat better and sleep better. I think of it as the sacrament of the present moment."

For Rennie, who used to attend St Mary's Church, Fratton, it's a chance to express her faith in a way that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

Jill leads worship there each fortnight, and is accompanied by Charlotte once a month. In other care homes, Jill offers 'Messy Vintage' – which enables those with dementia to express themselves using art and craft.

Offering care to those living with dementia is a growing part of our ministry to our local communities. Clergy and others visit care homes, churches host groups for those with dementia and their

carers, and regular churchgoers can start to exhibit signs of dementia.

Jill has trained as a Dementia Champion and offers one-hour sessions to raise awareness of the disease and how it can affect people. It helps us to understand how we can respond appropriately to someone living with dementia, including leading worship in a way that engages with people's emotions and spirituality.

More than 200 people, including Bishop Christopher, have attended these sessions and become 'Dementia Friends'. Churches such as Holy Spirit, Southsea, our cathedral, St James, Milton, and St Mary's, Fratton, have brought teams of volunteers together to learn more. Ordinands and trainee Readers have also received training.

"Sometimes dementia-friendly worship might involve passing items around for people to look at," said Jill. "Sometimes it's something to smell or pictures to look at. It's important to offer something multi-sensory.

"It also means we build up relationships with the care homes and their staff. They may call us in when someone is dying, so we can offer prayers. Sometimes the staff join in the worship themselves. Most places are aware that it can really help those with dementia if we can engage with their spirituality."

One person in four over the age of 80 is likely to have dementia. And one in 10 people with dementia only leaves the house once a month.

That means support for those



Older Person's Advocate Jill Phipps with Rennie Gillson in Bluewater Care Home



The Rev Charlotte Hetherington helps residents at Bluewater Care Home join in worship with musical instruments

living with dementia and their carers is a vital issue for churches.

Churches on the Isle of Wight have pioneered 'Dementia Conversations' for carers, alongside the not-for-profit organisation Dementia Pathfinders. Three groups now meet monthly in church premises, helping carers to support each other and their relatives.

It started at St James Church in East Cowes, where the Rev Veronica Brown and Barbara Stephens, chief executive of

Dementia Pathfinders, have jointly facilitated a group for more than two years. Now similar groups exist at two other island churches.

"Veronica and I co-host the group in East Cowes, and Sue Theobald and I co-host the group in Ryde," said Barbara. "There's an introductory exercise, which welcomes newcomers. Then a guest speaker or myself will introduce an issue which is designed to prompt conversation.

"After around 50 minutes, we