Nana's Washday

Sensory stories – deep connections

Julie and Louise have a great combined energy and make a strong team. "We blend", they say, "and we're always looking for the next adventure!" Julie Street-Anderson is a Reader at Christ Church Burntwood and Louise Molineux is involved with the puppets team at St Peter's Hednesford. Both work for Staffs County Council, with Stafford Specialist Day Opportunities, supporting adults with profound learning disability to live a valued life. And both are motivated by working in the service of others.

Louise received a Special Recognition award from the Council last year for her work supporting people with learning disabilities. She said: "We have the privilege of providing services for adults with some of the most complex needs. Our clients are at the heart of everything we do, they are our greatest teachers and it's a real privilege to be able to care for people."

So Julie and Louise are supportive of steps to make our churches more dementia-friendly. Christ Church Burntwood and St John the Baptist Hammerwich recently renewed their Dementia-Friendly Church Certificate, with Mike Holmes (Dementia Coordinator) and Rev Steve Morgan identifying the following three actions:

1. Building on the links with local residential homes, make connections by sharing prayers for people affected by dementia.
2. In both our churches, share a leaflet of prayers for people affected by dementia that people can easily take away and use at home, also using the leaflets to publicise the Cameo Café.
3. Hold a service with a dementia focus, where children and adults are all involved.

The service was held recently at Christ Church, Burntwood, based on the format of the Lichfield Cathedral dementia-friendly Songs of Praise held a month or two back, as shared across the Dementia-Friendly Church network:

it's called "The House Built on the Rock". And Mike told me that the service was appreciated by all.

Within the service, Julie and Louise performed "Nana's Washday", a 10-minute sensory story written by Louise. Louise plays the part of Nana and Julie is the storyteller, with their story based in the 1930s. They have props of a period radio, a clothes horse, a washing basket, a washing line and period clothes. Add to that the smell of the soap and the sound of the washing drum – then, after hanging out the washing, in true English fashion, the sound of the thunder and lightening! So the washing comes in to dry on the clothes horse and then it's time for the ironing.

How did people at Christ Church respond? The sensory story made deep connections, prompting treasured, lively responses. One lady living with dementia giggled right through, simply saying, "Oh yes"! At the end of the performance, Louise danced down the aisle with a shirt – and a gentleman wanted to dance too; this prompted lots of other people to get up and join in with the dancing. What a powerful, heart and soul response!

How does this sensory story connect with people affected by dementia and with our Christian faith? Julie responds:

> "A sensory story is able to connect with an individual through our senses of sight, smell, taste, sound, touch and movement, in a beautiful creative way. These things can trigger memories, life experiences, thoughts and emotions and in turn promote communication, engagement and the ability to connect with the world around them in a meaningful manner. A sensory story is short and each line is reinforced with a prop, whether that be visual, or through smell, taste or sounds, or via the power of familiar music. These things really matter, when words do not connect as they used to.
>
> When an individual receives a diagnosis of dementia, their faith and church family are so important. God is always present in every situation – so whatever we face, we are not alone; and I love it that God surpasses all understanding. Our Christian faith means that we believe in and model our lives on the life and example of Jesus, who

simply asks us to "love one another" without prejudice or discrimination. Our attitudes and actions should then reflect the love, kindness and compassion of Jesus.

When someone is living with dementia, it can be such an important time to feel as if we "belong" and to be part of a community. Our church life and church family are wonderful examples of how to promote and support well-being and maintain connections with dear friends.

God exists in nature, in music, in others, in our senses and in creativity. So when it can feel like everything is being taken away by dementia, we can see that God ensures we still feel Him with us, in these ways. And engagement and connection with one another and the world can still be enjoyed. What an awesome God we have!"

Julie and Louise are willing to visit other churches and share "Nana's Washday", as part of a dementia-friendly Sunday service. If you'd like to follow up with them on this, contact Julie Street-Anderson on julie.sa13@outlook.com Although it's less easy for them to attend a weekday dementia group with "Nana's Washday", Julie and Louise are open to inquiries on this as Staffordshire County Council are supportive of activities which serve the community.

And of course, building on the creative dementia-friendly service shared so successfully at Christ Church Burntwood, others churches or groups may choose to build on these ideas, crafting their own sensory performance – with openness to the responses it prompts…