

# How can the church love and serve their care homes, now and beyond?



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## 1. Where were care homes before Covid?

The residential care home is ubiquitous. There are 21,723 in the UK and are commonplace in every city, town and village everywhere. The 410,000 people who live within are you and me, just older. They are fully signed up members of our community who are twice as likely to be severely lonely as others of their generation living elsewhere. Care homes have always been open for visitors, for new friends and the church family.

But now, more than ever, they are in great need of support from churches\*.

## 2. What is it really like in care homes at the moment?

- We're experiencing high numbers of unexpected resident deaths so there's grief, bereavement and mental health issues.
- The last few weeks have put things into perspective with a welcome positive change in attitude but staff still feel overlooked and they don't know where to get help.
- PPE isn't always readily available and testing is a challenge as well.
- Training for carers is very different from NHS staff and there is no specific support for care home staff.
- Sheltered housekeepers have got enormous responsibility at this time, some of whom feel isolated, are frightened and have difficult situations at home.
- But camaraderie has really increased because everyone's in the same boat and they're all playing their part. We have seen those residents who have families, really stepping up with their communications.

## 3. There are so many needs in our community right now, can our church really help care homes too?

Very few care home companies specifically employ chaplains. In our local conurbation with 159 care homes, there are fewer than five. Links between churches and care homes can decline over time with changes to personnel on both sides. What care homes need and what churches provide can easily misalign and so now is an urgent and opportune time to even just reestablish connection, support where possible and build strong foundations for what is set to be a traumatised future.

## 4. But as we can't even visit care homes, where do we start?

- Care Home managers are inundated with challenges and communications at the moment and so the best way to connect is by calling and emailing the Activities Team. They are the gatekeepers of community activity coming into the home and facilitate anything to do with social/spiritual care.
- We can't enter a care home at the moment but if a church is in touch with a smaller facility where the social area is on the ground floor, a presentation could be delivered outside with chairs turned and windows partially open to allow sound to get through. Where this has happened, it has been much appreciated.

Here are some other ideas for you to suggest to your care homes that Truth Be Told (TBT) has used and gathered from chaplains, activities staff and carers:

## Practical Help...

**Sharing stories:** TBT has pen-paled together more than 50 church/community people with residents in homes we have existing relationships with. We've shared stories, pictures and videos together. It's been easy to initiate and has really lifted the spirits of everyone involved.

Have a look at [www.truthbetold.org.uk](http://www.truthbetold.org.uk) for examples and visit [bit.ly/TBTTellMeYourStory](https://bit.ly/TBTTellMeYourStory) for a template.

**Craft supplies:** With no visitors or external activities providers, entertaining residents and keeping their spirits high is crucial. Movement of people, equipment and resources is limited within homes to reduce contact and so supplies will be running low. TBT has provided packs of watercolour pencils, stone-painting pens, scripture-based mindfulness colouring books, one for each floor, to the care homes we work with.

**Games, CDs, DVDs:** Would your care homes appreciate a wider variety of activities? Perhaps you could ask your church family for donations.

**iPads, laptops, other technology:** How about asking for donations from your community for your care homes to ensure that there is always a way for their family and friends or your church to contact residents?

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## Pastoral Support...

**Coordinated response:** With councils, local charities, community groups and churches already working together to try and meet the needs of the most vulnerable, there may already be helplines for prayer, advice, support, friendship and counselling in your area. A designated 'carer/resident' helpline may not be necessary, but it is crucial that care home staff know *who* and *when* to call if they or a resident need pastoral or prayer support.

**Advice and support:** Can you contact the coordinators of existing prayer/helplines to make them aware of calls that may be coming from care homes? They can then flag up where extra support is needed if there are multiple calls from the same homes. Can you promote the appropriate helplines to every care home in your area so that they know exactly who and when to call when they need to?

**Counselling:** To address the needs of carers and in so doing, residents, you could support your care home by offering to pay for and arrange online mental health first aid training (Trauma Risk in Management - TRiM) for a member of their team. In our conurbation, a local funeral director has offered to pay the £15 fee for a staff member in 100 of our homes.

## Prayer Support...

**Messages:** Can you simply send a message or card to local care homes saying that you're praying for them?

**Telephone chaplaincy:** Offering telephone chaplaincy would be appreciated and preferable to relying on a general helpline, being careful that any volunteers know to pray for the situation rather than for their conversion.

**Please pray for:**

**Mercy** for residents, that fewer than expected would die and that the virus would not spread out of hand

**Physical protection** for staff, that there would be enough PPE and there would be no more deaths

**Intervention** for struggling residents who don't have any family, friends or external contact

**Provision** for staff who get paid little, plus weeks of statutory sick pay and are inexperienced at budgeting

**Emotional protection**, that the predicted trauma and mental health tsunami would be averted

**Community engagement** would increase as people learn to love those living in residential care in a new way

**Spiritual connection** for staff and residents as they come to know their Father in heaven now and forever

### 5. How can we continue serving our community in care homes?

The repercussions of Covid-19 on all those connected with care homes will be far-reaching. Management will be dealing with grieving families, traumatised staff and fewer residents will hit their finances. Residents will be dealing with their own grief and the effects of living in a hurting environment. And yet, TBT also predicts that the resurgence of community spirit and a visceral desire to do *something* to help will give churches the opportunity to mobilise their community into action in a new way.

TBT partners with churches to equip, resource and train them to team up with their local care home to run intergenerational storytelling groups that bring belonging, joy and life to the residents, carers and families. TBT groups meet weekly and follow an imaginative and hands-on curriculum with themes such as animals or transport and stories that tell bible-based truths such as 'I am loved' or 'I am precious'. Parents of 0-4s and carers of residents get to witness the beautiful interactions between the children and their older friends and week by week, everyone involved begins to see how beautiful the church family is too.

We are currently working on our 'car park' curriculum, for children and parents to gather and enjoy sessions *outside* care homes so that residents watching safely from inside will know, more than ever before, that they have not and will not be forgotten. The stone to the tomb didn't stop Jesus and a virus won't stop TBT either!

To learn more about any of the suggestions above or to find out how your church can partner with us, please contact [gemma@truthbetold.org.uk](mailto:gemma@truthbetold.org.uk) and visit [www.truthbetold.org.uk](http://www.truthbetold.org.uk).