



Written by  
**Debbie Thrower**

## Holding an annual celebration of age service

- Design a short companionable service
- Create 'an occasion' that's warmly anticipated each year
- Include older people in planning and delivery
- Refreshments should be plentiful and good quality
- Publicise the event before and after

### Background

After several years' of holding these services, my advice is to keep them comparatively short and sweet. But that doesn't mean superficial. Forty-five minutes is the ideal duration; leaving the worshipper with something to think about... and ready for tea!

*'It was informal, joyous, and appreciated by those who don't come to church as much as by those who do.'*

*'I really enjoyed myself, I will come again next year, if I'm still here!'*

Key elements should convey how we're all in the same boat: ageing comes to us all – and if we're granted longer lives – there are compensations as well as the inevitable challenges.

### 1 Design a short companionable service

Aim for worship that's enjoyable and meaningful. What's most appreciated is companionship. Pick a title like 'Celebrating age' that tells people what to expect. Announce that it'll be held each year, indicating you're alongside people for the long term. You may prefer to call it 'The silver service' or 'Golden afternoon' to be less direct; my preference, though, is to be honest and address the premise that celebrating age isn't so hard a task!

Choose a new theme each year to pique fresh interest. I've picked 'Gratitude', 'Contentment', 'Confidence', 'The journey of life', and 'A quiet mind'. One year we looked at the theme of God's refining fire, exploring how we might be tried and tested as we age. The liturgy should be accessible and dignified; capable of being understood by a wide variety of people, at different ages and stages. Build in some silence, pauses for the Holy Spirit to move.

## 2 Create 'an occasion' that's warmly anticipated each year

You're seeking to build a loyal congregation that comes back time and time again. Decorate the church/hall with fresh flowers, have a strong visual focus with a relevant prop or screen image. Don't assume everyone present will be old in age or outlook; you'd like a blend of ages, so young and older worship together, and younger volunteers can help the most frail.

Think of a small gift to send people home with; such as a prayer bookmark, a homemade lavender bag or a hanging decoration. Or you might order a batch of inexpensive booklets on a topic that chimes with the theme. Each person should feel loved and cherished, so they want to come back next year!

## 3 Include older people in the planning and delivery

Convene a planning group with several members who are older themselves. Listen carefully to what they want from the event. It might influence the theme and how you unpack it. Every component, from a warm welcome to the prayers, music, readings and 'thought for the day' with the key message should inspire but also ring true to the lived experience of ageing.

Usually, familiar hymns and worship songs are popular, with words in large font size on a screen, ideally. Produce enough large print paper copies of the order of service for everyone and make sure any hearing loop system is working. Readings could appear on screen, as well as printed in the service sheet (for those who'd like to take it home to reflect on later). Aim for a balance of older and younger voices among the readers, and those delivering prayers. You might want to include an interview with a senior member of the congregation. If so, ensure you have working microphones (with spare batteries at hand). Strike a tone of respectful informality, while reflecting on the joys, and challenges, of growing older.

## 4 Refreshments should be plentiful and good quality

Tea is a highlight, especially for those who seldom eat meals with others. Recruiting willing helpers to bake and serve refreshments is key to ensuring all goes with a swing. Look out for people who seem hesitant to stay, gently encouraging them to join in, or for others who are on their own and lack someone to chat to. A convivial hubbub of conversation indicates everyone feels included and is having a good time.

## 5 Publicise the event before and after

Don't assume a notice in a church magazine or on a website telling people it's happening will suffice. A personal invitation is best for some who might be diffident, and to reach new people put up posters and write a short article for the local newspaper accentuating the positives of coming – that you'll be made welcome, find it interesting and meet new friends. After the event write a follow-up report, describing the service and including quotes from those who attended. Emphasise this is an annual event and there'll be another one next year!

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BRF Ministries, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE  
+44 (0)1865 319700 | [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk)  
[brf.org.uk](http://brf.org.uk)

