

TUESDAY 24 MAY AT 6 P.M. : T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: A Pattern for Christian Living. An evening talk with Professor Jay Parini

in the Brinkman Room, Heythrop College, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN. Email Emily Ross at: e.ross@heythrop.ac.uk, or tel: 020 7795 4263

Identity preserved

Dementia Awareness Week begins tomorrow. When a loved one is affected, their suffering and that of their friends and family can be hard to bear. The group Dementia Companions can help

ANITA BONIFACE

THE TROUBLED question of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Am I one person today and tomorrow another?", that was asked in a poem written shortly before his death, has a poignant relevance for anyone familiar with the effects of dementia. A loved one's loss of memory, and so in some ways of identity itself, can be so distressing that it is extremely difficult to bear. In that poem, Bonhoeffer found an answer: "Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am Thine." These words can give strength to those struggling to cope with a loved one's dementia.

Caring for a person with dementia is demanding both emotionally and physically. It can be a round-the-clock job with little support available and the carer often has to give up their own leisure pursuits, social life and holidays. People with dementia often cannot express their needs and this sometimes leads to challenging behaviour. This may be one reason why, sadly, there is still a stigma attached to dementia today; and people experiencing the condition and their carers often suffer isolation.

Faced with these sorts of problems, a Staffordshire doctor whose husband was suffering from dementia approached the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) branch in her local parish of St Joseph and St Etheldreda. With the support of the parish priest and her health visitor, they set up Dementia Companions. The volunteer group has now expanded across the country. Members receive training and this can be provided by the Alzheimer's Society and other local groups such as Admiral Nurses (dementia specialist community nurses). E-learning resources are also important as are fact sheets provided by the Alzheimer's Society.

The group helps by providing respite breaks for carers in the community, as well as visiting people with dementia in residential homes. It enabled one carer to attend a Bible study class, another to get to Mass on Sundays with her granddaughter, for example.

The Companions are encouraged to find out as much as they can about the people they are visiting. Sometimes during a visit, Dementia Companions bring family photographs or use an iPad to show pictures of places familiar to that person.

The spirituality of people with dementia is something that is often neglected. Dementia Companions visit people in residential homes

To do

ENCOURAGE people who are worried about dementia to make contact with the SVP or the Alzheimer's Society.

CONSIDER starting a Dementia Companions group in your parish during Dementia Awareness Week, 15-21 May.

FIND creative ways, often based on triggers via the senses, to help people with dementia access their memories.

where a person's dementia may be more advanced. These visits are important as sufferers often have no relatives and would not get a visit otherwise. When Holy Communion is brought to those even with advanced dementia, they can often recite the Lord's Prayer and other well-remembered prayers they learned by heart as young children.

Similarly, they readily join in singing hymns when they listen to *Songs of Praise* together; and it is clear that they enjoy the experience. Memories can be sparked by going outdoors to feel a breeze or the warmth of the sun, the song of a bird, or the smell of newly cut grass; and all these things help them experience the wonder of God's creation, often anew (sometimes over and over again). This talking and praying is in keeping with the Vincentian ethos and spirituality that guides the SVP.

Most parish priests see the benefits of having a lay Dementia Companions group who can visit parishioners who are ill; and they will direct the group to people who need help. Needless to say, it is important for such a support group to get their parish priest on board before they begin. The group can be advertised locally through word of mouth, through local SVP groups and through other groups such as the local luncheon club. Adverts in the local press can also be considered – especially if the group is open to all faiths. Volunteering is at the heart of the work of the SVP, which always emphasises a person-to-person approach to helping others.

Members of Dementia Companions groups hold monthly or fortnightly meetings during which a leader allocates a visiting rota, and members share information about visits and provide mutual support. Local experts can be invited to give a talk or show a video. Twice

a year, the Dementia Companions group in Staffordshire holds a seminar for members and interested parishioners. This is a good way of introducing new members, offering ongoing training and advertising the service.

New members can be recruited through addresses after Mass, church bulletins, posters, leaflets and church appeals. The SVP can assist with recruiting members and informing people that support and advice on how to care for people with dementia is available. This can be done through other agencies, such as GP surgeries and social services, from where referrals often come. MASE (the Monthly Alzheimer's Support Evening), Alzheimer's Café, plus local specialist hospitals and residential homes, community centres, supermarkets and the local library are all worthwhile places to spread the word. Local MPs might also be willing to communicate the service through their surgeries.

It is important to be creative with promotional materials; but also to remember to get permissions to use photos or quotes from people, and to make it clear that all members are checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service as safeguarding is paramount.

Dementia Companions are now working with a number of parishes (both with and without SVP members) to set up other Dementia Companions groups around the country. This includes Methodist and Anglican parishes in addition to Catholic parishes; but the benefits of these groups can go far beyond the Church. Dementia Awareness Week runs until 21 May. People who are worried about dementia should make contact with the SVP or the Alzheimer's Society for information and support.

The Alzheimer's Society's Dementia Friends programme (www.dementiafriends.org.uk) also aims to change people's perceptions of dementia, so that people living with dementia feel understood and included. Those interested can attend a face-to-face information session or watch an online video.

From being more patient in shop queues, to volunteering, to campaigning for change, to visiting someone you know living with dementia, every action counts.

Anita Boniface is media and communications officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society (England and Wales). For more information about the SVP go to: www.svp.org.uk