

Facilitating Memory Cafés

Toolkit

What is a memory café?

[Memory cafés](#) provide a space for people to come together for food, fun, and friendship. Requiring little upfront cost, they are a popular form of ministry to tackle loneliness and isolation among people living with dementia and their carers, but often reaching a wider audience.

What do people do at a memory café?

In their simplest form, memory cafés consist of tea/coffee, a game, and conversation. However, offering a variety of activities in a structured session works well, and ensures there's something for everyone.

- **Memory games:** Quizzes are a popular option for memory cafés. These might be straight-forward general knowledge quizzes (multiple choice, yes/no, or factual answers) or something more creative, such as spot the difference or name that tune.
- **Music:** If you can find some willing musicians in your congregation or community, your memory café might include a performance for guests or a sing-along. For the latter, choose songs that guests will know – songs from the war, music hall classics, hymns, or even classic pop songs. If you can't find a volunteer to lead the music, a playlist on YouTube/Spotify etc. could work as an alternative.
- **Exercise:** You should consider engaging an external instructor, who is trained in safe and appropriate exercises for older people, to lead any physical activity. (Do check what grants exist in your area to cover this cost.) Chair-based exercises are popular and accessible, but at least one memory café in the Diocese has had great success with tai chi.

What kind of spiritual content is appropriate?

As with all community ministries, it will be worth thinking in advance about how to incorporate spiritual care in a context where guests may be from a variety of faith and belief backgrounds. Light-touch options used in the Diocese include: clergy attendance at the café, opening/closing the session in prayer, making use of worship music/hymns, invitations to the church's wider activities, and marking Christian holidays.

Are there any external organisations who could help run a café?

Churches sometimes partner with external organisations to deliver memory cafés. In some cases, the church hosts and leads the café session, while external partners provide a particular service – be it an exercise class, musical contributions, talks from local interest groups, or tailored advice to community members living with dementia. For example, in Brent, several churches partner with [Ashford Place](#). Their representatives attend café sessions to provide guests with advice on community services/support, including benefit entitlements.

In other instances, the church provides space and refreshments, while a specialist organisation leads the session. Successful partnerships already exist between Diocesan churches and [Age UK](#), [Resonate Arts](#), and local Rotary Clubs. Unfortunately, however, these existing cafes do not necessarily offer replicable models. NHS-funded community support services differ across London, with dementia charities active in some locations and not others. Moreover, in the current political/economic climate, many services have seen



funding cuts – meaning external organisations may not be seeking new partnerships. Your first step should therefore be to research what dementia provision already exists in your area – including who your NHS-contracted “Dementia Advisor” is. The Compassionate Communities Team is glad to assist with this if helpful.

In all partnerships it is worth thinking carefully about your objectives for the café, and how these fit with your vision for the wider church. This will help ensure a mutually beneficial working relationship from early on, with roles and responsibilities (for staff, congregation members, and externals) clearly defined.

How should we prepare ourselves and our space?

Memory cafés should be safe and accessible spaces for everyone. Due consideration should be given to the needs of guests, who are likely to be elderly (as dementia predominantly affects over 65’s) and made vulnerable by challenges such as memory loss, language loss, and a slowing of reflexes. Creating a ‘dementia-friendly’ space need not be intimidating, however, as a plethora of resources is available.

Livability provides a 15-page ‘[Dementia inclusive church guide](#),’ which provides a helpful list of prompts for an ‘Environmental audit.’ A more comprehensive ‘[360 accessibility audit](#)’ is also provided by the London Diocese, and Disability Ministry Enabler, [John Beauchamp](#), is able to offer additional advice and support. London also has a ‘[Dementia Friendly Venues Charter](#),’ with the option for venues to self-accredit to become Dementia Friendly Venues. This may not be appropriate for all churches, but the website nevertheless signposts some useful resources for thinking about accessibility.

It may be helpful for café volunteers to become [Dementia Friends](#). The Alzheimer's Society offers a short online training, free of charge, explaining what dementia is, and how to support those living with the condition. After completing the training, it is possible to send off for a free pin badge to show others that you are a Dementia Friend. The NHS also offers a more detailed, free training on its [online portal](#). Though more medical in tone, it is a helpful resource, providing insightful testimonies from people with lived experience.

How should we promote the café?

Communicating the times and frequency of café sessions well will help ensure their success. If you are running your café with a partner organisation, it will be worth discussing the different places that, between you, you might advertise the café. Keep in mind that promoting the café exclusively online is unlikely to reach a wide audience of older people, who may not be regular internet users. Plan to promote your café according to a regular rhythm (rather than launching it just once), and remind people when sessions are coming up.

Where can I find out more?

- If you’d like to see a Memory Café in action, here is a [map](#) of Diocesan churches working in this area.
- Steven Morris’s excellent Grove booklet [Memory Café: How to Engage with Memory Loss and Build Community](#) provides a practical and accessible starting point.
- Trevor Adams’ Grove booklet [Developing Dementia-friendly Churches](#) provides a good introduction to dementia care in the church context more generally.
- For longer reads, options include Joanna Collicut’s [Thinking of You: a resource for the spiritual care of people with dementia](#) and John Swinton’s [Dementia: Living in the Memories of God](#).
- John Swinton also introduces some of the key ideas from his book online, [here](#) (11 minutes) and [here](#) (27 minutes). These clear and insightful videos, which include practical and theological reflections on dementia care, are well worth the watch.