How a memory cafe is saving a forgotten community

**If you go to St Cuthbert's, North Wembley any Thursday between 11am and 1pm you will find people who are cheerful despite suffering the worst that life can throw at them. The reason for that joy is the weekly memory café. Here, the *Rev Steve Morris* tells us a little more about the outreach project.**

"Our parish is on the far edge of London and our church is a bit marooned by a roundabout and a road. When I first came here two years ago, one thing was obvious: we needed to reconnect with our parish and to do that we needed to know where the parish was hurting.

The answer was right in front of us. People told us that they were lonely and isolated and that there was no sense of belonging. One man said to me that he did not see another living soul all week. And at the same time we came upon many folk with Alzheimer's and the desperation that can bring.

It was from this need and our desire to nurture community that we began memory café in this multi-cultural parish.

In just a couple of years it has become an inter-community, multi-faith phenomena. The pattern for the weekly session has stayed pretty stable, but we have added things and developed into an action-packed two hours. Essentially, a memory café just needs you to have a kettle, some tea bags, a warm room, a genuine welcome and a few quizzes. Then off you go.

We thought at first that we'd get just a few people – perhaps those with Alzheimer's – but the idea of memory café was much stronger than that. We found we were getting all types of folk from our multi-ethnic parish. We have Hindus, Sikhs, Jewish people, Muslims and people of no-faith. We get those with Alzheimer's and their carers and many others looking for friendship and the remorseless business of being alone. Many are widows – male and female. Most live in the old family home, but the family have moved away and left them on their own.

People tell me they love the welcome and, of course, the great fun. We have seated-exercise, memory games, a choir and an artist-in-residence.

What is most heart-warming are the testimonies we hear. I call them mini-resurrections. People tell me that they feel alive again, that they have hope and that they have made friends and feel valued. That's what warms our hearts. It interests me that they often use the language of salvation, unbidden and without knowing anything much about the faith.

When you take time to listen to older people, they have such life stories to tell. That's the key, being bothered enough to listen. If people have no one to hear their story then what do they do with their memories?

It has certainly caused me to think about what church is, why we are here, and how we have neglected precious older folk and their gifts and wisdom and memories.

I wonder why the evangelical movement isn't as scandalised as we are about the loneliness of elders, and the squandering of their talents. Some of them tell me that they feel they are a nuisance. I certainly understand why churches so value youth and families, but I wonder if we could think again about our ministry to older people.

One of the things I have found very touching is to see the love of families for those with Alzheimer's. I think there is not anything more difficult than loving your husband or wife when they no longer know who you are and who they are. But they continue to love and to care and as we care for them, for the two precious hours of memory café, we make a bold statement. Alzheimer's can't win. Nor can loneliness or isolation. And as church we stand with our local people.

The other week I went to the chemist for my prescription. The pharmacist is from Mumbai. As he gave me my tablets he beckoned me into his consulting room. I wondered what I had done wrong.

"Steve," he said. "I want to thank you on behalf of the Indian community around here for all you are doing for us."

I was very touched. Memory café builds community because its ethos is hospitality and doing stuff. The memory games draw people in and the friendship keeps all coming week-after-week.

I would like to encourage you to start a memory café. They are dead easy. Our [website has loads of details.](http://www.eauk.org/church/stories/www.stcuths.org)

We started on our first week with 10 people. We now have 70 and growing. Radio London did a touching show about our memory café on Christmas Day. We feel that every church in the country could run one."