PILGRIMS' FRIEND SOCIETY

10 top tips *for a great* Christmas *with older friends and family*



Practical ways to help you have a calm and comfortable Christmas

10 top tips *for a great* Christmas *with older friends and family*

My father-in-law, Pat, 81, lives with dementia, and like many families, we've had to learn how to adapt as he has got older. We still want Christmas to be joyful, welcoming and full of family life as we celebrate the birth of Jesus together, but we've also discovered that some things work better than others. Here are a few tips that I hope will help you and your loved ones too.

By *Miriam Baines*
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> ***"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests."***
> Luke 2:14

1. Start with the *person*, not the plan

Before making plans, I think it's important to ask: what does this particular person enjoy? What makes them feel calm? What situations tend to make them anxious? The more we understand this, the easier it becomes to make good decisions.

Sometimes that might mean adapting long-held traditions and occasionally it might even mean deciding that a particular gathering or event isn't realistic this year. That's okay – the best plan is one that's centred on the person you're trying to support.

2. Introduce *yourself* and approach warmly

If your older person is struggling with memory, whether that's due to dementia or just age, one habit to get into is using names constantly. When I greet Pat, I'll naturally say, "Hi Pat, it's Miriam." When family members arrive, we weave names into conversation. Rather than putting Pat on the spot, we simply provide the information he may need. I never want him to feel embarrassed if he can't remember a name.

I also try to approach him from the front, make eye contact and smile. Those things sound obvious, but they communicate warmth and reassurance, especially to a person living with dementia whose sensory perceptions may be affected.

3. Let them keep doing the *things they love*

Pat has always loved doing the washing-up. If you asked me where some of our best conversations happen at Christmas, I'd probably say standing in the kitchen after lunch, drying plates. He clears the table, we load the dishwasher together, and he tells me once again why he doesn't approve of dishwashers at all. It's a conversation we've had many times… But the point is he's doing something he enjoys that still gives him a sense of purpose.

Rather than trying to draw your loved one into activities they find difficult or trying to persuade them to not help out at all – tricky for those who've spent their lives serving others – try to join them in one that still brings them joy or gives them purpose or adapt it. For example, if they love washing-up but find it a bit much now, maybe they could wipe down and stack the placemats instead.



4. Lean *into* familiar Christmas traditions

Christmas is full of traditions, especially for those who have been part of church life for many years. I've found that these can be incredibly helpful when someone is living with dementia. In our family, one of the traditions is reading The Polar Express together on Christmas Eve. What's lovely is that this isn't a new tradition. Pat knows it and he remembers doing it with his own children. In many ways it's more familiar to him than it is to my boys.

I think there is something beautiful about introducing younger generations to traditions that older family members already know and love. It allows them to participate from a place of confidence rather than feeling like they're constantly trying to keep up with something new.

5. Create a *comfortable space* where they feel in control

Christmas can feel chaotic – people come and go, there's noise, movement and excitement everywhere. I've noticed that Pat is much more comfortable when he knows exactly where he is and what is happening around him, something which is true for most older people, even if they aren't living with dementia.

We make sure he has his usual chair. From there he can see the room, the people in it. and the door. Having that sense of orientation really matters and when someone feels they can see what's going on around them, anxiety often reduces.



If your relative is coming to you, it's a good idea to walk the routes they are likely to take and check for accessibility, removing any clutter, adding lighting if needed, and noting where they might need a bit of extra help, like getting up the front step. A seat with sturdy arms that's not too low will help with sitting and standing.

6. *Celebrate* children's energy but manage it wisely

Our boys are now growing up, so Christmas has become a little easier but when they were younger it was much harder! The wonderful thing about children is that they bring life into a room. When they arrive, Christmas suddenly feels like Christmas – everybody lights up.

The challenge is that children also bring noise, unpredictability and the occasional disaster. I still remember moments involving drinks being enthusiastically poured and ending up all over the table.

> ***"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"***
>
> Psalm 133:1

For us, it's always been a balancing act. The joy the children bring is hugely important, but we also have to be aware of when things are becoming overwhelming. Sometimes that means quietly stepping in, cleaning up quickly and helping everyone move on.



7. Give *everyone* permission to take breaks

There's power in a reset. If the atmosphere is becoming too busy, we'll suggest to our boys kicking a football in the garden or taking a quick walk around the block. Even if it's raining, we'll grab coats and boots and head outside. Ten minutes later, everyone comes back calmer.

I've realised that Christmas doesn't need to be one long uninterrupted event. In fact, most people, whether they have dementia or not, benefit from occasional pauses (you could probably benefit from one too!). A short break can stop small stresses turning into bigger problems.

8. Come *prepared* with activities

I never arrive empty-handed, not because we need to entertain everyone every minute, but because it's useful to have a few things ready if the atmosphere needs redirecting.

Sometimes we'll get out photographs. This Christmas I might bring our wedding album because my boys haven't really seen it and Pat hasn't looked through it for years. Other times we'll do a jigsaw or settle down with our books. You might want to consider reading some of the classic Christmas Bible texts out loud, especially if your older person hasn't been able to get to a carol service this year.

Having a few activities ready is like a safety net, so have a think about what you could have on hand or ask someone else to be in charge of providing diversions.

Consider reading one or two of these traditional Bible texts out loud

Isaiah 9:2–7	Isaiah 11:1–10	Luke 1:39–56	Luke 2:1–20	John 1:1–14

9. Let music bring everyone *together*

I've found that music can be one of the easiest ways to connect across generations. When conversation feels difficult, a familiar carol or favourite Christmas song can instantly create a sense of joy and recognition.

Rather than only playing modern festive music, I try to include songs Pat would have known and loved when he was younger. Whether we're singing around the piano or listening to well-loved carols, music gives everyone something to share and enjoy together, without any pressure to keep a conversation going. And if your gathering isn't the kind to sing together out loud, a designated half an hour of quiet with carols playing in the background might be all that's needed – and give the opportunity for a well-earned snooze for all!



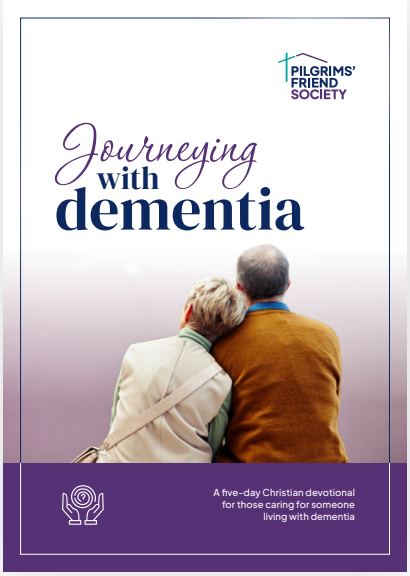
10. Focus on *presence*, not perfection

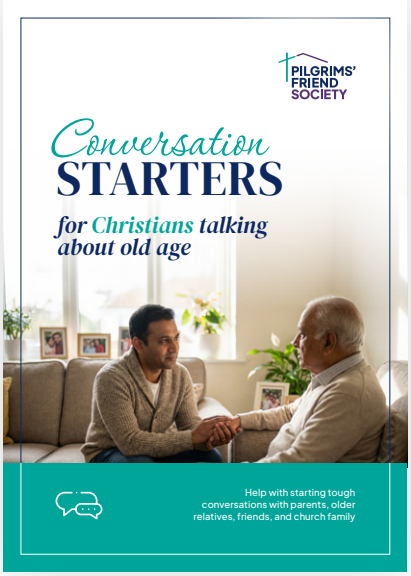
Perfect Christmases don't exist. There are awkward moments. There are misunderstandings. There are times when everyone needs a breather. Some years have felt hard, particularly when my children were younger and required constant supervision. But when I look back, those aren't the things I remember most. What I remember are the moments of connection – like our The Polar Express tradition on Christmas Eve when, one year at the end, Pat leant across and took the small bell that came with the book, shook it and laughed.

Don't forget...

Christmas may look different when old age or dementia are part of your family's story, but different doesn't mean worse. Sometimes it simply means slowing down, adjusting expectations and remembering that the greatest gift we can offer is our presence. At the end of the day, older people just need to know they are loved, included and still very much part of the family.

Helping *you* support your older loved ones









Walking alongside a loved one as they age is a privilege that can also be tiring and tricky. At Pilgrims' Friend Society we've produced a series of resources to help you as you navigate this journey with those you love.

Read online or download and print. Please do share with others who may find them useful.

Visit

www.pilgrimsfriend.org.uk/resources

OR SCAN/CLICK HERE



About Pilgrims' Friend Society

Rooted in our Christian faith, at Pilgrims' Friend Society, as well as providing secure comfortable homes and professional care, we believe that older people can be supported and encouraged to spend the later part of their lives contributing to the world around them, growing and enjoying fulfilling lives.

We have been supporting older people to flourish for more than 200 years, since a group of Christians concerned about "the aged and infirm Christian poor" established the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society in 1807. We started off by providing pensions and support through volunteer visits before developing housing and care schemes for older Christians.

Today we continue that legacy by running residential care homes and independent living housing schemes around the UK, providing environments in which older people are comfortable and secure, whether they need care or are living independently.

The Pilgrims' Friend Society bespoke approach to care, The Way We Care, ensures that we create communities where older people can flourish in their later years, especially as their physical needs increase.

We are committed to seeing the whole person – the history, the experiences, the joys and the sorrows of life, and to knowing who the important people are who make up the bundle of each person's living.

The Way We Care is grounded in our Christian faith and draws inspiration from the Bible. Every part of what The Way We Care looks like in the daily lives of our care homes is rooted in how the Bible tells us to treat and support others around us.

Find out more about The Way We Care by visiting:
www.pilgrimsfriend.org.uk/thewaywecare

Ready to think about a *new season?*

PILGRIMS' FRIEND SOCIETY



At Pilgrims' Friend Society, our heart is ensure that all older people can flourish as they age. Our residential care homes and independent living housing schemes are communities where older people are nurtured, supported and cared for in a safe and secure environment.

If you'd like to find out more, do get in touch. Contact details for our homes and housing schemes are below and each location also has its own page on our website – click the names below to explore their web pages.

Residential care homes

www.pilgrimsfriend.org.uk/homes

BETHANY HOUSE, PRESTON
0300 303 1724
bethanypreston@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

BRIDGEMEAD, BATH
0300 131 9115
bridgemead@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

EMMAUS HOUSE, HARROGATE
0300 303 8450
emmaushouse@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

EMMAUS HOUSE, WHITEHAVEN
0300 303 1440
emmauscumbria@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

EVINGTON HOME, LEICESTER
0300 303 1455
evington@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

FINBOROUGH COURT, GREAT FINBOROUGH
0300 303 1450
finboroughcourt@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

FRAMLAND, WANTAGE
0300 303 1470
wantage@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

FURZE HILL HOUSE, NORTH WALSHAM
0300 303 8434
furzehill@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

KOINONIA CHRISTIAN CARE HOME, WORTHING
0300 303 8480
koinonia@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

LUFF HOUSE, WALTON-ON-THE-NAZE
0300 303 1495
luffhouse@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

MIDDLEFIELDS HOUSE, CHIPPENHAM
0300 303 8470
middlefieldshouse@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

MILWARD HOUSE, TUNBRIDGE WELLS
0300 303 1460
milward@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

SHOTTERMILL HOUSE, HASLEMERE
0300 303 1475
shottermill@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

VILLA ADASTRA, HASSOCKS
0300 303 8440
villa-adastra@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

Independent living housing schemes

www.pilgrimsfriend.org.uk/housing

CAREY GARDENS, KIRBY MUXLOE
0300 303 8455
carey.gardens@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

DOROTHEA COURT, BEDFORD
0300 303 1490
dorothea@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

FINBOROUGH COURT HOUSING, GREAT FINBOROUGH
0300 303 1450
housingmanager.finborough@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

HOMESDALE, WANSTEAD, LONDON
0300 303 8485
homesdale@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

LUFF MEWS & SELHURST COURT, WALTON-ON-THE-NAZE
0300 303 1495
luffhouse@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

MILWARD HOUSE HOUSING, TUNBRIDGE WELLS
0300 303 1460
milward@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

PILGRIM GARDENS, LEICESTER
0300 303 8455
andy.harrison@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

ROYD COURT, MIRFIELD
0300 303 1480
roydcourt@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

STRATHCLYDE HOUSE, SKELMORLIE
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strathclyde@pilgrimsfriend.org.uk

"Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you."

Isaiah 46:4



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