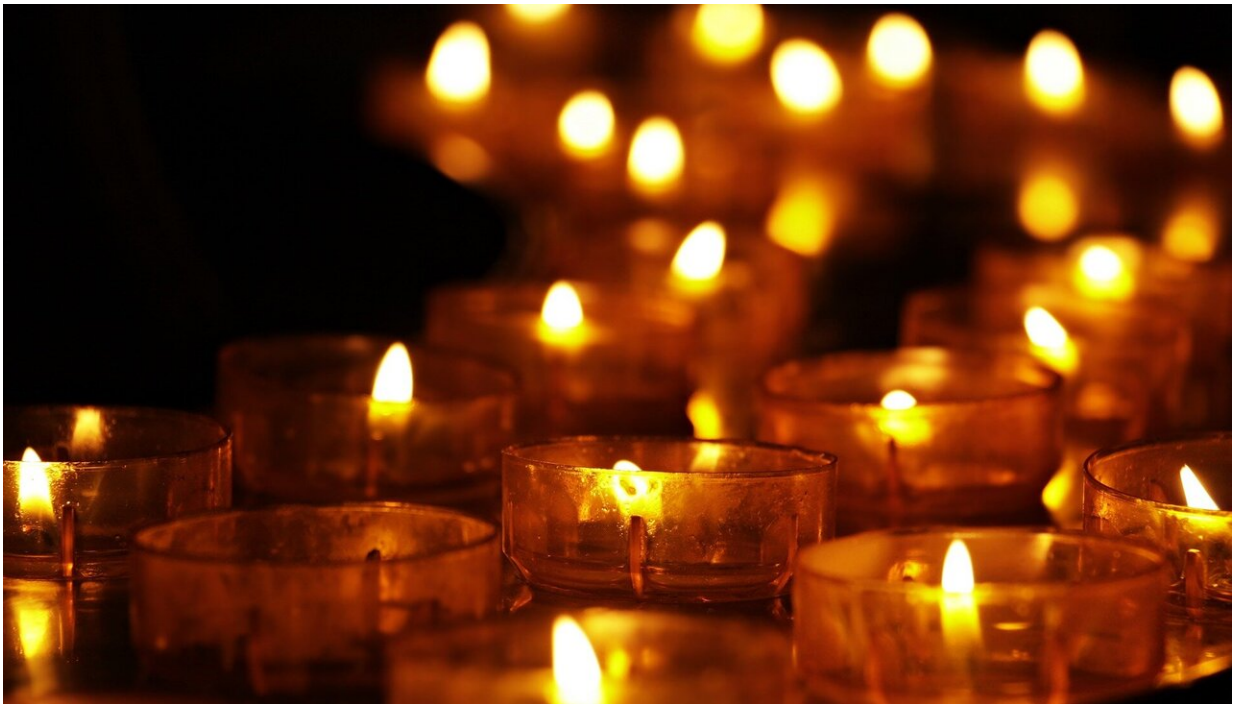


# Research highlights role of faith spaces in supporting healthy aging

April 24 2024, by Joe Stafford

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A team of researchers from The University of Manchester has spent the last 18 months examining how faith spaces in Greater Manchester support different groups of older people within their communities.

Greater Manchester has a growing older population which is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. The city region also faces high levels of

inequality around health, income and access to neighborhood services.

In this context, faith spaces provide much needed support as well as places for social connection. However, they are rarely acknowledged for the work they do, are mostly self-funded, and rely on mainly older volunteers to deliver their services.

Researchers from the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG) spoke to a wide range of partners including local authority [public health](#) and neighborhood officers, third sector organizations, faith-based and interfaith networks, and diverse groups representing [older people](#) from across Greater Manchester. A range of participants contributed to the data including [faith leaders](#) or representatives of faith communities, as well as older people who are regular users of faith spaces.

Their research found that faith spaces provide spiritual well-being, belonging and a sense of community by serving as "social connectors," and that they provide practical and [emotional support](#) across gender and social class.

The faith spaces in this study also supported a wider range of benefits beyond that of spiritual well-being, both for those who identified with a faith community, and by those who did not. Some participants from the White British community who visited an Anglican church told the researchers that they did not think of themselves as people of faith, but the space was important for social purposes. Beth, a White woman in her 70s, said "I'm a humanist so I don't come here for the service, but to have a cup of tea with people."

The activities provided by the faith spaces were not restricted to indoor meetings—a group of women started going for walks in a local park as part of an informal initiative by a lay leader from the Muslim

community who participated in the research.

One of the women taking part was Rayhana, a 72-year-old Muslim woman, who had found herself "stuck at home" without a network of other Asian women after retiring from her busy life working as a teacher and looking after her children on her own.

"It made a big difference in my life because I used to sit at home depressed not going anywhere," she said. "But now I come out with these people, and we enjoy that.

"I feel like a human being again before I was just sitting like a statue at home. Now even if I don't come here, I just try to go round the block, round my house, let's walk. It did make a big change, and now I sleep fully as well because I walk, I talk to people."

The research uncovered high inequality across different neighborhoods, as well as social isolation among groups and individuals within the older population. Such experiences are reflected in the provision of various services by faith spaces, these often targeting recent migrants, those experiencing isolation and/or [financial hardship](#), and people undergoing challenging life transitions such as bereavement, divorce, health problems and relocation.

The experts are calling for a more strategic involvement of faith-based groups in public health and age-friendly agendas. Taking into consideration the existing support happening in faith spaces and the opportunities for that work to be expanded, they suggest that policymakers should explore how to enhance the role of faith spaces in contributing to promoting health and well-being in the community, and provide support to enhance the social function of faith spaces, both for existing users and members of the wider community.

They also appeal for recognition of the role of faith spaces in supporting isolated/newly arrived groups to the community and their potential to connect older people to age-friendly initiatives, as well as support for faith spaces to access funding and the broadening of the age-friendly framework to embrace spiritual participation and cultural diversity.

**More information:** [The role of faith-based organisations in developing age-friendly communities](#)

Provided by University of Manchester

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