Existential conversations in old age – a diaconal approach

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Research on older people’s reflections and experiences concerning existential issues is limited in a Scandinavian context. Deacons within the Church of Norway constitute a professional group that can encounter older people’s need for existential conversations, but empirical research in this field is scarce. Through individual interviews with 11 older people and three focus group interviews with 18 deacons, this study aims to contribute to empirical and qualitative studies on a) research on older people’s thoughts and reflections around death, meaning and loneliness, and whether they would want to talk about existential issues with other people or not, and b) deacons’ perspectives on existential conversations with older people and their perceived competencies in this field. The analysis methods used are Thematic Analysis and Qualitative Content Analysis. We introduce “approachable deacons” as an analytical innovation and assert that deacons may make an essential contribution to public mental health, both in quality and quantity. We furthermore assert that the deacon profession represents a counterculture to society and healthcare, where time is short, older people may feel downgraded, and existential and religious literacy is limited.

Keywords: Deacons, existential conversations, older people, empirical, approachable.