

COMING OF...



AGE

BRING ON THE BABY BOOMERS!



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Why a resource on ageing? We're all getting older – we all know an older person – surely it isn't an "issue" as such. Surely there's not much to discuss?

We've prepared this material as a discussion starter because there are issues to think about. Abuse of the elderly at the hands of their carers, financial hardship and how we as Christians respond to the issues associated with a rapidly ageing population; all need to be considered. Our attitudes towards older people shape public policy and legislation. Attitudes and policies shape what sort of future faces us, as we all get older.

This resource can be used in a variety of settings, for example:

- As the base for home or small group discussions
- Three 45-minute workshops to be held following a morning service or at some other time
- A three-hour workshop including "live" two or three minute segments by a local person on some aspect of the topics
- Where people across age-groups are represented

It is also hoped that through reflection on the issues raised in this resource people are enabled and encouraged to advocate for older people in their communities.

It is expected that these discussion papers will prompt local action around social and pastoral concerns.

Suggested reflections and a prayer are included to help focus discussion.

PRAYER

Dear Lord our God, as we gather to reflect on our changing world may we remember with gratitude and humility that it is your world and your cherished people of whom we speak.

Stir us with new possibility, enlarge us with new understanding; enable us to do the truth for the sake of Jesus and your love. Amen.

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THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Grey hairs or ripeness of years?

“In contrast to American culture’s recent preoccupation with the problem of ageing and the care of older persons, the New Testament has surprisingly little to say on the topic. The relative silence of these texts may be explained, at least in part, by the very different social and cultural world in which the New Testament writers lived: fewer people lived to an advanced age, and those who did were honoured and esteemed within the community. Ageing, therefore was not seen by the early Christians as a “problem” to which some sort of religious solution was required.”

Richard B and Judith C Hays - The Christian Practice of Growing Old: The witness of Scripture.¹

2

What does the Old Testament say about old age?

(Unless otherwise noted all quotations are from the NRSV.)

The Old Testament seems somewhat ambivalent about old age. Alternative views are often held in tension. The very terms for old age suggest a diversity of experience and people that defies stereotyping.

Grey hair “To be grey” is the base for many expressions of age. (Gen 15; Gen 25:8; Judg 8:32; 1 Chron 29:28)

*Young people take pride in their strength,
but the grey hairs of wisdom are even more beautiful. (Prov 20:29, CEV)*

Having a beard is the root of another word for age in both masculine and feminine forms. It means being a fully-grown adult. (Zech 8:4; Gen 24:36)

Decrepitude, feebleness are occasional references to old age. (2 Chron 36:17, Job 15:10)

Ripeness, fullness of years, length of days is a common and more positive view. (Prov 3:2; 1 Chron 23:1; 1 Chron 29:28; Job 42:17; Ps 92:12-15)

Old age is an exceptional achievement and blessing. How we define “old age” has changed. In Roman times half the population died before 44.² Those who lived longer were regarded with awe; their age signified importance and divine favour. They died prosperous, of natural causes and sometimes in good health. (Deut 34:7; Gen 25:2-8; Gen 15:15; Ps 92)

Mortality is of the essence of being human. Psalm 90 tells us that ageing and death cannot be denied. Yet this is all in the hand of God. Our mortality is not outside God's purposes or contrary to them. The timing of it is another question and subject to all kinds of human influences.

*You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers. (Ps 90:3-6)*

Experience, old age and wisdom go together, yet are not to be assumed. Wisdom belongs with God. The wisdom of the aged can be challenged.

But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for discernment. It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that discern what is right. (Job 32:8-10)

The aged are both respected and valued, disrespected and exploited.

Respect for older people is commanded. (Lev 19:32; Ex 20) Where disrespect exists it is a sign of a corrupt generation. (Isa 3:5) Ruthlessness towards the aged is a sign of the extreme harshness of an enemy. (Deut 28:50; Isa 47:6; Lam 4:16)

3

Even victims of exploitation are bearers of God's promises.

The sons of Noah exploit their old, drunken father. (Gen 9) The daughters of Lot do the same. (Gen 19:30ff) Jacob, with his mother's assistance, manipulates his almost totally blind father into blessing him instead of Esau. (Gen 27) Nathan and Bathsheba exploit David's failing health and memory to establish Solomon as king. (1 Kings 1) The prophets condemn disregard for elderly parents. (Micah 7: 6) The elderly need protection. (Prov 19:26, Prov 28:24, Ex 20:12)

As bearers of God's promises the very old had, in the age of the patriarchs, some key roles in the salvation history. Noah was reported to be 500 when he became a father. Terah was 75 when he became the father of Abram. Abram was 99 when he received a covenant promise from God that his descendants would be "as numberless as the sands on the seashore". (Gen 17) Sara "bore a son when she was very old". (Gen 21) The prophet Isaiah was an adult before he was called to prophesy for 60 years.

What about the New Testament?

The New Testament writers deem older people worthy of honour, respect and special care. Failure to provide for older family members is condemned. (1 Tim 5:8; Mark 7:9-13)

Older people are to be models of faith, exercising reverence and self-control (Tit 2:2-5). They are to show leadership in teaching and counselling and may have a vocation to face death or martyrdom without seeing God's promises fulfilled. (Heb 11)

The older characters in Luke's infancy narratives also exemplify long-suffering faithfulness. They signal the possibility of unimagined fruitfulness in old age. Zechariah and Elizabeth and later, Nicodemus, demonstrate the opportunities of change in later life. To trust in God means being open to the future. Peter quotes Joel 2:28 in his sermon in Acts 2:17 "your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams".

"...It never seems to occur to the New Testament authors to characterise the ageing process as an evil to be overcome. Thus...an alternative vision in which the modern, popular view of ageing as a "problem" might appear puzzling and unhealthy."³

4 Our starting points need to recognise both continuity and discontinuity with the Biblical themes. "Old age" seems to be relative to a degree to the times and circumstances in which we live. Length of years is far from unusual today; the possibilities for enjoyment and leisure in old age are far greater for a greater number. "Honour your father and your mother so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" has an enduring force. (Ex 20:12)

ONE

Bring on the baby boomers?

"Baby boomer is a very ordinary name for the generation who shaped the last three decades of the millennium, but the baby boomers don't care. They changed the world and they changed it back again. They invented life as we know it. They gave us jogging, MBAs, rock music, cholesterol, scepticism, latte, divorce, silicon chips and counselling. John Lennon was wrong in the song: it wasn't all we were saying, not by a long shot. Giving peace a chance never quite worked, either – not even the baby boomers can do everything. But they're not baulking at the last hurdle – old age.

The boomers can't bring themselves to mention the words. Old age is what their parents had. The baby boomers are going to invent something all their own."

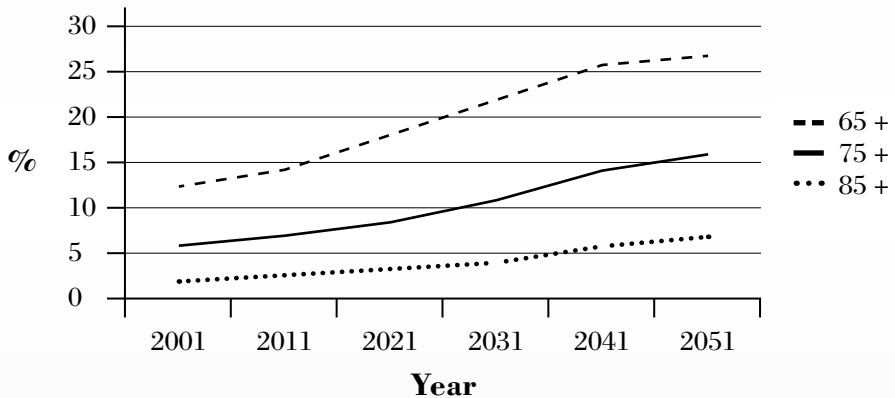
Bruce Ansley, NZ Listener 17-11-2006.

New Zealand baby boomers born between 1946 and 1971 are about to become the 21st century's "pension boomers"⁴. Census 2006 reports 495,600 people aged 65 years and over living in New Zealand. The baby boom bulge stretches this to 800,000 by 2023 and one million by 2030. The bulge smooths off at around 1.2 million towards the middle of the century (Fig 1). The rate of stretch accelerates after 2011 as the oldest members of the post-war baby boom generation turn 65.

People aged 65+ currently make up 12 percent of the population. By 2023 they will comprise 18 percent rising to 26 percent by mid-century. Over 85 year olds will then have increased in number by 600 percent from 1996. As the number of people living alone increases, older people will also grow as a proportion of all householders, from around 20 percent in 2001 to 36 percent by 2051.⁵

This is a global phenomenon. In 1950, 13 million people in the world reached 80 or more. In 1990 there were 50 million. By 2025 it's expected to be 137 million. But will these Boomers settle for a pension and a leisured and declining old age?

Projected Population 65+ 2001-2051



Source: Statistics NZ

Talking points:

How will the baby boomer generation's expectations of old age differ from their parents?

People over 65 are all different! Statistics can make it appear that we are talking about a homogeneous group of people when nothing can be further from the truth. What are some of the ways that we express individuality? How do we prepare for a surge in the population of older people, knowing that it is people, not numbers, that we are truly considering?

What are the opportunities for and threats to an older community?

We're living longer and healthier

Death rates are falling. In 1940 life expectancy for a (non-Maori) woman was around 70 years and for a man 65. Today there's a one in 50 chance of a newborn girl reaching 100 and one in 200 for newborn boys. Life expectancy differences between Maori and non-Maori are narrowing. We've all got a longer life expectancy.

Older Maori, Pacific and Asian groups

All three have much lower percentages of the population over 65. All are rising as life expectancy extends and as migrants age in this country. The number and proportion of older Maori is projected to increase over the next three decades. Few of the segregated elderly accommodation options are attractive to their traditional extended family cultures. Some kaumatua housing groups on Marae have been developed. Localised efforts to upgrade older people's own housing in remote Maori communities have been very successful. What will happen if the "look after number one" ideals of urban, western, culture impact on their family groups?

Talking points:

We will most likely live longer than our parents did. What expectations do we have for our "added years"?

Is the breakdown of traditional extended families inevitable in Maori and Pacific communities?

6

Dependency and the future

In 2002 there were 18 people over 65 for every 100 employed, working age person (15-64). By 2011 this will be 25, rising to 45 per 100 in 2031. At present each person between 45 and 64 not working is matched by one person over 75 potentially needing some care. By 2031 it is estimated there will be two people needing care for every person able to give it. Some point to the positive effect of a baby blip in the 1990's.⁶ The blip babies' impact will improve the supply of people in the workforce to look after Boomers; that's if we can keep them in New Zealand. It's difficult now to recruit and retain people in support roles. What will it be like in another 20 years?

Talking points:

What effects might these changes have on private and public superannuation schemes, the availability of volunteers and the availability of unpaid carers?

What other social changes could affect the availability of unpaid family carers?

What sort of a role can the local church play in providing programmes or services specifically targeted to the older people in its community?

Government response to these predictions

The Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Senior Citizens 2002⁷ picks up all these points, highlighting the fact that older people are a diverse population. They share common concerns about health and current and future access to health and other social services. In New Zealand and internationally, future policies are shaped around catch phrases like “Positive Ageing”⁸ and “Ageing in Place”.⁹

Talking points:

Faced with these pressures, do you think it likely that health services for older people will become less accessible in the future? What does this say about the role of older people in our communities?

Look at Isaiah 3:5 – what sort of a society does it depict? To what extent is the way we treat our older people an indication of the value we accord them?

Speaking faithfully

Rev Dr Graham Redding – Principal, Knox Centre of Ministry and Leadership reflects on ageing

As people age they have to come to terms not only with physical and mental frailty but also with isolation, loneliness and a loss of autonomy. Movement into a retirement home can bring much needed care, but also a sense of displacement.

- Old people are often treated more as objects – recipients of care and sympathy – than persons in their own right.
- Awareness of mortality and proximity of death can trigger a variety of responses. It can form an impediment to the formation of friendships.

Ps 90:10 “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we fly away.”

- In the midst of the above realities, a key affirmation can be drawn from the writings of the Apostle Paul and in particular his repeated reference to being “in Christ.” 2 Cor 5:17 “So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”
- We understand ourselves best as human beings not simply in terms of who we are – a product of our biological processes – but rather as we are, or as we are becoming, in Christ. Thus, our humanity is in the process of transformation. Our true life is hidden with God in Christ. Therefore, even within the limits of our biology and in the proximity of death, we are able to affirm an open future. God is not yet finished with us! Gal 3:27-28

TWO

You're as old as you feel - attitudes and aptitudes

“What kind of life lies ahead for the new group of long lived global citizens? The answer is not simple, for the lives of older people, even in the industrialised countries, are far from satisfactory. In these relatively prosperous lands, older people face poverty, age prejudice, depression, loneliness, abuse and the waste of their talents and labour.... People over the age of 60 came to be defined as “old”, decrepit and unfit for work. Experts, scientists, reformers, employers and clergy all played a part in this process of social redefinition. In factories and offices employers began laying people off in their 40's and 50's. By 1890 a quarter of all people over 65 had been reduced to destitution....”¹⁰

First the bad news

8

It appears that the modern concept of old age is relatively recent. Until the 19th century most people worked until they died. The industrial revolution changed that and by the 1880s people over 60 came to be seen as “inefficient, unproductive, sick and even demented.”¹¹ New Zealand introduced pension support in 1898 for people over 65 “setting in motion the idea that old was 65 years.”¹² The medical profession played its part. “Old age (beginning at 50) was one of the five natural divisions of human development and decay”.¹³ Biological ageing “inevitably led to dementia”. Strangely these views resulted in ageing being seen as an irreversible condition unworthy of research or treatment. They would be astonished at the nips, tucks, pills, potions and botox used with great confidence today to delay the effects of ageing.

While it's easy in hindsight to judge previous ages, it must be said that the Church in the 19th century also saw old age as a time for preparation for death and salvation. Church “Rest” homes usually imposed a life of asceticism, prayer and celibacy, frequently separating husbands and wives. “By...defining pity and charity as the appropriate responses to the elderly the church sanctified and reinforced the movement which severed older persons from their accustomed life and labour and forced them into a state of indigent dependence.”¹⁴

We (at least 50 percent of us) laugh now at views like those of Prof William Osler of John Hopkins University in 1905. As a leading physician he lectured in the US about the “loss of mental elasticity which makes men over 40 slow to receive new truths” and “the comparative useless-ness of people over 40 and the entire dispensability of people over 60”. (see note 10)

Talking points:

To what extent do these 19th century perceptions still hang around, influencing attitudes in the 21st century?

What are the differences between ageist prejudices and discriminations between the 1880s and now?

How appropriate now is 65 as the age at which people are labelled “old”?

Throughout the Bible we are shown that advanced years are no barrier to serving God. Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5ff), Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38) are examples that suggest “radical openness to the redeeming power of God (that) may be found among elders ...” (Growing Old in Christ, see further readings). Psalm 92:14 talks of older people still “producing fruit”.

How then, do these passages sit with a societal view of older people as dependent and “past their use-by date”?

A continuum: prejudice – discrimination – abuse?

The late 20th century focussed attention on acute forms of ageism as Elder Abuse.

It's not difficult to see the roots of some 21st century attitudes and behaviours. Age Concern NZ¹⁵ points to a variety of cultural and socio-economic factors that may affect the risk of elder abuse. They include:

- the depiction of older people as frail, weak and dependent
- erosion of the bonds between generations of a family
- restructuring of the basic support networks for the elderly
- systems of inheritance and land rights, affecting the distribution of power and material goods within families
- migration of young couples to other areas, leaving elderly parents alone, in societies where older people were traditionally cared for by their offspring.

“Elder abuse occurs when a person aged 65 years or more experiences harmful physical, psychological, sexual, material or social effects caused by the behaviour of another person with whom they have a relationship implying trust”¹⁶

An ancient yet modern parable?

Kenneth Bailey¹⁷ invites us to look very closely at the first three verses in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15: 11-32.

- For the son to ask “give me the share of the property that will come to me” was to say to his father, “I wish you were dead!”
- The two sons appear to be conspiring against their father at this point. The younger son could not inherit before the elder or without his consent. “He divided the property between them”. Later he says to him “All that I have is yours!” How true.

These two sons conspired to offer the ultimate insult to their father, “we don’t want you, we just want your money”. That form of elder abuse seems to have happened for thousands of years.

Talking points:

What other examples appear in the Bible of families deceiving or defrauding parents?

What images of old age are seen in the father who waits for his son to return?

10

Work, work and more work!

The modern magic silver bullet that solves all social ills?

Many books and articles are appearing about work as the baby boomer answer to both personal and collective issues of an ageing community. Everybody work longer! We’ve come through a period when older workers were encouraged to take their money and run, making space for the youngsters – baby boomers all. Now the pendulum swings. Yet myths still persist about the abilities and attributes of older workers:¹⁸

- as workers age their abilities and performance decline
- older workers are more expensive to employ
- older workers cannot adapt to new technology, are less healthy, less physically able and have less energy for the job
- older workers lack innovation and creativity, are less willing to train and present a lower return on training investment than younger employees.

These stereotypes are now challenged by research and the baby boomers. Whether leisure in your 70s will be regarded as “sinful” is another question. What of those who aren’t well enough for work? Much work is repetitive and boring. A few people are lucky enough to be paid for doing what they love. Should they be careful about prescribing their choices for others not so fortunate?

Talking points:

How can the Church promote positive views of ministry with older members of congregations?

A Moderator of the General Assembly a few years ago was scornful of ministers who were becoming “chaplains to the elderly”. He had a point, but are we too dismissive of the gifts and graces of the energies of the elderly?

And so to the good (?) news

Science and medicine cannot confidently distinguish ageing as biology from ageing as a socially determined process. None of the physical changes (except women’s reproduction) happen predictably at a given age or in a set range of years. “The infirmities associated with long life are only averages, not destiny”.¹⁹

Social policies that propose special benefits and concessions for the elderly are often promoting age segregation. Should we ask why this is necessary or the best way forward? Securing adequate income and health access for all ages might be more useful.

Discrimination in the work place is being challenged. Studies reach the same conclusion – the productivity of older workers compares favourably with that of younger workers. Using age alone as a predictor of productivity is, quite simply, discrimination.

Work force participation of people over 65 is increasing for both men and women. Phased retirement is becoming more acceptable to both employers and employees. People aged 60-64 have had the fastest rise in income (up 59 percent) in recent years. “This is simply because they’re working for it,” says Age Concern.

11

Redefining “Old Age”

- 55-60 pre-retirement;
- 60-65 early retirement;
- 65-70 mid (or second) - retirement;
- 70-75 late retirement,
- 75-80 early old age,
- 80-85 middle old age,
- 85-90+ old old age.



THREE

Who Wants To Be 100?

“Freda Bream wrote an article in the New Zealand Herald in 1991. She acknowledged that many people (in her retirement village) have not regretted the move, but while there were positive aspects on a practical level, there was much she hadn’t anticipated. She writes of missing contact with other age groups – the girl next door, the man across the road, the people in local shops. The reality of mixing with those in the village was constant exposure and reminders of the health changes in ageing. “I find myself soaking in a pool of unhappiness. Life becomes increasingly sad as you age.” She questioned whether relieving older people of physical work, mental strain and decision-making is a good idea and suggested that people should think about such things when planning for their future.

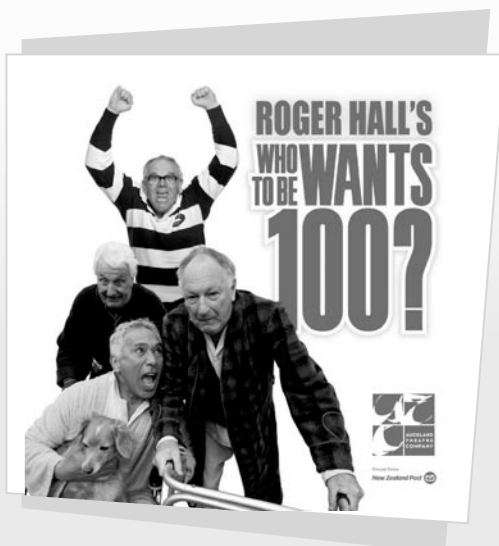
Everyone’s circumstances are different. A woman in her mid-70s whose husband died very suddenly struggled on alone with a large home for four years. She became depressed, anxious and very isolated. When I met her recently in a retirement village she had been transformed.” (Anne Millar, *Growing in Age*)

12

Roger Hall’s play “Who Wants to Be 100?” shines a light on the lives of four characters in a rest home. They experience some of the issues that affect, to a greater or lesser degree, the five people in 100 over 65 who live in a rest home or hospital. The play questions whether anyone would want to live to be 100 and find themselves in a rest home. Positive policies of supporting people to stay in their own homes and communities are designed so that the baby boom bulge doesn’t inflate this 5 percent. Meantime for the other 95 percent there are some complex lifestyle questions to be faced as life extends.

Where shall we live?

For reasons of philosophy and finance the Presbyterian social service arm, Presbyterian Support, has, in three regions out of seven, exited rest home and hospital care. All regions have been building their capacity to provide alternative community based support for the elderly in their own homes.



Eighty-nine percent of respondents in a housing survey recently undertaken in Nelson and Dunedin emphatically preferred their own homes in the community as the place to see out their retirement years.²⁰ Many had already downsized to retirement units. A few had moved to a retirement village. Warmer climates, access to health services, friendships and family are major considerations for the younger retired; security and services becoming more important in later years. Adverse change to their health was the only circumstance in which a shift was conceivable.

The range and quality of accommodation options varies from region to region. For the 95 percent of older people who won't be living in a rest home; it's either the old family home, a purpose built unit in the community, a retirement village, council or state housing, an apartment or a flat. Forty-two retirement villages are listed in the Auckland Yellow Pages.

In some parts of the country the age of the housing stock adversely affects maintenance and heating costs and makes "ageing in place" a more difficult option.

The tried and true formula of selling the family home and buying something smaller for retirement is also problematic. The gap between the sale price of the old home and a purpose built replacement has widened.

What can we afford?

By world standards New Zealanders over 65 are not poor. We have the lowest pensioner poverty ranking of 30 OECD countries. ("Poor" is defined as income less than 50 percent of median income. New Zealand Super is set at 66 percent.) Yet Age Concern NZ reports "many older people living in poverty". Only 40 percent have incomes over \$20,000 a year.²¹ A small but growing number of people over 65 visit food banks. The gap in income between the lowest and highest 20 percent of older people is increasing.

13

Will the baby boomers, have more, want more, need more?

People aged 55 to 59 are the peak age group for New Zealand's net worth; people over 45 control 71 percent of the country's wealth. How will this serve the community in the future? Alarmists claim that we will not be able to afford to maintain NZ Super at current rates as the dependency ratio climbs. Others remind us that what is "affordable" varies in the political and economic circumstances of each era. We "afford" what is most important to us at the time. In 2000, New Zealand was in the lowest 20 percent of OECD countries in the proportion of GDP spent on pensions, in relation to the percent of population over 65.

Observers also point out positive and negative impacts of incentivised savings schemes such as Kiwisaver. In other countries compulsory, or "soft compulsory" schemes have, it is claimed, reduced political commitment to a guaranteed retirement income. This may not be a direct cause and effect relationship but will be worth watching. Australia has better provisions for young families but is in the top 16 percent of elder poverty. Is that what we want? Despite this, some people manage to live (and even save) with NZ Super as their only income.

Additional income means additional choices in a range of lifestyle, residence, healthcare, travel and investment options. “Skiing” holidays can take on a new meaning as the younger retired see their baby boom kids “well fixed”. “Why not ‘Spend the Kids’ Inheritance (SKI)?” they ask. Others still see inheritance as a right and responsibility, particularly as the generations burdened with student loans struggle to get a financial foothold. Will future generations need the wealth transfer more than the boomers?

Needs and fairness

One of the most contentious areas for citizens and policy makers lies in the area of the question of fairness of access to Government support in old age. Asset testing (i.e. pay your way until your last \$170,000) as a means of “targeting” assistance to the greatest need seems fair. Why should I pay for your parents’ care so that you can inherit? Asset testing has been unpopular for those with assets and introduces some complicated calculations about accommodation and care. The Government has moved the bar to \$170,000, rising \$10,000 in each future year, but some serious anomalies remain.

Take Mary for example. She has \$300,000, having sold her home and entered full residential care in “Happy Hollows”. She receives New Zealand Super and will pay the full cost of her care until she has \$170,000 left. Don has the same level of assets (including his home) and the same needs but has been given the option to remain in his own home with a package of domestic and personal support services. The cost to him for his support will be \$600 a week less than Mary’s. Is this fair? ²²

14

Talking points:

Much modern discussion about retirement income is about ‘me and mine’ rather than we and ours.

It has been said, “economics is the left hand of God”. What perspectives should the churches be offering to inform and stimulate public debate about retirement incomes? Would it be fairer for everyone to be responsible for their chosen accommodation costs and receive Government support for their necessary levels of care?

What is the ‘dignity’²³ of old age?

The sharpness of this question is highlighted in Roger Hall’s play, “Who Wants to Be 100?” The threats to dignity are well drawn in the lives of four rest home occupants. Carers, some members of their families, physical and mental limitations, the inexorable march towards death, all challenge “dignity”. That is if human dignity only comes from our genes, appearance, achievements, status, mental sharpness, wealth or relationships.

The Bible regards our dignity as indelibly conferred upon all human life by God in creation. Life is intended for relationship with God, with each other and with the whole created order. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). It is expressed in the phrase “in the image of God” who has made us for relationship with God. This reflection is seen most clearly in the risen Christ into whose likeness we are being recreated. Faith makes us aware of ourselves as called by a gracious God into relationships, responsive and responsible all our lives.

Books about ageing tend to fall into various categories. Some are fixated on health, fitness, food, appearance and self-esteem. Others see it as a time of financial jeopardy for which one must make elaborate fail-safe or prudent plans. “You’ll always need more than you think”. Others write about how to fill all the new “leisure” hours, with education, work, new activities and travel. To someone on the cusp of retiring they are often worthy, sometimes frightening and occasionally reassuring.

When you talk to people about “the dignity of old age”, they speak about the importance of the following (written here in no particular order):

- To adapt to changes in our lives with grace, acceptance and the occasional protest
- Being able to choose the way I live my life
- To have our wishes about complex choices heard, respected and if necessary challenged in a way that leads to robust decisions
- To be seen and treated until our dying breath as loved children of God
- To live without the added needs of age interfering with or destroying valued loving relationships.

Most people succeed in the second. Not everyone succeeds in the fifth. Any lawyer, minister or doctor can tell stories of the consequences of failure in this regard. Being too well looked after can often make the first very difficult.

The dignity conferred upon us by a gracious God derives from the fact that God loves us, demonstrably, graciously, eternally.

Talking points:

What would you add to the list above? In what order of importance would you rank these things?

Suggestions for further action and reflection – Revs Dr Graham Redding and Rev Dennis Povey

We list the following things that prise open our lives and keep them open to new possibilities. How should the church be further enhancing these?

- Friendship – across generations and among the elderly - not just for the sake of the individual but also for the building of community.
- Faith – there are numerous biblical examples of God calling elderly people to greater faithfulness and surprising acts of discipleship.
- Family – not just those to whom we are related by birth, but through the family of faith. Linked to this reality is the concept of the communion of saints.
- The significance of our faith stories/narratives/memories – not merely those of our individual lives, but those which under-gird all our lives, infusing them with hope. Sometimes our personal memories and stories are in need of healing and we need to be encouraged to deal with things we may have hidden for many years. We’re talking here about a journey towards integration.
- The importance of facing our mortality rather than avoiding it. The elderly can teach the young how to die well. In so doing, the sting of death is removed.
- The importance of being rather than doing.
- 16 ● The seamlessness of justice. It is for the old and the young, the fit and the frail. Provisions once made with generosity tend to wither with time and some become invisible in their forbearance.
- Advocacy – with the withdrawal of Presbyterian Support from residential aged care in some regions, the Presbyterian contribution to standards of residential care has been diluted. Another voice may need to be found through local churches. Visitors can advocate personally for better respect for residents in rest homes and hospitals where dignity is seriously compromised. Families are often hesitant to complain. It is a delicate area but should we avoid it as too hard? Getting to know and being seen around facilities predominantly for the elderly can help reduce their “ghettoisation”. Sometimes the life seems so complete within the walls. that people get forgotten.
- Check pastoral lists. Often people - particularly women who were very active in congregations - get forgotten with a change of minister or elder and just disappear as a name on a list.

Notes

- ^{1,2 and 3} Hauerwas et al. 2003, Growing Old in Christ, Chapter 1.
- ⁴ Colin James's NZ Herald column for 12 June 2007.
- ⁵ Older New Zealanders – 65 and beyond (2004), Statistics New Zealand
- ⁶ Prof Ian Pool (17 November 2006) as quoted by Bruce Ansley, NZ Listener.
- ⁷ Towards Lifelong Participation and Independence, 2003. Ministry of Senior Citizens, New Zealand
- ⁸ The Positive Ageing Strategy, (2001). Ministry of Senior Citizens, New Zealand
- ⁹ "Ageing in Place" has gone out of fashion. This phrase and its replacements all mean "Developing services that support older people to live in the community", Health of Older People Strategy 2002, p78
- ¹⁰ As quoted in Humanity Comes of Age, (1994) Geneva, WCC pp 10-22
- ¹¹ See note 10
- ¹² Millar, A. Growing in Age (2001), Christchurch, Philip Garside Publishing
- ^{13, 14} See note 10
- ¹⁵ Fact Sheet - http://www.agewell.org.nz/elder_abuse_and_neglect.htm
- ¹⁶ Bailey A, Koopman Boyden P, Michel J et al (1992) Promoting the Rights and Well-being of Older People and Those Who Care for Them, Wellington New Zealand
- ¹⁷ Bailey Kenneth E, (1976) Poet and Peasant, Eerdmans.
- ¹⁸ See Note 10
- ¹⁹ Davey, J A (2007). Maximising the Potential of Older Workers. Update to 2007
Wellington, VUW: NZ Institute For Research on Ageing
- ²⁰ Povey, DM and U Harris (2007). With My Boots On! A Study of Older People's Housing and Preferences Dunedin and Nelson 2006. Dunedin, Presbyterian Support Otago.
- ²¹ Fact Sheet see note 15
- ²² Pre feasibility Study On Aged Care Options and Impacts, (2006), BERL, Wellington.
- ²³ Concise Oxford Dictionary, "true worth, esteem, respect due, excellence"

For further Reading

Growing in Age (2001), Christchurch, Philip Garside Publishing
Growing Old in Christ (2003), edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Stoneking, Keith Meador and David Cloutier. Eerdmans.
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