

**COUNCIL OF CHRISTIAN AND JEWS WA**

**AM I MY BROTHER'S  
KEEPER? ... AND SISTER'S?**

**Jewish and Christian  
Perspectives on Aged Care**

**What can Christians and Jews learn from each other with  
respect to restoring and maintaining human dignity?**

**14 June 2011**

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## INTRODUCTION

Back in 1988, Rachel Dulin wrote in her book *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging?* that society – including the Church – shunts its social responsibilities with respect to older persons.<sup>1</sup> She posited that we “turn to the government authorities to do the job that we, as individuals, fail to do” and as such overlook the cries for help of a group she claimed were in a constant economic and social decline<sup>2</sup> Her pessimism about attitudes towards, and treatment of, older persons was shared by others for quite some years afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

So are we doing any better in 2011? I’m sure most of you are aware that we are an ageing population. In practical terms in Australia, this means – and these figures are from the latest ABS:

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that the number of persons aged 65+ will rise from

**14.7% in 2011 to 19.0% in 2021**

to **23.0% in 2031**

up to **24.5% in 2036**<sup>4</sup>

Now we could go past 2036 but probably by then most of us would have lost interest!

It is anticipated the biggest increase will occur around now – 2011-2012 – when the peak of the baby boom generation reaches retirement age.

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The most rapidly increasing age group is expected to be the 80+ year olds. The projection is that figure will rise from 4.1% of the over 65 population in 2011 – to 8.1% in 2036.<sup>5</sup>

To note, but not elaborate upon, in Western Australia the life expectancy for non indigenous men has increased from approximately 54 years in 1991 to 77 in 2005, and from approximately 60 years to 83 years for women.

What is particularly significant about these figures is that according to the most recent Australian statistics, **only 7% of persons over 65 reside in aged care homes.**<sup>6</sup> As we know, people are being encouraged and supported to stay in their own home for as long as possible with the provision of all kinds of home help and care.

So all this presents a challenge for many sectors of society. This includes the Christian Church and other faith/religious organisations. But my perspective tonight is from that of the Christian Church. Which too must be asking how we respond somehow to at least some of the 93% of older persons who are in independent dwellings. A notable fact that came out of my Masters thesis was parishes had very little contact with older persons who were housebound or significantly housebound so

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Dulin, *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 108.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Laurence J. McNamara, “Theological Perspectives on Ageing and Mental Health”, *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 13, No. 3-4 (2002) 3; John Painter, “Outward Decay and Inward Renewal: A Biblical Perspective on Aging and the Image of God”, *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 12, No.3-4 (2001) 44. Similarly Dulin – “useless and cast off” (Dulin, op.cit., 109).

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, 2004, Previous ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 15/06/2004, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/27C5532C626FF114CA256EA20015C008?opendocument#> (accessed 7 June 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Number of contributing factors to this increased longevity throughout the western world, including Australia. The most significant of these factors are the benefits of modern technology and medicine, and a healthier lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> There is also a significant decline in birth rates which, combined with greater longevity, will increasingly affect the age distribution of western populations. For example, 2005 statistics in Western Australia revealed that “the current birth rate of thirteen babies for every 1,000 people ... is a third of that reported at the turn of the century” (<sup>5</sup> Health Department of Western Australia, “Population Health in Perspective in Western Australia”, 14 January 2005, <http://www.health.wa.gov.au/publications/documents/HO8.pdf>, 2 (accessed 19 August 2005). Nationally the rate has been falling quite rapidly since 1961. Back then the average number of children a woman would bear over her lifetime was 3.6 – by 1979 that had dropped to 1.9. In 2001 it reached the lowest on record 1.73 children per woman. It had increased slightly to 1.77 in 2004.

<sup>6</sup> ABS, 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, 2005, 12/07/2005, *Housing Arrangements: Housing for Older Australians*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/4FE57DB85B46D6CFCA25703B0080CCCC?opendocument> (accessed 7 September 2007).

there is work to do.<sup>7</sup>

Many who have an interest in religion and gerontology are turning to the New Testament to explore how the early Christian society may influence contemporary society in this regard. I would therefore like to look at some of the NT to garner some perspectives towards ageing in that time.

One particular and significant insight we can take from the NT is how older persons were valued right through their later years. There are many examples in the NT of older persons still contributing to the life of the Church. And in fact they were strongly encouraged to continue to share their wisdom and experience in their later years, thus remaining an integral part of Church life. For example:

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1 Timothy 5:1-5, 9-10:

1 Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, 2 to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. 3 Honor widows who are really widows. 4 If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. 5 The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; 9 Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; 10 she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

Just having a closer – although not exhaustive – look at this passage. V.1 – there is debate amongst scholars as to the whether “older man” – Greek *presbuteros* – means both an older man and an elder. Just prior (4:14), the writer does refer to the “council of elders”, and later gives instructions to “elders who rule well” (5:17-22). So it could be argued the reference here implies older men who were elders, and thus leaders. Elsewhere though, it is not implied that older men were necessarily elders (Titus 2:2). However, most importantly about all this is that that older men were valued as spiritual leaders because of their many years of learning and as such were called upon to retain a strong teaching role and be exemplars of faith and Christian living.

In v.2 – the respect and honour due to older women – *presbuterai* – is emphasised by comparing them with mothers, who were highly esteemed in the ancient world. Whether women per se were is another question.

The word honour in v.3 is interpreted variously. Some are convinced that “honour” (*tima*) in this context is an instruction to pay the widows for carrying out their specific tasks, thus affording them respect worthy of other recognised positions such as bishops, deacons and elders (cf elders in v.17).<sup>8</sup> Others suggest “honour” here may imply “a special seat in the meetings and rank in the Church hierarchy” as later became possible.<sup>9</sup> Whilst for still others “honour” means nothing more than showing respect “as you would (to) your grandmother”.<sup>10</sup> I suggest what can best be concluded is that there were indeed widows who were supported by the Church, but that some widows may well have received monetary compensation for ministry, thus demonstrating an active role by older women that was recognised and valued.

<sup>7</sup> “People in some kind of organised religion or alternative spirituality ... are happier, more optimistic and more generous than atheists” – and – “Religion and spirituality appear to provide some anchors in life”, Melissa Kent, “Be Spiritual, Be Happy”, *The West Australian*, Wednesday December 15, 2004, 48. Similarly, studies quoted by Ross Larson conclude that a “positive spirituality, good attitude, and good health all go hand in hand” (Ross Henry Larson, “Ageing in the Twenty-First Century”, *The Clergy Journal*, 75, No.5 (March 1999), 32).

<sup>8</sup> Later spiritual writers such as Origen (c 185-254) and Clement (late first century) align widows with bishops, presbyters and deacons (Charlotte Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 90, No.3 (1997) 295).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)*. Also Anthony T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1982) 100.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 120. Also Bassler who expresses doubt over whether the widows did in fact perform particular duties in return for financial aid (Jouette M. Bassler, “The Widows’ Tale: A Fresh Look At 1 Tim 5:3-16, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103, No. 1 (1984) 40 F/n 61).

And v.4 appears to reinforce the expectation that children took responsibility for their ageing parents in gratitude for the parents care of them. Whether it was an attempt to ensure families did their bit to free up the Church to help those in more desperate need we can't be sure. But there was clearly an expectation family and extended family contributed to the care of older persons.

It is not very relevant to this discussion to debate whether "real widows" in v.5 are synonymous with "enrolled" widows of v.9. What this verse does – is imply one of the important duties of "real" widows. That is, they are to pray unceasingly. It is true this is the duty of all Christians, but the passage makes clear it is an important part of the older widows' role in the Church community. This directive in 1 Timothy 5:5 also implies the widows' total dependence upon God, and therefore a strong faith (cf Sirach 35:14, 17).

It has been argued that prayer ministry was emphasised for these widows because being 60 years and over – as mentioned in v.9 –

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meant their physical contribution was probably becoming more limited. That may be so in part, but evidence also suggests that these older ("real") widows were major participants in weekday community worship and that they engaged in pastoral and benevolent visitation. The latter particularly is alluded to by the comparison to the younger widows who we are told, in v.13, were purportedly "gadding about from house to house". In other words, the purpose of the older widows visitation was the antithesis of "gadding about", thus implying a more intentional and purposeful pastoral visit (ie active ministry).

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Titus 2:2-3:

Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance. Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good...

A quick look at a few other passages. There is actually some evidence of conflict between Jesus and elders – older persons – and officials of the Church (Matthew 16:21, 26:3, 27:41; Mark 8:31, 11:27, 14:43, 53, 15:1; Luke 9:22, 20:1). However, this conflict generally centred around those who rejected Jesus' teachings. The book of Acts similarly records difficulties with elders who continue to oppose the Christian faith (Acts 4:5; 6:12; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15). However, Acts also records positive relationships between Jesus' disciples and religious elders (11:30; 14:23; 20:17). And other NT passages give older persons prominence. For example, in Luke's Gospel (1:18) the ageing Elizabeth and Zechariah are chosen for a significant role – ie parenting John the Baptist. Luke tells of the devout and righteous ageing Simeon (2:25-35) – and of the very pious and elderly prophet Anna (2:36-38). Mark (12:42-43) and Luke (21:1-4) tell of a poor widow who still contributed financially to the synagogue "treasury" despite her meagre means, thus symbolising quite unselfish generosity and her absolute trust in God and in God's provision for her. In Acts, the older widow and disciple Tabitha (9:36) was devoted to "good works and acts of charity". In Romans (4:1-22) the elderly Abraham is referred to as a model of faith, and in James (2:21) a model of good works. In Chapter 11 of Hebrews exemplars of faith are listed, all of whom are elderly.<sup>11</sup> And so evidence does not support Jesus or his followers attempting to reject elders per se. Any tensions with specific older persons were seemingly over the latter's desire to rid society of the Christian faith and retain some of the old traditions that Jesus was wanting to change.

So with these – and other examples not mentioned – I believe that overall the NT presents a picture of older persons who were valued by the Church because of their deep and mature spirituality and

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<sup>11</sup> Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob and Joseph.

many years of experience and wisdom. Further, there is little suggestion that any older person, whether an old man or woman, an elder, or a real/enrolled widow were expected to relinquish their contribution to the Church and society because of age. I think the available texts demonstrate that the intention was always to promote honour, respect and care towards older persons and to reinforce their religious and social value.

So...can Christians and the Christian Church corporate – be our older brothers’ and sisters’ keepers in contemporary society? Can we still elicit guidance from the NT to help us in our quest to ensure older persons are treated with love, respect and dignity?

I would say yes to both – but with qualifications.

Let me explain myself with a couple of examples.

Firstly, according to gerontologist Warren Carter, we live in a “sandwich generation” where the NT mandate of children caring for older parents (eg 1 Timothy 5:8) is seen as inconvenient because of “busy schedules, career goals, the quest for personal fulfilment, and the celebration of individual freedom”.<sup>12</sup> I would add that often in the family household today both the husband and wife are in paid employment – sometimes with split shifts so they are rarely home together. This, combined with family and domestic responsibilities, leaves little time to care for ageing parents.<sup>13</sup> This includes just sitting chatting, reading or providing transport – including to Church.<sup>14</sup> Further, employment takes people to all places of the earth, and so many older persons have no family at all to care for them.

Another scholar has written of the “club sandwich generation” – meaning the children who are caring for older parents are themselves living longer than in the past – resulting in several generations living long enough to need care simultaneously.<sup>15</sup>

This new family dynamic exacerbates isolation and loneliness for older persons.

Obviously – this issue is not specifically addressed in the NT. However, I believe the NT mandate of filial responsibility and care towards older parents and other ageing relatives remains a commendable guide for contemporary society. It perhaps just needs to be expanded a little to include the Church to ensure those without relatives able to care for them are not spiritually and pastorally neglected.<sup>16</sup> This is not to abdicate total responsibility from the children to the Church or other organisations, but rather is to respond to the society that has been created in the 21<sup>st</sup> century whereby more people are living to a “ripe old age”. And given only approximately 7% of older persons – ie 65 years and over – reside in Nursing Homes,<sup>17</sup> the Church does have some responsibility to find ways of ministering to those who may still be in their own homes but who are not able to be as active as they once were.

One of the things I argued in my thesis was to create a sense of ministry to and by older persons

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so that older persons aren’t always the recipient of ministry. If the Church can provide ministry

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<sup>12</sup> Warren Carter, “Adult children and elderly parents: the worlds of the New Testament, *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 12, No.2 (2001) 57.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 153.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Also Drew Leder, “We Should Help Our Elders Age Gracefully”, *U.S. Catholic* 60, No.4 (April 1995), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Sapp, “To Learn, To Teach, To Care: Gerontology As It Should Be Practiced – A Tribute to Barbara Pittard Payne Stancil”, in Derrel Watkins (ed), *Practical Theology for Aging* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2003), 12. Also Bianchi, op.cit., 153.

<sup>16</sup> Bianchi, op.cit., 170.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, op.cit., 323, Harris, op.cit., 108, and Elizabeth MacKinlay, “Spirituality and Ageing: Bringing Meaning to Life”, *St Mark’s Review* (Spring 1993) 27.

opportunities for older persons who wish to be involved – this can only enhance – or possibly even create – an older person’s sense of being valued and loved and still feel a sense of belonging. Which can then enhance their self esteem and dignity which is often eroded because of often negative attitudes towards ageing.

As Kathleen Fischer wrote in her book *Winter Grace* – if the Church has this attitude, older persons will no longer feel "objects of pity or duty" – or be recipients only of "sympathy and kindness". Instead, their need for "human recognition, welcome, and a sense of belonging" will be met.<sup>18</sup>

Some examples of how older persons can contribute to the life of a faith community:

- pray
- make phone calls – especially to other older persons (ministry to and by)
- write cards and letters on behalf the Parish – especially anniversary cards to acknowledge death, baptism, wedding and so on
- cut up stamps or soak them off envelopes – still needed
- fold leaflets/newsletters
- teach younger people to knit, sew, crochet

I am not advocating that one must still be active or able to contribute in order to be or feel valued. Rather, my comments are responding to the need of many older persons who still wish to contribute to, or be part of, a faith community.

My second example is how we – as a society and as a faith/religious organisation – respond to dementia sufferers. Whilst younger people do suffer from this illness, it does primarily affect older persons. If not full dementia – some memory loss.

From my experience some people are deterred from visiting older persons because they feel the latter may not remember the visit. Now whilst there are no references to dementia in the NT, what it does teach us – expressed quite articulately by gerontologist Therese Lysaught – is that:

*Like God's remembering of us, our presence to the elderly as we remember them sustains them (...the reality of the communion of saints situates the elderly as equal partners in the body of Christ, without the elderly, the church is not complete).*<sup>19</sup>

Another gerontologist, writes of the “the sacrament of the present moment”.<sup>20</sup> That is, older persons are very often aware of the present and every opportunity needs to be taken to encounter older persons within that time. Lysaught poignantly concludes that the issue is not whether older persons can remember, but that they are "actively and concretely" remembered, especially by the Church community.<sup>21</sup>

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We must never under-estimate the value of the present moment for older persons, particularly those whose cognitive abilities may have significantly deteriorated.

I have seen this time and time again in aged care homes where people are brought to Church in their big tub chairs and seemingly sleep through the service. However, there are a couple of places that will often evoke a response. One is when we start singing some of the old favourite hymns and you

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<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Fischer, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 72.

<sup>19</sup> M. Therese Lysaught, "Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering", in Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador and David Cloutier (eds), *Growing Old in Christ* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 295.

<sup>20</sup> Sidney Callahan, "Growing Gray with Grace: The Best is Yet to Be", *Commonweal* 121, No.10 (1994), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lysaught, op.cit., 301.

can see some of them start to respond. Or when I distribute Communion and suddenly they open their eyes – and their mouth – to receive. One lady currently in that situation has only a Blessing but when I bless her suddenly she wakes up and gives me the biggest smile imaginable. And praying the traditional form of the Lord's Prayer will also often bring a response.

A Revd Don Jamieson who works extensively with older persons with memory loss in Canberra – and has written about what he has learnt – says this about the value of the present moment:

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*When our journeys cross paths, and at times connect for some period of time, the value is that the person for whom we offer care, will then be able to connect with God in that crossing or connecting.*<sup>22</sup>

And if we have a fear about what to say when visiting older persons, one older person wrote:

*Visitors don't need to bring "things" – they just need to bring themselves. The "self" is everything.*<sup>23</sup>

One last point, there is teaching in the NT that although not specifically focussed on older persons, I believe nonetheless provides the basis for a paradigm for the treatment of, and attitudes towards, older persons today. And that is the teaching in the Epistles of the body of Christ (the Church) being made up of different parts, all of whom are members of that body. As such, that body is weaker for the exclusion of any part of it, each part has an integral part to play and all are invited to be participants in the Eucharistic community of the Christian faith (Romans 12:4-6; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12-25; Ephesians 3:6, 4:4, 16, 5:30; Colossians 2:19, 3:15). Thus I believe there is a timeless mandate to either include that which older persons can offer – even if that offering is one of a more passive type such as wisdom, prayer, love and support – or to provide spiritual care and support for those no longer able to give.

As Bianchi aptly warns:

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*..the social order itself, as well as the elder – ie older person – is impoverished by being deprived of the active participation of the old in the major concerns of the world.*<sup>24</sup>

And let us not forget the theological premise of the *Imago Dei*. Human beings are created in the image of God. That does not cease to be just because one ages and one may experience certain afflictions associated with ageing.

So yes, we the Christian Church – as a body and as individuals – are each other's keeper. Not in a suppressive or demeaning way. But in a way that is inclusive and life giving. We do have a role – a significant role – in enabling older persons to live with love and dignity.

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<sup>22</sup> Jamieson, D., *Walking With Forgotten People: Some aspects of pastoral care with Older People* (Canberra: Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies, 2004), p.15).

<sup>23</sup> Ellen Newton, *This Bed My Centre* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1979), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Bianchi, op.cit., 224.

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Julie has subsequently run a number of workshops in various aspects of ministry to and by older persons – both in the city and in the rural areas. Julie is currently Parish Priest at St Edward's Anglican Church Hilton.

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