

Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Aged Care

CCJWA members and friends gathered on the evening of Tuesday, 14 June 2011, at St Joseph's Upper Room in Subiaco to hear Ms Aviva Lipman from Maurice Zeffert Home, and Revd Julie Barrett-Lennard, speak on Jewish and Christian approaches to aged care. CCJWA Chairperson Charles Waddell introduced the event by reflecting on "Am I my brother's keeper?" from Hebrew scripture, and "Who is my neighbour?" from the Christian scripture, opening the question: How do we respectively take care of our weaker members? "Are we a 'me' generation who disparage the *Cinderellas* in our midst?"

Our first speaker, Ms Aviva Lipman, acknowledging input from Rabbi Solomon and Rabbi Apple, cited Leviticus 19, where we find that we should rise before the elderly out of respect, followed by Maimonides, who had this become a mitzvah: we should stand before the elderly in a manner to honour them. We should honour persons, not simply due to learning, but as worthy for their many years of life. In Psalm 71:9 we find "do not cast me off in my old age", and in Proverbs 20:29, that the glory of the young is their strength, the glory of the old, their age. In bygone times the elderly held social and political power; in our time we see them disempowered, as objects of 'welfare'.

Commenting on Maurice Zeffert Home, now celebrating its 50th anniversary, Ms Lipman drew our attention to the influence of Edna Luber-Smith. Taken aback by the scene of an elderly woman, who had kept kosher her whole life, being given a ham sandwich for dinner, Edna took it upon herself to change this so that others would not have to suffer this loss of religious freedom. Ms Lipman posed the problem of how we measure care. While the government makes high demands in terms of standards before a licence is issued to an aged care residence, it offers little financial help.

Maurice Zeffert Home's charter of 21 rights and 4 responsibilities may be summarized as a goal of serving the residents' dignity and self-determination. Residents are given choice over whether to take medication, whether to eat, and, via the 'advanced wish directive' (to ensure they are legally respected), are able to indicate the manner in which their last days will be lived, *but*, to honour a typically Jewish environment, the dining room offers kashrut alone. Overall, a holistic model is taken, which avoids medicalizing the residents, but is concerned with whether persons feel joyful and respected. A new program, "spark of life," has been implemented, which ensures a haimish environment, and celebrates, amongst other things, Jewish music and food culture. Chagall prints brighten the walls, and visitors, such as children from Carmel school, are invited.

Christian presenter Rev Julie Barrett-Lennard then noted that Christians are advised in 1 Timothy 5, in tune with Jewish biblical references, not to speak harshly to an older man, to treat the older woman as one would a mother, and to honour the elderly with the best seat. Further, the older woman is encouraged to pray as her physical contribution falls away.

Rev Barrett-Lennard commented that today we tend to look to the government to do what we used to do ourselves, and revealed some interesting facts. At present, surprisingly, only 7% of our elderly live in nursing homes; in 25 years' time people aged above eighty years will rise from 4% to 8%. Often, today, both partners of a couple work, and sometimes there exists a 'sandwich generation' where, due to longer life spans, two generations need care. Few house-bound elderly are visited by parish representatives. These problems, which the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) do not address specifically, pose as ministry opportunities to overcome — the loss of what the elder person once gave, and the sense of negativity which society in general now associates with the elderly.

Through her research into the phenomenon of aging, Rev Barrett-Lennard advocated a positive attitude to age rather than disparagement, inviting the elderly to engage in a self-chosen contribution to society whereby they would maintain their sense of value as part of it.

In his vote of thanks, CCJWA executive member Eric Schneider offered a summary of the two approaches. Ms Lipman, naming from Jewish writings, principles underpinning the values and practices involved in providing care for the elderly, showed how this was applied to the care offered in the Perth Jewish care facility, the Maurice Zeffert Home. Rev Barrett-Lennard presented a broad picture of current statistics and attitudes, with a focus on how to change a pervading current attitude (held by both 'young' and the elderly themselves) — the feeling that, as past their 'useful date', the elderly have nothing to offer society, and are merely a liability. This requires changing that societal perception, including its being held by the elderly themselves.

At the close of this presentation, before refreshments were served, members were given the opportunity to address questions to the floor, chaired by Rev Charles Waddell. A discussion followed involving moral issues, such as, does a person (in either tradition) have the right to decide whether to continue life based on whether they *feel* useful, raising the question 'what constitutes our sense of dignity?' This augured a future discussion on how 'dignity of life' is to be interpreted.

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