



Who Cares for the Elderly?

By David Robertson

“If you don’t have a computer you don’t exist in the eyes of the church”. It was a stunning statement from a ‘mature’ woman in her eighties. Devastating. But it got me thinking about what is important for us as Christians – and whether our priorities are more determined by the culture around rather than the Christ within.

We live in a society which is dominated by numbers, algorithms, charts, and statistics. Policy is determined by flow charts, political numbers and ‘modelling’. We are everyday told some statistics – but not others. Some of us know by heart the number of cases of Covid 19 and deaths. For example, yesterday I heard the BBC tell us that the WHO had stated that over 5,000 people had died with Covid in the previous day. What they didn’t tell us was that another 150,000 people had died that day – including around 45,000 from cardiac disease, and 27,000 from cancer. Some statistics grab headlines. Others disappear without a trace. I know a care home manager who told me that a couple of years ago she had 11 of her clients die in November. Not a word of press coverage. But if that had happened today – it would be headline news in all the papers.

In terms of statistics I was shocked to read this week that the nursing home death toll in Australia this year is down by over 1,000. Yes, you read that right. Down. Despite the hundreds dying in Victoria and the 17 in NSW, the overall total is down. Every year between 40,000 and 50,000 elderly people die in Australia’s nursing homes. That itself is an astonishing figure – almost one third of the total deaths every year. When we are given the impression that our nursing homes are just death traps, bear in mind that many people in nursing homes are there precisely because they are nearing the end of their lives and need

special care. Should that not be one area of social care where the Church has a particular interest and involvement?

We need to remember that the elderly are not mere statistics. They are human beings made in the image of God and as such, deserve to be treated with special dignity and respect. We once had an elderly couple come to us because the church they had been in for many years had suggested to them that they move on. Why? they did not fit that church’s ‘demographic’. I doubt that many of our churches would be that crass or cruel – but perhaps sometimes we do not value the elderly as much as Christ would want us to.

James tell us that “religions that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’ (James 1:27). Is that the criteria by which we judge ourselves? I don’t think the Lord cares two hoots about how many ‘views’ or ‘clicks’ we have. He is not into data mining. He is into people mining. So, let’s make sure that visiting the elderly – especially at a time of pandemic is our priority. I think of my elderly parents – the thought of them being left alone and isolated ‘for their own good’ is a sickening one to me. My mother and father want to see people. They don’t want people to stay away from them as though they themselves have the plague!

Many years ago, my two oldest children were in a horrific accident at a youth camp in the United States. Thankfully they did not suffer long term harm – but it could have been very serious. When the executive minister came to express concern, the senior minister told me that whilst his colleague was genuinely concerned, he was also deeply worried that we were going to sue the church for what happened. I told him that

that was not what we did and was the last thing on my mind. I found the whole incident somewhat sad. It seemed as though there was more concern over a potential million-dollar lawsuit, than there was over the two children. Sometimes I fear that we are more concerned about our 'reputations' – we don't want to be known as the 'Covid' church – than we are about the people we are supposed to be protecting. Don't misunderstand me – we must take all suitable precautions – but we also always need to bear in mind other factors. Our older people have emotional and spiritual health needs – as well as physical. The church, of all organisations, should have a wider and more wholistic

perspective.

The elderly are not statistics. They are not burdens. They are not lesser members of the Church. They are precious, respected and even revered. Let's treat them like the treasures they are. Not least because one day we too will be in their ranks.

David Robertson
Third Space.
www.theweeflea.com