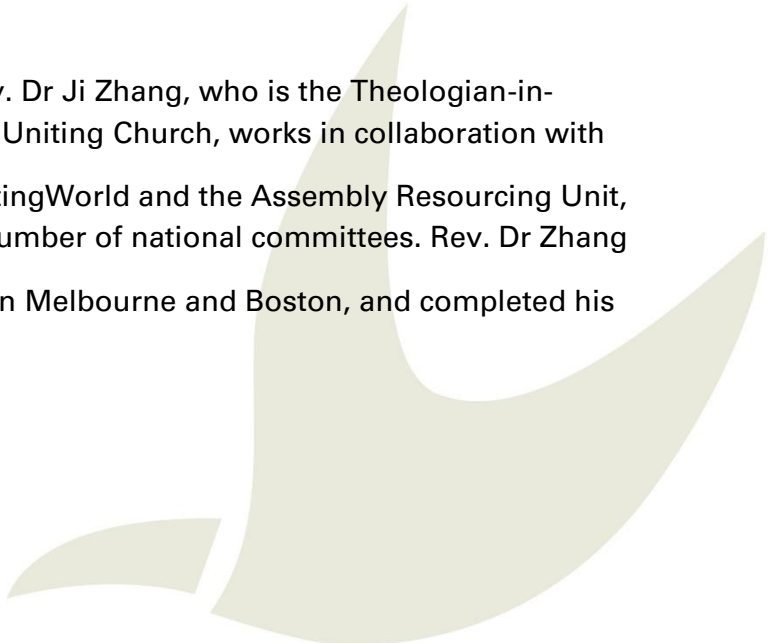


A Theology of Ageing

It's time to transform ageing and aged care in Australia

A Theology of Ageing was written by the Rev. Dr Ji Zhang, who is the Theologian-in-Residence with the national Assembly of the Uniting Church, works in collaboration with national agencies UnitingCare Australia, UnitingWorld and the Assembly Resourcing Unit, providing theological leadership through a number of national committees. Rev. Dr Zhang was born in Shanghai and studied theology in Melbourne and Boston, and completed his PhD in comparative philosophy/theology.

A large, abstract, light green graphic element in the bottom right corner, resembling a stylized leaf or a curved shape.

Introduction

This paper is a theology of ageing. It reflects the journey of the Uniting Church's participation in the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, and its ongoing involvement in aged care reform that will lead to universal access to care and support in Australia.

At the end of 2018, the Uniting Church submitted its values statement to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (hereafter the Royal Commission). In the statement, the Church welcomes the Royal Commission, and recognises the importance of building a national culture of respect for ageing and older persons in Australia.¹

In February 2021, the Royal Commissioners presented their final report to the Governor-General, General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd). The Report presents recommendations based on the collective findings from 641 witnesses at hearings, 6800 calls, and 10,574 submissions. The Report has three key words in its title: "Care, Dignity and Respect".²

UnitingCare Australia's ongoing participation in the formation of the future aged care system reflects the Uniting Church's commitment to integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth, and seeking justice for the most vulnerable. The commitment is rooted in the Church's calling to serve the world for which Christ died, whose life and mission embodies God's loving purpose for all people to be treated with respect, dignity and compassion.

This theology of ageing is a public theology reflecting the context of aged care reform. It affirms the Church's history, in which care for the elderly has been an important part of our response to God's love for all people. It engages a dialogue between the faith-based service and the rights-based approach. It affirms biblical witness on respecting the elderly and provides a theological rationale for aged care reform by presenting the following five connections between faith and action. Given that the Royal Commission is urging a new national law, this theological reflection commences with Mosaic law.

¹ <https://assembly.uca.org.au/about/aged-care-royal-commission>

² <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au>

1. Respect the Elderly

Respect for the elderly is part of the Mosaic Law that has been practised by the Jewish and Christian traditions over the centuries. The Ten Commandments in the Old Testament contain two sets of relationships. The first four commandments define the human relationship with God, and the next six shape human relationships with each other. “Respect your father and mother” is the first order in these human-to-human relationships.

After the journey out of Egypt, God gave Moses the Commandments upon which a new nation could be established. In the Exodus, respecting the elderly was regarded as a sign of new civilisation. The law was a turning point in history at which the Israelites left behind a history of slavery – in which old people were the least valued – and walked towards a land of liberation. **“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land”.** (Exodus 20:12). Honouring and respecting the elderly was part of a new moral code that would protect the nation’s long-term future. The commandment was to be practised by each generation. It is to be recognised that Ten Commandments also known as the Decalogue is the high point of Mosaic law. The Law also includes references to a wide range of prohibitions and punishments which are culturally specific to the historical period in which they evolved; but they don’t have contemporary application for the aged care reform.

When Christian communities were first established, Christians continued the culture of respect and practised the commandment: “Honour your father and your mother”, (Matthew 15:4). At the time, Christians were a minority group and faced persecution under the Roman occupation. Hence, honouring the parents was not only a cultural practice, but a commitment to discipleship.

During the Royal Commission hearings, the Commissioners described the aged care system as “a shocking tale of neglect”, which “diminishes Australia as a nation”.³ The Report calls for an exodus from the current practice. Reform is required to fundamentally overhaul the design, objectives, regulation and funding of aged care in Australia. Like the ancient story from slavery to liberty, the reform is to leave behind ageist mindsets and write the commandment of respect into our nation’s identity.

³ <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/news-and-media/royal-commission-aged-care-quality-and-safety-interim-report-released>

Australia is rapidly ageing. Currently 4.1 million Australians (about 16% of the population) are over the age of 65. Looking two generations ahead, the proportion of the population aged over 65 will increase to 22%.⁴ Australia must lay a solid foundation for the nation's future as this demographic shift progresses.

The Royal Commission's first recommendation – to create a new Aged Care Act – is exactly for this purpose. The key objective of the recommended legislation is to establish a universal right for the elderly to access safe, timely, and high-quality care.

Like the faith-based Commandment, the rights-based Aged Care Act will shift the aged care system away from considering older people as through an economic lens, to move the sector towards a needs-based universal access system, with the older person (and their carers) at the centre. This reform will require the Government to coordinate and fund the development of an integrated long-term support and care system that ensures the needs of all people living through the ageing process are met.

The aged care reform seeks to affirm the ancient wisdom at a government level, to put respect at the forefront of aged care policy. In caring for our elderly's daily needs, there is an unfolding discourse of nation building, to protect liberty and sustain civilisation.

2. In the image of God

Every person has human dignity. Christian understanding of human dignity is rooted in God and in Creation. The Creator first established the natural orders in the creation story of Genesis and brought living things into being. Then "God created humankind in his image... male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

This theology of ageing rests upon this biblical teaching of human dignity. We are all created in God's image. Every person has an equal and intrinsic worth of God's divinity. This sacred image is a gift God; it can only be given, not removed. **Human dignity in God's likeness will not fade away or diminish through the ageing process.**

The future of aged care stands on this theological ground of human dignity. Made in God's likeness, the Church affirms human dignity in which there exists an equality of rights of our

⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76>, accessed March 2021.

older citizens to be treated in the same way as others. This is also the foundation for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “The inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.⁵

Australia must turn away from ageism. Ageing should not be viewed solely as a process of physical degeneration and illness. Ageing is about life and living and should be honoured. Having cared for the elderly, many families and carers in UnitingCare facilities can tell real stories about the advantages afforded by ageing, and the impact of care upon their lives. Care in its broadest sense gives expression to the intrinsic worth of human dignity. Aged care should not be narrowly practised as dealing with ‘problems’ of ageing, but rather be broadly viewed as a cultural integrity of honour and respect. It is to support the generations who have journeyed ahead of us to live out the fullness of life, as a part of our community.

Compassion is the mother of care and support. Our future generations will learn from how we treat the elderly today. The aged care reform needs a narrative of positive ageing. It maintains positive relationships between the elderly and the society, and allows relational space for learning and wisdom to be share.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). God has become a human person and lived among us, so we may also share his divinity. **In Christ, there is a radically open and inclusive community. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).** Likewise, there is neither young nor old within Christ.

In the passion of Jesus, we see our own suffering. In the resurrection of Christ, we envision our hope. To dishonour the process of ageing by refusing dignity to the elderly, is to deny that each of us journeys from suffering to hope.

The nature and the scale of suffering being revealed in the Commission is structural. While most people want to remain at home and in their community, the current system is not funded to accommodate the level of need for home care services to enable this to happen. Waiting times for high care result in people dying on the home care waiting list with inadequate supports, or entering residential care when this could be avoided or delayed. Australia needs to build an extra 88,000 residential aged care places over the next 10 years

⁵ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/what-universal-declaration-human-rights>

to meet the rising demand for residential care, however, there needs to be incentives for provision of care that is not 'institutional'.

More than 20 reviews aimed at improving aged care services have been undertaken in the twenty years since the Commonwealth Aged Care Act 1997 came into operation. Unresolved issues of quality of care, the undersupply of skilled and qualified nursing and personal care workers, lack of integration of aged care with the broader health and disability systems, all point to an overall capacity limit, and a structural disadvantage of aged care in a nation that has enjoyed three decades of economic prosperity.

To live out human dignity in fullness requires a redemption to this structural suffering.

Equal access to support and care must be front and centre in what we do. Every person, throughout the course of their lives, has the right to equitable access to care and support when and where they are needed at an affordable price.⁶ No matter their age, gender, sexuality, ability, class, colour, creed or cultural origins, each person in Australian society is to be treated justly, accorded dignity and have their basic rights protected.⁷

The aged care reform is about equality of access to care for older people, so that our elderly may fully live in human dignity.

3. Love God and Love Our Neighbour

Social service is the Church's mission to live out the self-giving love of God for the world. "God is love...We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:8; 19). This theology of ageing is grounded in two New Commandments in the New Testament: to love God and to love our neighbours (Mark 12:30-31).

Most of our aged care services share a common story of humble beginnings: local congregations took upon themselves the responsibility to love and care for the elderly who

⁶ UnitingCare Australia, *Ageing to our full potential – preparing for an older Australia*, October 2019, 2-3.

⁷ UnitingCare in Australia, *Faith Foundations*, 5.

lived in their communities. Aged care was part of community discipleship through service: “Honour your father and mother”, “and love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 19:19).

In Australia’s modern history, the structure of family has experienced many changes, moving from large households to small family units, men and women in the workforce, and separation of generations through movement, often interstate or international. As lives lengthen, there are multiple generations which have many and different levels of responsibility. The responsibility of care for the young and the elderly has been shifted and professionalised: from within families to community services. Christian communities responded to the social change and established communal care facilities for the most vulnerable. The Church led the establishment of aged care services before the state provided major funding.

The values and mission of the Uniting Church’s service providers follow a long tradition of the Church providing person-centred physical, emotional and spiritual care to older people, underpinned by a belief in human rights and social justice for all. This commitment to safety and wellbeing extends to all older members of our communities, not just those in our care or who access our services. An essential component of our compassion for the people’s lives seeks to incarnate God’s love for the world (1 John 4:8-10), so that the people in the margins may have life abundantly (John 10:10). **Aged care reform seeks to put love back into care. God’s love is universal; everyone has the right to receive care and service founded on love and compassion.**

God’s love is costly. In the love of God for the world, God gave His Son to take away the world’s sin.

Our love for the elderly is also costly. Australia’s older population has a right to share the broader community’s expectations of choice and control, safety, autonomy, privacy and self-determination in their lives. All individuals must have the same entitlement to access the various services they require, when and where required, regardless of age, location or financial resources. As a community, we must commit to share our resources fairly to meet this entitlement: services cannot enhance the quality of care and recognise the value of their workers while they fight to stay open. In 2020, 64% of aged care homes operated at a loss, compared to 56% the previous year.⁸ The proportion of aged care homes planning to either

⁸ Stewart Brown, Aged Care Financial Performance Survey: Aged Care Sector Report - for financial year ended 30 June 2019, accessed January 2021.

upgrade or rebuild has fallen to 6% compared with 19% in 2015-16.⁹ Care staff are underpaid relative to the value of their work. The whole system is underfunded.

Aged care reform is about affordability and sustainability of aged care in Australia. Our nation as whole must value the social contribution of aged care. Our care workers must be properly valued. Over 360,000 people currently work in the aged care sector, and more government funding is required to maintain the quality of care through a systematic improvement in the training of staff. It is telling that Australia's spending on aged care is 1.2% of GDP, compared with an OECD average of 2.5%.¹⁰

The Uniting Church recognises that our church membership is ageing. Looking into the future of aged care, we too have a vision. "Older people are valued and included in community life, enabled to maintain health and independence, are able to contribute their talents and wisdom, pursue their interests, nurture relationships, maintain their culture and spirituality and be in control of their future".¹¹

Aged care reform seeks to prepare Australia to be ageing-ready. Technology is an enabler that empowers the elderly and connects their families to services. The system redesign must also support their care needs through personalised service navigation, prevention and early intervention, as well as service provision.¹²

The aged care reform is about love and compassion. Love our neighbour means to put people at the centre, and build care and support on their needs, interests, strengths, and capacities.

⁹ Australian Aged Care Collaboration, *It is Time to Care about Aged Care*, February 2021, 18. Sourced from Australian Government Aged Care Financing Authority, Eighth Report on the Funding and Financing the Aged care Industry, July 2020.

¹⁰ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Review of International Systems for Long-term Care of Older People – Research Paper No. 2.

¹¹ UnitingCare Australia submission to Productivity Commission - Caring for Older Australians, 2009, 1.

¹² UnitingCare Australia, *Ageing to our full potential – preparing for an older Australia*, October 2019, 20.

4. Justice for the First Peoples

God is in this Land. The Uniting Church's *Preamble to the Constitution* recognises that the land has been created and sustained by the Triune God before churches arrived as part of the colonisation process. By faith and action, the Church celebrates its Covenantal relationship with the First Peoples, and advocates with them on any reform that will impact their lives.

Unlike the western worldview based largely on individualism, the First Peoples' worldview values communal roles and responsibilities. They practise ancient traditions and honour the elderly in community. Viewing from their lived experiences, the Royal Commission's recommendations have a tendency to reinforce the individualistic lifestyle, which is actually in contradistinction to their own worldview. The aged care reform needs to value the communal aspect of life, instead of focusing on individual rights, individual needs, and quality and safety of service for an individual person.

Rev Dr Denise Champion is an Adnyamathanha woman in South Australia. She speaks from her experience that she was unable to find the right type of care near her community in the Flinders Ranges. For her, the Report has rightly recognised that 1.4 million people aged over 65 years live in regional, rural and remote Australia. For First Peoples, however, ageing starts a lot earlier due to life-long health disadvantage, so the demand for culturally safe services in regional and remote communities may be underrepresented.

The reform of aged care must contribute to the first Closing the Gap outcome: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives. Services that address and respond to premature ageing are critical to achieving the target: to close the health and life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by 2031.¹³ Indigenous aged care shall be integrated with health care, so that aged care has a consistent approach to enhance a person's total well-being and life expectancy.

Aboriginal people are among the most disadvantaged in Australia. Aged care reform must include justice for First Peoples. The right to receive care implies a policy of inclusion. A universal entitlement to aged care must be part of a plan to ensure First Peoples gain equitable access to both health care and aged care.

¹³ <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au>

While access of First Peoples to culturally safe aged care is an issue for every community, there are particular issues in remote communities, in many of which there are no services of any kind. Currently 78% of residential aged care services in regional and remote areas operate at a loss.¹⁴ Without adequate public funding, it will be difficult to maintain – let alone expand – services in these areas. Because of the scarcity of local service, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are often relocated into large cities – often without family support – in order to access essential health care and aged care services. Relocation disconnects an elder from his/her family, community and country. Some elderly would rather give up life-saving treatment and return home.

There is much we can learn from Indigenous cultures. Caring for the elderly does not merely focus on physical and health needs. but is holistic. It also looks after a person’s total wellbeing. For First Peoples, holistic care is inseparable from cultural and spiritual belonging. Ageing is a natural part of family life, and aged care does not remove the elderly from the family and community. Cultural competence must be included as an outcome of capacity building among care providers. Quality care involves a deep appreciation for First People’s spiritual connection with the Land.

The Uniting Church envisions a future in which high quality care is focused on a person’s wellbeing, taking into account their whole self.¹⁵ Having a universal right to care does not entail that the content of service is another “one-size-fits-all” package. **For First Peoples, care is all about relationship. It forms relational bonds with** younger generations and develops connections with ancestors and their resting places. This relational approach is actually a key component of a culture of quality care that the Royal Commission identified as absent in much of the service received in Australia.

5. A Culture of Care

We are a multicultural church. In the 1985 statement, the Uniting Church committed to “provide for full participation of Aboriginal and ethnic people, women and men, in decision making in the councils of the Church; to ensure that these groups have equitable rights in the use of Uniting Church properties and access to its resources; and to include their

¹⁴ Stewart Brown, Aged Care Financial Performance Survey: Aged Care Sector Report - for financial year ended 30 June 2019, accessed January 2021.

¹⁵ UnitingCare Australia, *Ageing to our full potential – preparing for an older Australia*, October 2019, 19.

concerns and perspectives in the agendas of the councils of the Church".¹⁶ In 2015, the Uniting Church reaffirmed that our multicultural identity was a gift of the Spirit in this Land.

The Church's diversity is born of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13); there are many different gifts but the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4). On any Sunday, around 200 congregations within the Uniting Church gather to worship using a language or languages other than English. Around 45 languages, 15 of which are languages of our First Peoples, are used each week across our congregations. The Church will open to changes that the Holy Spirit will bring to its life, because the Spirit has already changed the Church through the creative contributions of people of different cultural backgrounds.

Like First Peoples, our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD) have many traditions of elderly care. For many of them, caring for the aged is part of a culture of care. Ageing is not a problem to be solved, but a life's journey to be honoured. The elderly should not be left isolated and powerless in a "hidden-from-view" system, but their lives should be included into our lives. Today many staff in aged care come from CALD backgrounds. The Uniting Church value their cultures and their capacity to develop a community of care. They are more than the employed staff to provide professional care. Indeed, they can teach us about creating and maintaining a community of care.

The Confucian teaching on filial piety is centred around family. Master Confucius once said: "Care for the elder is the foundation of social goodness". Without a strong home, there can be no potency in a society. The political skill that is required for a dynasty's prolongation is akin to the wisdom that enables a person's longevity. What is at the heart of this moral principle is about looking after life. Therefore a social system is created to care for the elderly and honour their life-long contribution.

In our Pacific communities, care is still provided to old people by their families. The concept of family includes members from extended family which form the surrounding community. The Church is at the centre of Pacific communities, and ministers are still actively nurturing a culture of care through ministry.

There are, however, barriers to culturally-inclusive care. Many first-generation migrants in Australia are poor. The current system largely places the responsibility on the individual,

¹⁶ UnitingCare Australia, *Ageing to our full potential – preparing for an older Australia*, October 2019, 17.

carers and family to understand how to navigate the system and gain access to services. Older people from some backgrounds would rather sacrifice their care needs than potentially leave a financial burden to their children. For their children, a decision to move their parents from homecare to residential care to receive needed services may not sit well with their sense of obligation.

All of these are us. Today one in four people was born outside Australia. In the future, our ageing society will reflect the same multicultural diversity. **The Church is committed to learning from the CALD communities. A culture of care is not just limited to care service provision, but rather to reach out to those in need and include the elderly in our families and communities.**

Aged care involves building the capacity of family, supporting carers, developing a culture of care in the community. Care is not delivered linearly from the subject of provider to the object of receiver. A culture of care indeed strengthens dynamic relationships. It is a decentralised and multi-purpose system that provides service, promotes compassion, and strengthens relationships. CALD communities can play an active role and shape a culture to recognise the diversity of older citizens and open up to them the possibilities of maintaining life-sustaining relationships.

In the current aged care system, funding is skewed towards residential care. There are not enough choices between home care and residential care, nor the services needed to support informal carers in their role. A culture of care can be exemplified through the diversification of service. Support includes living at home with access to community services, home based family care, neighbourhood care, and outreach of church community. Care planning creates opportunities for screening and early intervention, home care, day programs, overnight programs. Good communal care embraces a diverse range of facilities including independent community living, retirement villages with care options, serviced accommodation, micro nursing homes, and multi cottage care homes.¹⁷ These care options will give the elderly more possibilities for maintaining relationships and reduce the reliance on traditional large scale residential care.

The aged care reform is about ensuring universal access to aged care that caters to the diversity of needs of a diverse society, establishing a flexible system to support the elderly in home; and supporting the cultures of care within CALD and other diverse communities. A

¹⁷ UnitingCare Australia, *Ageing to our full potential – preparing for an older Australia*, October 2019, 15.

culture of care essentially values older citizens in our society, recognises the diversity of their experiences and needs, includes the elderly in our lives, and enables them to enjoy relationships.

Summary

The Uniting Church believed that “by the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life”.¹⁸ The Royal Commission is an opportunity for the Church to renew and transform our understanding of ageing and aged care. The process of the Royal Commission has revealed the extent of the crisis which is not only operational but also cultural. As a nation, Australians have permitted ourselves to drift into an ageist mindset that has allowed public policy that undervalues older people and limits their possibilities.¹⁹

This theology of ageing returns to the biblical roots of respecting the elderly in the Ten Commandments and supports the establishment of a new Aged Care Act that shapes the aged care reform. Life is more than physical. We are created equal in the image of God, as spiritual beings. The dignity in divine likeness does not diminish through ageing. The Church’s rights-based advocacy is built upon the foundation of dignity for all humankind. A commitment to universal access to quality aged care can therefore be conceived as a nation building policy.

In the Uniting Church’s history, aged care has always been part of service mission. Love God and love our neighbour: these were the New Commandments guiding local congregations in their outreach to the most vulnerable in society. Aged care is about placing love into service. Love our neighbour means to put people at the centre, and build care and support on their interests, strengths, and capacities. We believe love perseveres and never fails (1Corinthians 13:7-8).

God is in this Land. The Spirit is still unfolding through our Covenant relationship with the First Peoples. This theology of ageing advocates with Indigenous Australians to close the gap in health and life expectancy. Observing the right to receive care is inseparable from respecting their right to belong to family, culture and country. In seeking wisdom from our multicultural society, the Church seeks to be enriched by the Spirit of diversity and is

¹⁸ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 18

¹⁹ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Interim Report: Neglect, October 2019, Forward, 31. Accessed March 2021.

committed to learning from CALD communities, to reflect the diversity that derives from all differences in experience and background. A culture of care expands our horizon beyond care as provision of services. It builds upon multicultural practices and envisions a decentralised system of community connections that include the elderly in our diverse communities.

Aged care reform is about cultural change. But change is not negation. The aged care reform does not negate the past, but rather rediscovers ancient wisdom in order to sustain the liberty of life today. Respect, dignity, love, compassion, belonging, and inclusion, these are the values to be written onto our hearts and practised by this generation. Moreover, these are the virtues to be passed on to our children.

This theology of ageing is about the being and the becoming of cultural transformation.

