

Dementia & Ministry: ‘engaging a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus’¹

*A paper presented to the Taskforce on Disability
for the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn*

by Dr Winifred Lamb

What is dementia?

DEMENTIA is an umbrella term for a number of different modes of brain damage which are progressive and terminal and which affect more than memory. The Dementia Australia website is a useful introductory source to the biomedical aspects of this condition.²

Disabilities associated with the condition

There is no question that dementia is a disability that involves loss on several levels. Those living with dementia experience, in various ways, diminished physical and cognitive capacities, including the loss of a sense of reality, of time and location which threaten to fracture personal identity.

As such, they also suffer a diminished capacity to be part of social interactions and of plans and decisions made on their behalf.³

As we gain understanding of how their distinctive impairments affect persons living with dementia, we can begin to appreciate their needs and the nature of care & ministry suited to them.

They will, at certain times, be lonely and bewildered, or frightened at their stage of the illness. Interactions become for them cumbersome, weighed down by unspoken doubts about their capacity to communicate and connect.

¹ Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, Disability Task Force *Terms of Reference*.

² The Dementia Australia website is a useful introductory source on the nature of this medical condition. <https://www.dementia.org.au/>

³ Loss extends to the close relationships developed over the years. Their partners, friends and family grieve for someone who is still alive.

For this reason alone, the church is incomplete without them, reflecting the meaning of Paul's teaching on the church that 'the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.' (1 Corinthians 12:22).

This upends our view of human worth, when we are shown that God can reveal profound insights on the mystery of the Gospel & the 'truth of Jesus'⁶ through the vulnerability of the person from whom pride and pretence have been stripped away.⁷

Ministry & persons living with dementia: the 'curved ball' effect

While insights gained in such instances are valuable, such learnings must still be attended with vigilance about the inherent power relations that are at play & that we introduce into pastoral care & mission. For in these cases, it is the abled that discern and gain insight from *the very being* of those with dementia. This objectification of the other is not respectful nor is it genuinely participatory.

The corrective response towards 'inclusivity' can itself become a trap that continues the unwanted power relationship between able & disabled, & kindness to them becomes an act of charity. As Stephen Pickard puts it, 'Ministry to the disabled can all too easily become a curved ball; it becomes a means to our (own) betterment.'⁸ In addition, the ability/disability divide is arbitrary & without firm basis, arising from the longstanding default in human society to separate, divide and exclude.⁹

To avoid such undesirable consequences, we need to turn to fundamental biblical understandings of God; the church and of

⁶ Canberra Goulburn Diocese Disability Task Force *Terms of Reference*.

⁷ Malcolm Goldsmith, 'Through a Glass Darkly: A Dialogue Between Dementia & Faith,' in *Aging, Spirituality & Pastoral Care: A Multi-National Perspective*, Haworth Press, 2002.

⁸ Stephen Pickard, 'Being a disability-inclusive Church', p. 3

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

Ministry & persons living with dementia: the possibilities

In such situations the church is well equipped to remind persons living with dementia, of stories, music, liturgy, prayers, as well as signs and symbols which have sustained them through the years. For Anglicans, memory plays an important part in the transmission and practice of faith & as non-verbal communication assume a more necessary role, familiar rituals and symbols serve as memory cues that aid participation in worship.⁴

Relationships with persons living with dementia challenge us in our over reliance on words and assured answers, and they call us back continually to attentive listening, to communion, as well as to the power of stillness and silence in their presence.

In such ways, people living with dementia show us that time & time again, God speaks to us through those who have no voice. Not only reflectively, but by opening up to us the preconceptions we hold of personhood, and even, of our relationship with, and in God.⁵ They remind us at such times that vulnerability is the essence of the Gospel and there is no place where God's Spirit cannot enter with transforming power to convert our hearts about our sister and brother who are living with dementia.

⁴ Elizabeth MacKinlay, 'The Spiritual Dimension of Caring: Applying a Model for Spiritual Tasks of Ageing,' in E MacKinlay, James W Ellor, Stephen Pickard eds., *Aging, Spirituality & Pastoral Care: A Multi-National Perspective*, Haworth Press, 2002.

See also Anne Ranse & Don Jamieson, from *When I am Old: A Guide to Pastoral Ministry with the Frail, Isolated Older People*, published with the support of Anglicare, 2014.

⁵ For a clear, accessible and personal theological discussion regarding the lived experience of persons living with dementia, I recommend a quite moving conversation between John Swinton and Curtis Chang on The Good Faith Podcast, 'Dementia: Living in the Memories of God' on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLTBsf3rhNs>; see also John Swinton, *Dementia: living in the Memories of God*, Eerdmans, 2012.

human being in order to critically re-examine the values and categories to which we default.

As noted by John Swinton the primacy of these guiding questions: *Who is the God we worship? & Whose Jesus do we follow?* serve in vital ways to ‘coordinate our conversation’¹⁰ in its role of developing, clarifying and creating various God images and drawing out the implications for practice. Analogously, the biblical idea of *imago dei* challenges our ‘hyper cognitive’¹¹ notion of person to affirm the contribution that persons living with dementia can make to the body of Christ.

In addition, biblical teaching on the church as the work of God, a ‘creature of the Word’¹² radically re-positions our consideration of personal worth and hierarchy so that our default categories of identity in the world are no longer fundamental. What is fundamental is that the members are, through the reconciling work of Christ, one new humanity for whom the categories of race, class, gender and ability/disability are no longer fundamental.

Ministry & persons living with dementia: the gift we can receive

In this regard those sisters and brothers amongst us who are living with dementia can be our immediate teacher. For that notion of the one new humanity (for whom the categories of race, class, gender and ability/disability are no longer fundamental) cannot remain an abstract theological statement. Neither can it remain at the level of generality. As disciples of Christ, we must each grow towards an understanding that we are the beloved of God and accepted through

¹⁰ John Swinton, ‘Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities’, February 2011, [International Journal of Practical Theology 14 \(2\)](#)

¹¹ Ben Boland, ‘Jesus and Dementia’, <https://lukesjournalcmdfa.com/2024/11/05/jesus-and-dementia-rev-ben-boland/>

¹² Stephen Pickard, *Being a disability-inclusive Church*, unpublished paper, p. 1.

the righteousness of Christ. Our theology of grace must move from the head to the heart.

While in society, our identity is formed in our accomplishments, we are slow to hear the utterly liberating news of the gospel that God is pleased with us not because of our identity or accomplishments but because of who he is:

‘This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us.... Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.’¹³

This is ‘the truth of Jesus’ that we can receive from our sisters and brothers who in the world’s eyes do not enjoy status or regard. Their very presence in the church is a statement that they belong without self-consciousness. Or as theologian Brian Brock puts it in relation to the ‘intellectually disabled’,¹⁴ ‘they are wondrously free from pondering what others suppose them to lack.’¹⁵

Brock speaks of the gift of grace from his Down syndrome son, Adam that by wanting to be at church and knowing that he belongs there, is an invitation to us ‘to be the kind of church that can handle people coming into church who don’t do Christianity the way we expect them to do.’¹⁶

Ministry to the end

But persons living with dementia (along with their carers), so easily become invisible to the church & to society. The progressive and

¹³ 1 Jn 4: 9-11.

¹⁴ Brock suggests we use the description “people who carry the label disabled” as an alternative to that description. Hans Ulrich & Brian Brock, *Transfigured not Conformed*, 2022, T & T Clark, 262, quoted in Stephen Pickard, *Being a disability-inclusive Church*,

¹⁵ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor, 2019), xvi-xvii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

terminal nature of their condition will challenge their capacity to participate communally on a long term basis.

The articulation on the ToR for the Taskforce on Disability to encourage 'accessible, inclusive and hospitable places of belonging and discipleship'¹⁷ for people with disability affirms their right not only to welcome and belonging, but also their agency and capacity for spiritual growth.¹⁸

The full range of spiritual resources must therefore be available and accessible to persons for the duration of their lives so that at the end, they can say, within the body of Christ, alongside Dag Hammarskjöld:

Night is drawing nigh

For all that has been – Thanks

*To all that shall be – Yes!*¹⁹

¹⁷ Canberra Goulburn Diocese Disability Task Force *Terms of Reference*.

¹⁸ What discipleship means at the later stages of dementia extends our understanding and appreciation of God's grace. See e.g. footnote 4.

¹⁹ Quoted in Malcolm Goldsmith, 'Through a Glass Darkly: A Dialogue Between Dementia & Faith,' in *Aging, Spirituality & Pastoral Care: A Multi-National Perspective*, Haworth Press, 2002, p. 131.