The New Dimensions of Age

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Extract from the report of the Anglican Peace and Justice Network meeting of network members in Seoul, Korea, 1999

For further reflections on age, and news of practical projects and ministries among older people, see the International Anglican Family Network newsletter, July 2009 edition, 'Valuing our Elders' at

http://iafn.anglicancommunion.org/newsletters/2009/july/index.cfm

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In Britain we are waking up to the implications of the demographic changes that are taking place in the world as a result of the increasing number of people surviving into old age.

In Britain, over the next 30 years, the number of pensioners (retired persons) will double and the number of people over 85 will increase proportionately. As a result, by 2040 AD, there will be only two working people per pensioner, compared to 1961 when the proportion was four to one. These figures could make economists blanch. Who will provide the wealth to sustain the costs of pensions and care? They also provide a warning for politicians, since they mean that Grey Power has come of age and a high proportion of the electorate will be demanding support for either themselves or their parents. The media have sometimes called this situation the Age Time Bomb.

It is not acceptable for a Christian community to use such a problem-centered approach. Old age is not a threat but an opportunity for service. We need to rethink the stereotypes that lie behind these assumptions.

The Royal Commission on Long Term Care has set the scene for a new attitude toward ageing with a quotation in a report published in March, 1999:

The moral test of Government is how that Government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped.

Practical thinking may be dominated by the statistics, which show the staggering increase in the proportion of old to young across the world. The situation, however, requires a moral response that shifts the argument from the mathematics of the cost of care, to an appreciation of the gifts that older people bring to society.

The Report sets out its basic assumptions:

Older people are a valuable part of society and should be valued as such. Old age will come to increasing numbers of the population and this should be seen as a natural part of life and not as a burden. Old age represents an opportunity-for intellectual fulfilment and for the achievement of ambitions put

on hold during working lives. To compartmentalize old age and to describe old people as a problem is intolerable - morally and practically.

At the moment, it is the affluent countries of the north that are beginning to confront the new situation. Nevertheless, the statistics apply almost worldwide, and in some cases the change is almost more dramatic. In India in 1920, life expectancy was 25. In 1980 it had risen to 53, and in 2020 it is projected that it will reach 68. This dramatic change will pose the same questions to the Indians about infrastructure, health care, family life, and the understanding of death that have arisen in northern countries.

The facts of demographic change have implications:

- Economically: Who will bear the cost of maintenance of the older generation?
- Politically: How will the older generation make their influence felt? Through the voting power they can mobilize? What will this do to the allocation of resources?
- Socially: How will society structure itself to provide adequate care for the increased number of elderly?
- Theologically: How do we understand old age and death?

Some of these questions require an answer at a social level in terms of policy; some are a matter of pastoral care at an individual level. In respect to the latter, the churches need to think out their view of old age. This is not a time of increasing uselessness but a time for growing in new ways spiritually, discovering God in an ability to look back with gratitude, and also to enjoy the apparent diminishment of the present. It is a time for contemplation and not activity; but this is also a dimension that contributes to the wholeness of society. The older members can witness to priorities other than creation of wealth and career advancement.

We have become obsessed with the appearance of youthfulness and devalue the gifts of age. By contrast the Psalms offer an alternative picture in the verse from Psalm 119:

> I am become like a bottle in the smoke (Ps 119, 83)

Here the image is of the person seen as the old gnarled wineskin, hanging in the corner by the fire. The leather of the wineskin has become hard and cracked in the smoke, assuming all of the characteristics of age - against which Oil of Olay and other cosmetic products promise protection. But the outer appearance does not matter; within is the wine that has matured with the years.

Theologically, old people need to discover their value, the ability to see life from a mature point of view - perhaps because they have grown beyond the fear of what others think. Such a position sets a person free to make unlikely friendships, support unpopular causes, and to be a resource to those who are on the margins of society.

It has been discovered in Scotland how much older people can contribute to society as volunteers. Most of those who care for others are pensioners (retired people). They look after older relatives, they are babysitters for their grandchildren, enabling the parents to go out to work, and they listen to problems when nobody else has the time. Above all, they can provide an element of stillness in an increasingly frenetic world.

The Old Testament carries something of this vision. Micah and Zechariah dreamed that:

> Each man will sit under his vine and fig tree with no man to trouble him. (Micah 4:4)
>
> Aged men and women once again will sit in the squares of Jerusalem. (Zechariah 8:44)

Part of the quality of Messianic times will be a fulfilled old age:

> No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person that who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years shall be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.... Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen ones shall long enjoy the work of their hands (Isaiah 65: 20-22),

To work with such an understanding is part of the pastoral care of the individual. This is especially relevant in an ageing community where so many church congregations are made up of the elderly. It is part of the justice structures of the kingdom in which nobody is disregarded, to combat the ageism in society which sets arbitrary dates for retirement, sees older people as unemployable, and pushes them to the margins of society.

Longevity produces its special problems among those who fear that they have outstayed their welcome in this life, and almost imagine that God has forgotten to 'call them home.' This, too, needs a special kind of spirituality, something more than passive waiting. Modern medicine has taken control of both birth and death and given the opportunity of choice. This opportunity produces a variety of ethical and theological responses. In addition, in a society that has little experience of living with age, the onset of Alzheimer's disease, for instance, can pose cultural problems. All the expectations are that age brings wisdom, not dementia. The consequent disruption of stereotypes can be distressing.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1998 in Edinburgh, I listened with distress to a consultant psychiatrist from India. First he described how his culture revered age and made a celebration for a person reaching their sixtieth birthday. Then he went on to the case study of an old lady admitted to an old people's home. The warden of the home was particularly concerned about the safety of personal property and so was most careful to collect any jewellery her patients had in their possession. One particular old lady failed to understand the intention of the warden and imagined that her

jewels, which had been taken into safekeeping, had been stolen. She was brought to see the staff psychiatrist because of her 'delusion.' She continued with her story and then began to search in her sari for her lost jewels. The nurse who accompanied her began to slap her to control her inappropriate search. In spite of the culture's traditional respect for old age, this elderly Indian woman was treated like a naughty child because the caregiver lacked any cultural norms to guide her in the newly developing situation.

There are various voices giving a lead to ways of finding a new ethic. Hans Kung has done work on a Global Ethic, which won acceptance at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993. Within Britain, Age Concern has mounted a Debate of the Age, supported by a number of working papers on Values and Attitudes. They identify an acceptable view of old age, but suggest that it depends on 'epigrammatic validity,' a phrase attributed to Frank Cioffi (who remains unidentified). Is this sufficient authority for a basic principle like "an individual's entitlement to the respect and protection of the community and to equal access to its opportunities does not vary with age or life expectancy?"

Similarly, the International Year of the Older Person, established by the UN, sets out five principles for the treatment of older persons: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment, and dignity. These can be deduced from the premises set out in the UN Charter, but if they are to carry weight in practical policy-making, do they require some stronger underpinning?

There are ethical questions for older persons themselves. How far do they use their political muscle to gain advantage for themselves, better pensions and social provisions, a disproportionate share in health care, housing rights, and transport? What should their attitude be to their children and grandchildren in the matter of inheritance of wealth? How do they balance the advantage of their family against the good of the community?

It may be that such problems exceed the concerns of APJN, yet they are all part of the pattern of a just, participatory and sustainable society which was the original formulation of the WCC which then led to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

These are issues with which we are wrestling in Scotland - particularly as we engage in the Debate of the Age in preparation for the millennium. These issues cannot be avoided by any society as it comes to take seriously the demographic shifts in our world.