8

Ageing: blessing or burden?

JAMES WOODWARD

Introduction

This chapter begins with a personal story about the relationship of self to age.[1] From this moment of connectivity with an older person I argue that imagination and compassion are the core spiritual virtues that should underpin our thinking about older people, our responses to ageing and the possibilities of the transformative contribution of the elderly to society. The second section examines the significance of demographic statistics before identifying some questions and issues raised by an ageing society. The third section looks at the challenges posed to older people in living a healthy, engaged and dignified old age. The fourth section discusses the much contested issue of how best to organize society to deal with the economics of health

[1] The title of the chapter 'Ageing: blessing or burden?' was first used by Bishop David Jenkins who taught me the importance of the social dimension of theological reflection and encouraged me to dig deeper into this area of study. For further information about my work in this area see <www.jameswoodward.info>, accessed 14 September 2014.

There are a growing number of older people narrating their stories of old age: Diana Athill, *Somewhere towards the End* (London: Granta Books, 2008); Philip Toynbee, *End of a Journey: An Autobiographical Journey 1979–81* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988); and Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*, ed. Marc Kaminsky, Mark Weiss and Deena Metzger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

and social care in later life. In the fifth and sixth sections we shall look at the possibilities of reimagining old age, acknowledging both the blessing and burden of ageing and seeking to see how the Christian tradition might support our nurture of the common good through a valuing of age.

Who's that in my mirror? Imagination and compassion as the basis of our relationship to age

In our world today even if you are going nowhere, you go there quickly! I am late for a meeting in Birmingham and I can't find my mobile phone to let my colleagues know that I am behind. I negotiate a busy junction and then meet a pedestrian crossing. There are three cars in front. My eyes catch the sight of an old man waiting to cross. He hesitates and then moves back while none of the cars ahead let him pass. I decide to let him cross, even when my anxiety levels about the meeting continue to rise. I stop. He hesitates. Then slowly and laboriously he takes several steps from the kerb. He is frail and the journey across the road seems to take for ever.

The man, it seemed, was so alone and so vulnerable. I saw his weakness and his pain. He had probably crossed that road for many years but suddenly that path had become treacherous and strange. How many minutes did I wait as he slowly placed one foot in front of another? How much longer would he be able to do this? Was he at the end of his life? Where was the man going? Who was he becoming? Was anyone helping him along his way?

As I drove off, something very profound and disturbing struck me. He was me! The thought preoccupied me for the rest of my journey. The day would come when I, threatened by a jungle of cars, would hesitate, and wonder how the familiar had become so foreign, how and why my

body had become so heavy and difficult, and how my reactions had become so tranquillized. The old man had become a stark foreshadowing of what I would become. His vulnerability would become mine with all its dependence and imperfections. His appearance challenged the mask of my illusions. His ageing reflected my own ageing.

I both sympathized with that old man and feared him. His presence spoke about my passage through time, my own physical changes, and my own inevitable death. I did not want to receive this message but it was written very clearly on the page of my busy day. It made me sad and gave me hope. He exhibited patience that reminded me that we all have to slow down. This discardable, throwaway person is the product of our culture, a bundle of experience, wisdom, knowledge, life, concerns and wisdom. Who is he? I do not see him in my car wing mirror – he disappears strangely into the landscape.

This man's story is important, just as your story is important. They belong together. These are the tales of unique human existence, fabric that took years to weave. Whoever we are, we are all worth something.

Some underpinning theological values

There are some key theological themes that run through this chapter. The first is that we all have value in the sight of God and that part of our responsibility to affirm the dignity of humanity is to recognise that all stages of our living and dying are of equal worth.[2]

[2] Many writers argue that in order to tackle some of the particular challenges of old age we must attend to the tasks of personal development through which we all pass. See Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978). This book has influenced much reflection in the area of intergenerational learning.

The second is related to this. Put rather crudely: what is old age and what are older people for? This is related to how we are to understand the nature of personhood and our engagement with many of the unmanageable and ambiguous aspects of our existence. As T. S. Eliot once remarked, 'there are two kinds of problems in life'. One kind requires the question, 'What are we going to do about it?' The other calls for different questions: 'What does it mean? How does one relate to it?'[3]

The first kind of problem is like a puzzle to be solved with appropriate technical resources and pragmatic responses. This approach poses a deeper range of challenges, which no particular strategy, policy or technique will overcome. We constantly run into the danger of a reductionist model of the person and ageing that understands ageing primarily as a scientific problem amenable to technical solution. We cannot live for ever and most of us shall need to negotiate this stage of living. Our consumerist and materialist eye cannot contain or even allow for the paradoxes of later life: ageing is a source of wisdom and suffering, spiritual growth and physical decline, honour and vulnerability.

Finally, there is the value of sharing the wisdom that comes with age. In the Jewish tradition, much has been said about what makes for a blessed old age. Among the features of such blessedness are a lack of infirmity, the presence of children, economic success and being afforded respect. It follows, therefore, that if persons are blessed in old age they are the veritable embodiment of holiness. The Jewish tradition assumes that if one has lived a long time, one has learned a great deal and is consequently deemed wise. The ideal state, of course, is a combination of wisdom and old age. A Yiddish proverb says it

[3] Cited in Thomas Cole and Sally Gadow (eds), *What Does It Mean to Grow Old? Reflections from the Humanities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 247.

best: 'Old age to the unlearned is winter. To the learned it is harvest time.'[4] This value embodied in an older person points to why a society that values older people is a richer place in which all may flourish.

An ageing society: what are the facts?

Both globally and in the United Kingdom, we are experiencing a revolution in the opportunities that are offered by a steady increase in life expectancy. The statistics offer a picture that is translated into all kinds of practical realities.[5]

In 2014 there were 10 million people in the UK over 65 years old. By the year 2030, this figure is projected to rise to 15 million. By 2050, the number will have nearly doubled to around 20 million.

Let us look at those projections from a different perspective. Today almost 1 in 10 people are over 60 years old. By 2050, 1 in 5 people will be over 60. By then, they will outnumber children aged 0–14.

These facts affect us all directly. A man born in the UK in 1981 had life expectancy at birth of 84 years. For a boy born today, the figure is 89 years, and by 2030 it is projected to be 91. The trend for women is similar. A girl born in 1981 was expected to live for 89 years and one born today might expect to live to 92. Projections suggest a girl born in 2030 might live to 95. We are all living longer and we should expect, in our

[4] Amy Elizabeth Dean, *Growing Older, Growing Better: Daily Meditations for Celebrating Aging* (Carlsbad, Calif.: Hay House, 1997).

[5] The statistics that follow are summarised from the UK Office for National Statistics <www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/population/ageing/older-people/index.html>, accessed 17 February 2014. This section also draws upon the work of Age UK, <www.ageuk.org.uk/professional-resources-home/knowledge-hub-evidence-statistics>, accessed 2 February 2014; and The King's Fund <www.kingsfund.org.uk/time-to-think-differently/trends/demography/ageing-population>, accessed 15 December 2013.

families and communities, to have increased numbers of older people. There can be few of us who do not know friends or neighbours who are literally 'living with age'. Each of us will need to anticipate and prepare for living longer.

At this point it is important to bear in mind that the projection of accurate demographic figures is problematic. It is not possible to project accurate figures because of variables in fertility and mortality rates. In some parts of the world gaining accurate information can be difficult and some projections have been based on false assumptions. These variables all have implications for policy-makers planning services for older people.[6]

Within this total statistical picture, however, the number of very old people grows even faster. This brings particular challenges to the debate about our provision for meeting the needs of older people. Much of today's public spending on benefits is focused on elderly people. Sixty-five per cent of Department for Work and Pensions benefit expenditure goes to those over working age, equivalent to £100 billion in 2010–11 or one-seventh of public expenditure. Continuing to provide state benefits and pensions at today's average would mean additional spending of £10 billion a year for every additional one million people over working age.

Growing numbers of elderly people also have an impact on the NHS, where average spending on retired households is nearly double that for non-retired households: in 2007–8 the average value of NHS services for retired households was £5,200 compared with £2,800 for non-retired. These averages conceal variation across older age groups, with the cost of service provision for the most elderly likely to be much greater than for younger retired people. The Department of

[6] See Kevin Morgan and Christopher Smith (eds), *Gerontology: Responding to an Ageing Society* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992), chs 8 and 9.

Health estimates that the average cost of providing hospital and community health services for a person aged 85 years or more is around three times greater than for a person aged from 65 to 74 years.

We can be sure that in the coming decades, rapidly ageing populations will increasingly strain health, welfare and social-insurance systems, putting potentially unsustainable pressure on public budgets.[7]

Some issues raised by an ageing society

Reframing our relationship to time and work

Living longer offers us the chance to reframe our relationship to time and to the various stages of our living. We need to rethink what we believe about the nature of work and the relationship between paid and unpaid activity. Concepts of retirement have changed, with older people over the age of 65 feeling that they still have a useful part to play in society. There are issues relating to family and the responsibility that the different generations have for one another, especially when older age presents health and social care challenges.[8]

The consequences of an ageing population present society with major issues of public policy, issues that face both the voter and those seeking a mandate to govern. These issues are in part related to finance and are wide ranging. For example who should be responsible for pensions and other income support? How do we provide the best health care for older people within the limitations set on health care spending, particularly given the increase in those living with dementia-related

[7] See Anthony Warnes, Lorna Warren and Michael Nolan (eds), *Care Services for Later Life* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).

[8] Kirk Mann, *Approaching Retirement: Social Divisions, Welfare and Exclusion* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2001).

conditions? Can the State be expected to meet the needs and associated costs of social care? How and where should older people live and how innovative are we in the provision of suitable housing?[9]

The physical and spiritual dimensions of growing older also present some real anxieties and fears. In an individualistic, consumerist and materialistic world, is it possible to affirm that we are blessed by the presence of older people? Indeed as we face the prospects of ageing what are we to make of the negative images and stereotypes of old age? How far do these representations shape our sense of what age means or are we shaped by the denial of ageing in twenty-first-century Britain?

Transforming attitudes towards old age

I have long argued that what is needed is a fundamental change in how we as a society think and feel about old age. It should be possible to nurture the valuing of age as a blessing, from within a theology of human dignity and flourishing. This is a core theme in our shared commitment to the nurture of the common good in our communities.[10]

In order to realise this vision, however, there will need to be some social, financial, political and theological change in order for old age to fulfil its potential in us and, through us, in society.

---

[9] Sheila Peace and Caroline Holland (eds), *Inclusive Housing in an Ageing Society* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2001).

[10] For more information about the development of my thinking in this area see <www.jameswoodward.info>. See also my *Valuing Age: Pastoral Ministry with Older People* (London: SPCK, 2008). This work needs to be done across the professions. It was modelled in the Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy where professionals tackled subjects of theory and practice. See also the work of Methodist Homes for the Aged (MHA), the Outlook Trust and the Diocese of Oxford SCOP project.

What are the challenges that older people face?

Older age can bring a range of challenges to independence.[11] These might include physical frailty, pain and dependency. A small proportion of older people have to accept the need for help from relatives and neighbours. Some may need to have paid carers to help with basic tasks of living, while a small number may need to accept a transition into residential care. Age can bring with it some cognitive impairment and even dementia. These and other factors combine to make this age group vulnerable to both abuse and neglect.

My pastoral experience has indicated that it is often loneliness that besets many older people.[12] This may be caused by the way in which an individual's social networks shrink. Family members, including children, may well live at a distance. Isolation may be the result of the death of a partner or indeed of children.

The context and culture within which ageing takes place are significant shaping influences for older people. Grandchildren are important for grandparents but often grand-parenting takes place at a distance or in the context of family breakdown. Older people can sometimes find it difficult to cope with the gaps and differences in values and ways of living (e.g. the reliance on modern technology and social networking as part of keeping in touch). Older people have expressed their concerns especially about the economic fortunes of their families as all live with the reality of differences in property and income.

---

[11] See Stan van Hooft, *Caring about Health* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006); Susan Carmody and Sue Forster (eds), *Nursing Older People: A Guide to Practice in Care Homes* (Oxford: Radcliffe, 2006); Barry McPherson, *Aging as a Social Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[12] See Jan Reed, David Stanley and Charlotte Clarke, *Health, Well-Being and Older People* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2004); Robert Slater, *The Psychology of Growing Old: Looking Forward* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995).

Ageing is also an inner journey as there are emotional, psychological and spiritual tasks to be faced. Older people need to come to terms with their lives as they reflect on its shape and fortunes. There may be a need to face bad and often traumatic memories. There is infinite value in this process. The inner work done in later life can be the means by which the treasure of wisdom can be passed down to younger generations.[13] There is a need for the elderly to consolidate their identity, which will include a healthy acknowledgement of mistakes and the aspiration to leave a legacy of something worthwhile after death.

Older adults, like people of all ages, will have to find their own way of dealing with death. Some may deny it, resisting at all costs any open conversation about understandable fears of living and dying alone. Some will even avoid any preparation for death that takes the shape of planning and paying for a funeral. There can be few, however, who do not wonder what shape their death might take and what chances there may be of dying with dignity. It remains our shared responsibility to embrace the realities of death through encouraging a more open approach to conversation, reflection and preparation for dying and death. This may also mean a clearer sense of what the choices and decisions may be around the end of life.[14]

Finally, we should not understate how prevalent negative attitudes towards older adults affect older people. These attitudes include indifference (many older people feel invisible and

[13] Vern Bengston makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how wisdom is or is not transmitted within families across generations. See his book *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[14] There is a considerable body of literature in this area. For an example of an open, honest and reflective account of an older person narrating the shape of the end of her life see May Sarton, *End Game* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

unvalued), pity, resentment and fear, which could even lead to a stigmatising and stereotyping of mature adults as out of date, and even greedy and selfish.[15]

Financial and political issues

The statistics that concern 'population ageing' give rise to a number of stories about increased longevity and often have a number of things in common – it is bad, it is new, and it will overwhelm us all. The major fear is the burden of cost and caring that having more older people will create.

We should note that 'population ageing' has been taking place for almost two centuries in the UK. We should also note the diversity of the ways in which people age and the interconnectedness of culture, economic status, housing, employment and the provision of health care.

Some, though not all, would add that a person's spiritual and religious world also impacts significantly on how they age. It will be important to ask those who generate public policy to include within their vision a holistic view of human personhood and the intrinsic value of all stages of living and dying as we seek to make the best provision for the common good.[16]

In this context far too much of the 'care debate' has concentrated on the important but rather narrow agenda of whether we shall be able to 'afford' ageing. This is a significant debate and still largely unresolved, which may well be to the forefront of political debate in the 2015 General Election.

We would do well to attend to the way this debate is conducted. In order to make choices, we need information. Too

[15] Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
[16] Kathleen Woodward (ed.), *Figuring Age* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999).

many of the conversations that take place about older people are simply inaccessible to the general public. The more politicised the discourse, the less we are able to negotiate the contested areas of policy. These debates (necessary as they are for democracy) often fail to place these issues into a broader and wiser historical and cultural horizon. To pick up the image of that man in the wing mirror of my car, we fail to make the connection between older people, the fabric of our lives and the prospects for our own ageing.

The Dilnot Report as a way forward for funding care

There have been a number of attempts to offer solutions to reform of the Funding of the Care of Older People. Recent discussion has focused on and around the proposals outlined in the Dilnot Report.

The report's main findings were that:

1 public policy must face the fact that public expenditure in England on older people's social care is not keeping up with rising demand;
2 care costs for any one individual are uncertain and can, in some circumstances, be very high indeed;
3 the current system of funding individual care in England, which requires people with more than a very modest level of capital assets to use those assets to cover the cost of their care, leaves many in fear and uncertainty as they approach one of the most vulnerable periods of their life;
4 a system is required for funding care which enables the risk to any one individual to be pooled, through taxation or insurance or, preferably, a mix of them both. The report proposes a system under which the individual will be responsible, on a means-tested basis, for the costs of his or her care up to a suggested level of £35,000, after which the State would

pick up the cost. The current asset threshold for those in residential care would also be extended, from £23,250 to £100,000.

Such a system, the report argues, will provide sufficient certainty to enable people to plan ahead, and allow the financial services industry to develop insurance and other products to help them with their planning. It will also help the poorest in our society the most.

The research underpinning the report estimated the cost to the public purse of its proposals at less than £2 billion. While we continue to be in a time of some economic constraint, finding the funding for old age care will clearly not be easy. There will certainly be debate about the priorities for government spending. But there is also a conversation to be had about the values that should undergird decisions made about the levels of tax necessary for the kind of society we wish to see where all may flourish. In this debate we should remember that the £2 billion that Dilnot suggests would fund care is to be compared with a total annual government expenditure of just under £700 billion.

The persuasiveness of the argument about resource constraints should be viewed against the implications of not making this investment. One implication is that the cost of caring for older people already falling on the NHS and other parts of the national budget is likely to go on increasing. In other words, resistance or delay to the introduction of a fairer system of funding means that problems and pressures on the system will continue, not be avoided, and incur further unexpected cost.

The government has incorporated the idea of a 'cap on care costs' proposed in the Dilnot Report into the Care Act which became law in May 2014. It has set the cap at a higher level (£72,000) although future governments would have the option to lower it should the fiscal climate improve, or indeed raise it

(it is intended that the arrangements embodied in the Act will come into force in April 2016). The government also propose to raise the upper threshold for means-testing to £118,000.

These steps have been welcomed as important, albeit not sufficient. As time passes, concerns are growing about the extent to which the changes will be experienced as an improvement, or whether the new system will be found to be as confusing and complex as the current one. Deliberations continue about fairer and more sustainable ways to fund health and social care – for example, in the context of the report of the independent Commission on the Future of Health and Social Care in England set up by the King's Fund which was published in September 2014.[17]

The Dilnot Commission also recommended other reforms, including a major information and advice campaign to help people plan ahead; better information and needs assessment for carers; and better integration of health and social care. The aim of this approach to justice and human flourishing is to achieve the right balance between individual responsibility and publicly funded provision. Getting that balance right is a core dimension within a Christian vision for Britain.

A new social contract is needed which – on the basis of an honest assessment of the respective roles of the State, voluntary associations and individual citizens – assures the weak and vulnerable of proper protection and gives all of us confidence that we are committed to building the conditions necessary to assist human flourishing.

The blessings and burdens of age

The discussion about the funding of care needs also to be put into the context of some of the organising narratives and

[17] Final Report of the Independent Commission on the Future of Health and Social Care in England, the King's Fund, September 2014.

possible misconceptions that shape the ways we look at age. Might we be able to hold together some of the burdens of older age with the opportunities and blessings of mature years? Longer life and increased numbers of older people result in many positive things for the community and our common life. In this part of the chapter I look at the defining of age; myths of dependency and health in old age; the relationship of poverty to old age; the pensions debate and the notion of retirement; and the perceived threat of dementia.[18]

Redefining old age

We must be careful about the ways in which we frame how 'old' age is defined. There are many who are thankful for the possibility of living longer and view getting old as a good thing. We may actually relish the prospect of living longer. Age redefined might affirm that we are *actually getting younger* if you count the years we actually have left to live! A wider view of these statistics can see that over time we can expect people of successive generations to be healthier and fitter and have longer to live at any age than their predecessors. This is a situation that could bring an abundance of opportunities and blessings.

An age in years that we might think of as 'old' now may not seem so in fifty years' time. We shall need to redefine age in the light of this and look again at what we mean by old.

The exploration of a positive defining of age will have to contend with the reality that a great deal of our culture is frenetically oriented towards youth. This may be understandable: people want to put down markers for the future as they see it and to capture the attention of a younger generation. Nevertheless it should be possible to hold together our perspectives of the

[18] Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (eds), *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (London: Routledge, 1995).

generations in a way that does not ignore the reality of responsible, active people in older life, who are still participants in society, not passengers. Younger people forget that they are ageing themselves, and should play their part in planning for how we think about and prepare for older age. Younger people will be in need of positive and hopeful models for their own later years. We tolerate a very eccentric view of the good life, or the ideal life, as one that can be lived only for a few years, say, between 18 and 40. So the work of defining age becomes critical if we want to break out of either wanting older citizens to go on as part of the productive machine as long as possible or of giving in to an ageism that accords them a marginal and humiliating status, in which older people become tolerated but not valued.[19]

Are all older people dependent?

A key part of reframing our relationship to older age is to remind ourselves that most old people are not 'dependent'. For the first time, *a million people* aged 65 or over are still in paid work. Indeed if we define dependency as 'not in paid work' then there are more dependants of 'working age' in the UK than there are people over state pension age who don't work. The number of people working past state retirement age has almost tripled over the past fifteen years. A TUC survey showed that 258,000 women and 338,000 men are still working at the age of 65 and over, against 93,000 and 112,000 in 1998.[20]

A great many older people report their health as good. At the time of the 2011 census there were about 300,000 people aged over 64 in care homes (including public and private, with

[19] Bill Bytheway, *Age and Time in Unmasking Age* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011), ch. 3.
[20] From <www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/24/over-65s-work>, accessed 23 March 2014.

or without nursing) – just over half a per cent of the population of England and Wales. Many of them are not dependent financially but are affluent and support younger family members.

Old age, poverty and pensions

We should not confuse old with poor. Those who are poor are rarely poor because they are old: they are poor now because they were poor when they were younger, unable either to accumulate assets or pension rights to draw on in later life.

Discussion of the economics of ageing is very often dominated by the concern that we cannot afford pensions. A little over a century ago, annual working hours in the UK were *double* what they are now (at around 3,000 hours per year). Working lives were also longer: boys and girls might leave school at 12 or 13, whereas now employment rates don't peak till the mid-20s as students leave higher education, and many retire from work before reaching the state pension age. The issue here is not that we cannot afford pensions but that the nature of work has changed and we need a different set of arrangements for pensions to reflect this.

Individuals retire at different ages and the present generation of people over 60 have the advantage of well-resourced pensions. Only those who have not accumulated the assets necessary to choose retirement will be forced to work on. The affluent will continue to be able to afford to retire early. Worst of all, it is those most likely to end up working up to the state pension age who will be least likely to survive to enjoy a long retirement. The poor, those in manual jobs, or living in areas of social deprivation, have life expectancies *from five to ten years below* their more privileged peers.[21]

[21] For further information in the area see <www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/index.html?nscl=Life+Expectancies>, accessed 23 March 2014.

None of this means that older people shouldn't be encouraged to work longer – if that is what they choose to do. To suggest, however, that an economy as productive as that of the UK 'cannot afford' to let its least affluent members leave work until they are 68 or 70 is quite mistaken. This is not about a policy driven by economic or demographic pressure but reflects the political debate about the place of the State and particularly the resourcing of the welfare state in a cash-limited economy.

The fear of dementia

One of the reasons that we have an ambiguous relationship with age and ageing is the fear of what shape old age might take in us. As the number of older people increases, there are few of us who do not know the effects dementia and related diseases have on individuals and their families. Definitions of dementia vary across time and place (at what point does the general weakening of cognitive function that accompanies 'normal' ageing cross the threshold to dementia?) but there is a close connection to age and 'early onset' dementia is very rare.

As life expectancy increases we could expect many older people to live with, and die with, dementia. It is anticipated that the number of people in the UK with dementia will double in the next forty years (800,000 people with dementia in 2012; 1,000,000 people with dementia in 2021; 1,700,000 people with dementia in 2051).[22]

If the dementia from which someone is suffering is mild and compatible with independent living, it has few implications. If it is severe, it has the potential rapidly to increase demand for social and health care.

What we really do not know is how the relationship between age and dementia prevalence is changing. The dream scenario

[22] See <www.alzheimers.org.uk/infographic>, accessed 23 March 2014.

is that longer lives also mean later dementia: the nightmare one is that longer lives come with a fixed relationship between age and dementia, so that a rapidly increasing proportion of the extra years in longer lives are spent with the condition. We do know of factors that appear *to delay the age of dementia onset*, including more mental, physical, or social activity, something vibrant communities can provide. There have been a number of government initiatives to address the increased number of people living with dementia.[23] Our response to this threat to well-being will be critical in how we collaborate for a good and blessed old age.

The contribution of older people to intergenerational care

Despite the problems associated with ageing, there are many positive attitudes of respect, interest and compassion for older people based on our experience of them as heroic, sacrificial and wise. In communities across the country older people play an important part in sustaining the common good through (for example) volunteering, unpaid childcare and support of neighbours, and they often play a critical part in the care of older partners. Older people in faith communities are often carriers of memory, story and identity.[24]

Grandparents are the most important source of childcare after parents themselves, more important than either public or private childcare. Older people make an enormous contribution in so many ways to the common good of our families, communities and churches. It is not easy to calculate with

[23] The dementia friendly communities champion group (of the Department of Health) has been working with the Alzheimer's Society and the Dementia Action Alliance on a programme of work. See <http://dementiachallenge.dh.gov.uk/category/areas-for-action/communities/>, accessed 14 September 2014.

[24] For a fascinating collection of stories about spirituality in later life see Keith Albans and Malcolm Johnson (eds), *God, Me and Being Very Old* (London: SCM Press, 2013).

accuracy the net contribution of older people to the common good of societies. Figures from the United Nations (UN) show that more than 70 per cent of men and nearly 40 per cent of women over 60 continue to work.[25] Age Concern UK published the following figures for unpaid care in the UK (2010): 3 million unpaid carers (replacement value of £15 billion); grandparent care – one-quarter of families use grandparent care each week (replacement value of £4 billion); volunteering – 5 million older volunteers (replacement value of £5 billion). This equates to a total value of £24 billion (equivalent to 3 per cent of the economy).

There is one area that is particularly important – that of the intergenerational relationship. As family structures become looser and more scattered geographically, it is vital that there be regular opportunities for interaction between younger and older people.[26] As we explore what might make for a good community we shall need to address the ways in which the good of older people can practically be part of the well-being of all people. Our vision must embrace the need to strengthen the bonds that bind all generations in our community together, especially at a time when these are under particular strain.

Valuing age: how might theology shape our debates?

Much of the research that has taken place in North America over the past twenty or thirty years has indicated that people

[25] See *The Forgotten Workforce*, <www.helpage.org/download/4c3cf79de7a82/>, accessed 29 March 2014.

[26] In some congregations, there are older people with time to establish mutually nourishing relationships with younger children who need some support in reading. Older people play an important part in the sharing of memories through formal and informal oral history projects.

beyond mid-age become more spiritual, and therefore more open to some of the religious questions that theology asks.[27] Among the many reasons for this increased 'religiosity' are two core realities.

The first is that beyond mid-age people are closer to their deaths than their births. This increased sense of awareness of mortality is linked with another feature of the second half of life. This is a preparedness to face up to one's limitations, deficiencies and disappointments that both hurt and threaten us. As individuals face their failures and mistakes, questions open up about what makes for human flourishing and well-being. Old age is the time when a person may look back over their significant relationships, the security that comes from homes made, children nurtured and careers developed. This increased and developed sense of the spiritual is forged out of life's failures as well as its successes. This research is validated through my own experience of pastoral work with older people, which reflects the significant reality of spiritual growth in the final years of living.[28]

The second core reality, found at the heart of all pastoral work, is the belief that every human being of whatever age is unique and equally precious in the sight of God. We belong together and our vision of the common good is dependent upon understanding what each of us has the capacity to contribute to the rich tapestry of humanity. This will differ at different stages of our living and will not depend solely on our economic status, our independence and youthfulness, or our capacity to be consumers. We shall need to explore a variety of

[27] See Eugene Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); and Melvin A. Kimble, Susan H. McFadden, James W. Ellor and James J. Seeber (eds), *Aging, Spirituality and Religion: A Handbook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[28] Susan A. Eisenhandler, *Keeping the Faith in Late Life* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2003).

ways in which everyone at each age might be able to make a contribution from the wisdom of their particular experience and sustain a sense of self-worth and purpose in society.

A failing of today's society is to set the old over and against the young, in a state of mutual incomprehension. In fact, the old need the young and the young the old. An integration of the generations is critical to a mutually supportive society.[29]

Three tasks which face all who are growing old provide distinctive gifts that we can offer to all the generations:

1 the task of completing our work – not just of finishing it but of deriving from it the wisdom of experience to be passed on to our successors;
2 the task of reflecting on our life – of reflecting on its underlying coherence as a service of God and its failures to realise the opportunities of service which we were given;
3 the task of hope – of witnessing not only to the value of a life well lived but also to the gift of faith in a God who will sustain us even in and through the moment of death itself.[30]

Together these tasks provide the distinctive contribution the elderly can make to all the generations, and the means of bridging the gaps between them. They offer the prospect of fulfilment both to those who are old and to those who one day will be.

I want to make a plea for us to support the development of very different ways of speaking about what we struggle with as we grow older. How ought we to grow old? Or what does it mean

[29] See Michael D. McNally, *Honoring Elders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Amanda Genier, *Transitions and the Life Course: Challenging the Constructions of 'Growing Old'* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012).

[30] See Peter Coleman, *Belief and Ageing; Spiritual Pathways in Later Life* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011); Elizabeth MacKinlay, *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001). Robert Archley writes about these issues from an American perspective in *Spirituality and Ageing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

to grow old? How do we nurture virtue in older age? How can we enable older people to make their valuable contribution?

Ageing has been brought under the dominion of scientific management, which is primarily interested in the physical aspects of ageing in order to explain and control the ageing process. How do we find a way of giving voice to the things that really matter? And if we can find a voice, who will listen to us?

Christians can offer alternative understandings of the moral significance of growing old. The cross is not a symbol of the fragility of a virtuous life. It is not just a story but the ground of a reality that subsumes the stories that all our lives would tell. The cross of Jesus is the grace of God; it is the ground of our hope; and it is the promise of our deliverance. Part of what we learn from the death of Christ is the central reality of sin and the necessity for us to learn to forgive others. In the cross the scars and pain and vulnerabilities of all the ages are absorbed into the love of God. In this embrace there is healing, forgiveness and transformation.

Old age is forever stereotyped. For some it simply does not matter and any attempt to attach particular significance to it is misplaced. We all age in different ways. We have older people that we admire and some whom we might be determined not to imitate.

While visiting some of the innovative work being undertaken by the Church in Sydney (especially in the area of housing for people living with dementia) I asked an experienced nurse why she thought that Church and society found it so problematic to engage with age. 'I am sure I know why that is,' she confidently replied, 'we are afraid of growing older: we need to befriend the elderly stranger in ourselves.'

We might take ourselves back to the car journey that I described at the beginning of this chapter. Can we imagine what old age might be like for us? Could this reimagining possibly

be the basis of the shaping of public policy? And what spiritual resources would we need to help us do this?

Conclusions

In this chapter we have taken an overview of some of the issues that shape our present public debate about age and ageing in twenty-first-century Britain. It remains to be seen how far these questions might frame or shape the way people make democratic choices, but we must keep the human reality of older people to the forefront of our debates. In the choices that we make about how to provide for those most vulnerable in our communities, we shall want to work across professional boundaries to provide the best care and support of older people. This will include a commitment to person-centred care that seeks to maintain health, independence and active life in older age. The rising numbers of older people living with dementia will make particular demands on mental health services. An older population will put demands upon how communities and families organise for housing and both formal and informal care. These are economic issues about resources but also questions about how far the State can meet our expectations.

There will certainly need to be a change in attitude to inheritance, retirement and patterns of work. We shall need to ask ourselves about our responsibility for the vulnerable and poor older people in our society. These are issues of care and how we empower individuals, professionals and institutions to deliver better services for the sake of our communities.

At the beginning of this chapter I shared a lesson in the importance of recognising ageing in ourselves through others. This is about generating a compassion shaped by imagination that can help us to appreciate the true meaning and significance of ageing. Age can be a wise and challenging teacher. Older

people can show how little time we give, in all our bureaucracy and busyness, to consider what substance and depth mean in being human. It is no accident that older people become more spiritual, and that they can help us to perceive that age is essentially a spiritual task.

This making of the soul takes shape when our human life is expressed in and through our stories. We need to value older people by listening to them. Their narratives need pondering, retelling, organising and appropriating. How might the Churches work together in moving age, older people and our responsibility to them further up the political agenda? How can those with the power to engage with ageism deal with the impoverishment of living that some older people embrace? It is perhaps the mature aged, rather than the young, who can become for us the prophets of our time, witnessing to a present pregnant with wisdom for living and pointing to a future filled with hope.