

Christians on Ageing Conference Call

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Exploring Homefulness in Ageing and Aged Care

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For our first Conference Call of the year we were once again able to have a speaker join us live from Australia – Zoom really is helpful for this sort of thing!

Sally began by asking us to think about what we think of when we say ‘home’? Is it a positive or a negative idea? Interviewing residents in a Care Home, she had found that some say, “This is my home now,” others speak of their former home as still being home, while others speak of going home to God. But what is it that makes people react in different ways? What is important? It’s a personal thing but it is linked to well-being.

We thought briefly about five questions for ourselves, and we were invited to share some reactions via the chat function:

1. What do you think of feel or imagine when you hear the word home?
2. What’s important to you when you think of home?
3. Do you have a place or a space where you feel most deeply at home?
4. When do you feel more at home than at any other time?
5. How did it feel for you too answer these questions?

Responses included “I still think of home as my parental home,” “Home for me is the place I know I can come back to and find familiar things,” and “A safe space, comfy, people who understand me, somewhere to be me.”

Sally suggested that the essence of home looks at deep meanings, and is therefore a spiritual concept.

Her first study was a qualitative piece of research based on 10 aged care residents aged between 72 and 98. She made use of Wilf McSherry’s definition of spirituality: *“Spirituality is universal, deeply personal and individual. It goes beyond formal notions of ritual or religious practice to encompass the unique capacity of each individual. It is at the core and essence of who we are, that spark which permeates the entire fabric of the person and demands that we are all worthy of dignity and respect. It transcends intellectual capability, elevating the status of all of humanity to that of the sacred.”*

What emerged from the study was that a key word in understanding homefulness is ‘connection’ – including meaningful relationships and a meaningful connection to place. Participants also spoke of a sense of belonging and being known deeply for who they were – somewhere where they felt valued and respected and loved. Tellingly, for most of the participants, a residential care home could not properly be described as home – but it could be homely, and homeliness can be created and maintained through connection – e.g. with carers and other residents – meaningful activities and good food.

Exploring meaning is an essential part of spiritual care. One question which Sally asked the participants in her research was whether they have a sense of a spiritual home. One resident, a former farmer, had his stockwhip with him on his bedside table as a reminder and a tangible connection to his farm and his true home. He was physically incapable of raising his whip but sometimes it is removed from his room because it is seen as a danger. People have not always

asked what it means to him, but asking about its meaning would have led to different actions. If we want to make residential aged care places more homely we need to ask residents what home means for them and then act upon it. There is a need to help staff, whatever their role to create respectful, loving and compassionate relationships with residents. Mealtimes and activities need to be meaningful to residents.

Sally concluded by suggesting that her study showed 5 principal areas of importance in creating a sense of home:

- Meaningful activities... not just time-fillers
- Autonomy
- Good food
- Independence
- Connection with the natural environment

She shared the following statement from Meaningful Ageing Australia in 2021: *“If we are truly committed to helping people to live and die well, this means understanding each person in a way that honours who they have been, who they are now, and who they are becoming... We need to be prepared to have the conversations and take the actions that matter most to each person... Religious practices can speak to the deepest parts of our identity and offer a unique kind of support that cannot be otherwise accessed. They can be a place of profound solace, encouragement and hope, even when we can no longer speak for ourselves... All spiritual care should be grounded in the reality of that person, that time, that place.”*

Sally is currently finishing off and writing up her other research study which is exploring the depth of meaning of ‘home’ for older people living with dementia – i.e. those living with early to mid-stage dementia and living in the community in their own homes. Her thesis is due in late this year, and we look forward to her sharing the fruits of that sometime in 2025.

We then moved into a time of open questions and comments.

- One observation was that when Sally was describing what makes a home, it sounded like the exact opposite of what might be called ‘institutional.’ And yet that is what is often required in care home settings, so presumably trying to balance between those is a pointer to homefulness? Sally responded by pointing to the importance of Design principles – getting back to smaller models which do not look like a hospital. The use of colour for doors etc, the provision of small dining rooms, quiet spaces, smaller TV spaces, making meals tasty – all of these can help. Being able to offer hospitality can be difficult for residents, but making it possible is another way of helping increase a sense of homefulness.
- Another observation referred back to the questions posed of us about home, and what would we miss most. Lesley suggested she would miss her teapot and her dog, adding that if she were in a care home she probably would not have either of those things. The importance of personal possessions or ephemera in giving a sense of home in a care setting cannot be overestimated.
- A third observation was to ask how many care home managers have ever thought of how they can create a sense of home? It is not all about making the place look like an up-market hotel – and loss of connection with former friends, neighbours and church can be hugely significant. Can Church visitors help to recreate that or reconnect with it?

We concluded by remembering that the research shows that Aged Care places aren’t home – and therefore we need to acknowledge the grief. But human contact and presence is essential.

