

UNITINGCARE AGEING CONFERENCE DEVOTIONS

July 2007

I am going to begin my reflection with a reading from the Gospel of St Luke. It is the very well known story of the Good Samaritan. It is so well known that people who wouldn't know much about the Bible can still use the expression "Good Samaritan" to describe someone who reaches out to others in a selfless way.

Here is the story from the 10th chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, with a slight amendment.

Just then a senior Government minister stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher", he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind: and your neighbour as yourself." And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live".

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came

near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise".

This is a foundation story of the Christian faith and while the Christian faith has many doctrines which can be quite important, the essential elements of the faith are grounded in stories [parables] which Jesus told.

When Professor Warren Hogan was conducting his review of aged care for the Commonwealth Government some years ago, he visited the Uniting Church offices and in our conversations he asked me to explain what was different about the charitable not-for-profit groups providing aged care. I can't remember exactly what I said to him, but I do remember that in response he said that my answer was a better one than he had heard to that date. I would take a guess and say that most of the answers that Professor Hogan had got to his question went along the lines that the not-for-profit sector and particularly the Christian based aged care operators were more caring, more loving, etc, than the private operators who were only in it for the money. That is not a good answer and no doubt Professor Hogan wasn't impressed by it because as he travelled around Australia he found, as anyone would, that

some private operators offer excellent services and high care to their clients and also that some church based Christian operators can provide pretty ordinary service and that their care and respect of clients is far from satisfactory.

Although I can't remember my answer to Professor Hogan it would have gone along these lines. I would always want to see that the services provided by UnitingCare Ageing to our clients are the best that can possibly be offered. But I wouldn't argue that because we are a church based Christian organisation that that in itself provides any guarantee of better service. Better service will arise out of better management, better implementation of our goals, not because we are run by the Church. Nor would I ever propose that our service will always be intrinsically better than that offered by a private operator. As I said, I hope we will be up with the best of the best, but that needs to be judged by objective tests, and it won't include our church connection.

The difference between us and the private operator is more about inputs than outputs. Not having to pay dividends to owners or shareholders, gives us a tremendous potential to be better, but that potential has to be captured. In UnitingCare Ageing, the considerable resources we devote to pastoral care and chaplaincy is something we do to provide additional services to our clients, it is not an evangelistic outreach for the church, and in that connection I cannot see anything wrong with us in the future, for example, employing a Catholic chaplain, or for that matter, a Buddhist one. The main feature of our

system will always centre around our motivations and intentions, which are good, but need to be used. Our system of aged care in the Uniting Church has arisen over the years from the desire of many church people to provide services to elderly people in their community. That is a great heritage on which to build our future. But, again, I emphasise it will be lost if it is not continually renewed and refigured for contemporary times. I suppose what I am saying is that we cannot just sit back and rest on our Christian heritage, else we will find ourselves in the same boat as the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable, because we will find that it is the Samaritan, the outsider, dare I say the private operator, who will come along and show us up.

Recently I had a very encouraging example of how UnitingCare Ageing is different. I was attending a meeting of the Coalition for Appropriate Supported Accommodation, a somewhat strange name for a small lobby group of people including myself, who have been working away for years to get a better deal for people with disabilities and mental illness who live in privately managed boarding houses in NSW. These people are at the bottom of the pecking order when it comes to disadvantaged people in our community. Happily the boarding house owners are leaving the industry and the numbers of such clients are shrinking. However, some 1000 people in NSW remain in licensed privately run boarding houses, many of them offering sub standard levels of care and attention. Recently the owner of the Lyndhurst Boarding house the inner west of Sydney announced that he was closing down. The only applicable condition of his licence was that he has to offer "up to one month" notice of closure. Some 28 people have lived there, many for up to 20 years

or more. At the CASA meeting some officers of DADHOC attended and asked, somewhat forlornly, whether anyone had any ideas about somewhere this group of people could live temporarily while they had more time to arrange suitable long term accommodation. We had the old Weeroona Nursing home in Leichhardt sitting empty while we decided the future of the site. Happily, after some conversations phone calls, etc, UnitingCare Ageing Sydney Region made it available and this month people have moved in. It took a bit of work getting the fridges, dishwasher and oven working again, and putting in some new furnishings. But, the residents have now moved in, and work is beginning on finding them good and proper long time accommodation. The staff of DADHOC specially phoned me last week to express their appreciation of what we have done, and were full of praise for Uniting Care.

Doubtless many other examples could be given. That is just a recent one in which I have been personally involved. It does show, I hope that the motivation and intention of an organisation does shape how it acts and how it responds to community needs. And even if it sometimes happens by chance, it will mostly happen because we have committed ourselves to put the service of others on the top of our agenda. In other words, to live by the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Our Christian heritage is a tremendous asset to us. The task is to build on it, not to rest on it or to rely on it.

Let us Pray.

Almighty God, we pray for your guidance as we meet in this conference to progress the work of UnitingCare Ageing. May all that we do serve the advancement of your Kingdom and the Gospel of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. May his parable of the Good Samaritan be our guide in all our dealings with others, especially those who are in our care.

We pray in his name. Amen.