

Introduction

I love older people and people living with dementia, but Jesus loves them even more! That's why I became, and continue to serve as, a chaplain.

The purpose of *Priceless People* is to equip Christians to share Jesus' love more effectively with both older people and people living with dementia. This is the book I wish I'd been given when I started working as a chaplain fifteen years ago. It's not just for those in pastoral ministry. Instead, it's designed for all Christians who love, or want to love, older people. It does so by raising awareness of the importance of sharing Jesus with both older people and with people living with dementia.

Perhaps some backstory will help. *Priceless People* started life as a series of articles in *Mia Mia* (the quarterly magazine of Mother's Union Australia). The series proved helpful, so it has now grown, been reshaped, and enhanced to create this book.

Most books about ministry in the context of dementia have an early chapter defining and exploring dementia. *Priceless People* doesn't. Dementia research is constantly evolving, so any such definition risks being out of date almost immediately. There are also great websites

providing information about dementia and they are regularly updated.

I need to add two important points. First, as with cancer, a person can live with more than one type of dementia. Second, though the biggest risk factor for developing dementia is growing older, dementia and ageing are not synonymous. Many older adults don't have dementia and, actually, many younger people live with it, including some children.

Thus, while sharing Jesus' love with older people and with people living with dementia constitute important topics individually, there's significant crossover in terms of principles and demographics. Much of this book's material about dementia applies to people living with it at any age.

Finally, ageing and dementia are hard and challenging topics, so I recommend reading this book slowly. Each chapter builds on the preceding chapters; however, every chapter is short and able to stand alone. So, you can either dip into specific topics, or read the book from cover to cover.

I hope and pray that this book challenges, equips and inspires you to share Jesus' love with both older people and people living with dementia.

Scripture, Growing Old and Dementia

Consider the media attention given to domestic violence (a horrific scourge).

Compare the attention given to dementia, the biggest killer of women in some high-income countries,¹ though 60 per cent of people living with dementia live in low- and middle-income countries.²

Contrast the attention paid to youth suicide with the scant attention afforded the most at-risk group for suicide: older men.³

We live in a world where the stigma of ageism is the norm,⁴ a world where value is derived from economic

1 The biggest killer of men remains cardiovascular disease. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death>

2 <https://www.alzint.org/about/dementia-facts-figures/dementia-statistics/>

3 The second highest suicide demographic.

4 Discrimination on the basis of age.

contribution, youth and beauty. Media representations of older people are often either openly derogatory or absent.

Indeed, a 2021 World Health Organization report

Christian Ageism

Consider the following test for your denomination and church: What proportion of resources (leadership, time and finances) is focused on people under twenty, versus the resources directed towards people over eighty?

found that 50 per cent of the world's population is ageist⁵ and that many people living with dementia are denied basic human rights.

In 2009, the American National Center on Elder Abuse reported that almost 50 per cent of people living with dementia experience abuse. There's also evidence

that elder abuse increased during COVID-19.⁶ The 2021 Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety report identified that the reason aged⁷ care 'has been under prolonged stress and has reached crisis point' and does 'not meet Australians' expectations', is because Australians have treated aged care as a 'lower priority' and

5 The World Health Organization (WHO) defines ageism as age-based stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

6 Weissberger, G. H., Lim, A. C., Mosqueda, L., Schoen, J., Axelrod, J., Nguyen, A. L., Wilber, K. H., Esquivel, R. S., & Han, S. D. (2022). *Elder abuse in the COVID-19 era based on calls to the National Center on Elder Abuse resource line*, *BMC Geriatrics*, 22(1), 689–689. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-022-03385-w>

7 'Aged' is now considered ageist language in much of the world however it remains the government approved language in Australia. As this book is for an international readership, I've tried to avoid referring to *aged care* except where it explicitly refers to the Australian context.

the government has responded by ‘restraining aged-care expenditure’ to the extent that ‘funding is insufficient, insecure and subject to the fiscal priorities of the day’.

I’ve heard Christians say repeatedly: ‘Children are the future of the church’.

However, this position is unbiblical. Jesus and the early church in Acts ministered almost exclusively to adults. Yes, Christians are called to ‘raise our children in ways of righteousness’, yet the future of the church is conversion.

‘Old age is not a mistake: It’s actually part of God’s plan for humanity.’

—Louise Morse
in *Dementia: Pathways to Hope*;
Spiritual insights and practical advice, p. 85.

But let’s start at the beginning.

Immutably valuable

Scripturally, people have at least a threefold value:

1. We’re created by God.
2. We’re created in God’s image.
3. We’re so loved by God that Jesus died for us.

Arguably the most valuable painting on earth is Da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’ (worth over US\$ 860 million). Its value isn’t simply the image. You can purchase a poster copy for a few dollars. The ‘Mona Lisa’ is valued because it was created by ‘the master’. All of creation has value as it’s ‘God’s handiwork’. Thus, creation has value beyond superficial characteristics, such as its utility or beauty, because it was made by God.

To extend the painting analogy, we're not simply painted by God, but we reflect Him. Being created by God and in His image provides the basis of our value. Therefore, our value transcends any of our characteristics such as gender, race, power, age, beauty and strength.

Any suggestion that our value was destroyed, either by the Fall or our individual sin, is quashed by Jesus. God who became human as we are human. Jesus who loved us so much, He died for us!

The basic theological point about older people and people living with dementia is that they're innately and immutably valuable and loved by God, because they, like all other people, bear the image of God.

How should Christians treat older people?

However, in addition to the immutable value of every person, the Bible clearly teaches that:

- Being old is tough (e.g. Eccles. 11).
- Christians have a particular responsibility to care for older people (e.g. Exod. 20, Eph. 6, James 1 and Matt. 25).

Historically the church has been the leader in the provision of care for older people.⁸ In Australia, most aged care providers were started by churches, and many continue to be run by them.⁹ My hope is that Christians and churches

8 John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Zondervan, 2021), pp. 80-83.

9 This is also true across much of the world.