

## **Justice and Compassion in Action**

### ***NZCCSS Biennial Conference Keynote Address***

***Lin Hatfield Dodds***

It is an enormous pleasure and privilege to be with you today to share in your conference. Thank you for being so accommodating to my schedule. I would like to start by paying my respects to the traditional owners of this land, to their elders and their ancestors.

Your conference theme is *Justice and Compassion in Action*, and you have set yourselves an ambitious conference goal - to explore your way through the issues for current and future services guided by a vision for greater justice and more compassion for older people. I want to start this morning by sharing with you some of the issues and challenges we face in the delivery of aged care services in Australia, and then reflect on how faith based service providers in particular might rise to meet the kinds of challenges we face in an increasingly complex environment with justice and compassion.

I believe that putting people at the centre of our thinking and doing is key. If we do nothing else, remembering each day and at each decision point that service provision itself is a means to an end - a means to enable positive quality of life outcomes for those we serve - will move us in the direction of justice and compassion. Good governance, good management, efficiency and effective services are necessary but not sufficient. Faith based leadership requires a servant perspective. The moment we forget that we are all about real people and real communities we diminish our identity as compassionate travellers with those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. We are called by our faith to stand in solidarity with those we serve, to see ourselves as part of the same human family. Person centred services must not just be about choice, they must be about compassion, and about a holistic and hope-full approach to care that dares to reach beyond service provision to personal and social transformation.

I work in Australia's largest network of non-government community service providers. UnitingCare is a faith based network, and is an expression of the Uniting Church at mission across Australia. We have around 400 community service agencies located across every State and Territory, providing services to over 2 million Australians each

year. We employ 35,000 staff whose work is supported by 24,000 volunteers and we provide services to children, young people and families, people with disabilities, and older Australians, in urban, rural and remote communities. With over 25,000 residential and community care places, UnitingCare manages 12 per cent of all aged care places in Australia.

UnitingCare's work is grounded in the Uniting Church's Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race. Our values affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. These values underpin all the work we do.

Our Church's President, Gregor Henderson, has said "The strength of any nation is measured by how well it looks after its most vulnerable. The Uniting Church wants to make sure that the aged care debate is about more than just numbers of beds and staff rations, but that it focuses on ensuring access to quality care for all older Australians – particularly those who are socially and economically disadvantaged."

The Australian aged care sector is facing immediate and long-term challenges. Both sustainability — the capability to plan and deliver services in the future — and equity — the ability to provide high quality services to all Australians, regardless of means — are under threat. We have yet to develop an Australian aged care sector that can meet the challenges of our rapidly ageing population.

There are 2.8 million people aged 65 and over in Australia, and by 2047 there will be 7.2 million. Without planning the care and support of older Australians, it is impossible to have a complete policy discussion about the future of social care or health, yet in Australia there is no public debate or discourse about the issues facing aged care both now and into the future.

There are both short- and long- term pressures facing providers of aged care. We have just completed a national project across the UnitingCare network looking at the pressures on residential aged care and so that is where I will focus this morning, acknowledging the very significant challenges facing community care now and into the future.

Providing aged care for all Australians faces a number of long term challenges:

- *An ageing population:* Between now and 2047 the number of working age Australians will rise by about one-fifth while the number of older people will more than double, and the number of very old will more than quadruple.
- *An ageing workforce:* As the pressure for aged care increases, the pool of available workers will decrease. Our line staff are ageing and we find it difficult to attract and retain younger staff.
- *A more diverse population:* Changes in Australian society over the past thirty years are beginning to be reflected in the older people seeking services and supports. Australia's diverse population will require more specialised and appropriate services.
- *Long-term health conditions:* Chronic and 'lifestyle' diseases such as diabetes and heart disease will add to the pressure on services. Dementia is increasing, necessitating significant changes in health and care management.
- *Decline in informal care:* The structure of families and society is changing, with the result that there are fewer carers available to meet the needs of an ageing population. This means a greater reliance on formal, paid care.
- *Sustainable funding:* According to Australian Government Treasury projections, expenditure on aged care will consume 2 per cent of GDP by the middle of the century – more than double the current level. It is not at all clear how this increase in cost will be met.

There are also immediate challenges putting pressure on the capacity of the aged care sector to provide equitable and sustainable residential care:

- *Capital funding:* Recent estimates predict a funding shortfall for residential capital development between 2008 and 2020 of \$5.7 billion. In recent years the cost of building has risen by up to 6 per cent per year.

- *Recurrent funding:* Funding for residential care is being squeezed by rising costs — in particular staffing pressures. Key funding programs for aged care are changing or have an uncertain future.
- *Workforce pressures:* In the midst of an acute national skills crisis the aged care sector is under particular pressure. Aged care staff are paid less than equivalent staff in the acute health sector, resulting in chronic skill shortages.
- *Burden of regulation:* Our Regulation Taskforce has recognised that the burden of regulation on aged care providers is excessive. Processes are unwieldy and divert substantial staff time away from actual care.

And of course, any failure of residential care provision has direct consequences for the acute health system and people's quality of life if older people are forced into hospital beds. This risk is immediate and it is severe. Much evidence suggests that the aged care sector in Australia is reaching a tipping point:

- Data from a 2007 survey indicates a severe downturn in the financial viability of care homes with over 80 per cent of care homes running a deficit.
- In Western Australia, only 65 per cent of new funded residential places offered by the government have been taken up.
- There are examples across Australia of facilities that cannot operate at full capacity due to staffing shortages, despite strong demand.
- Recent evidence indicates that care home residents are receiving as little as one hour of care a day.

Does this all sound familiar? Meeting the short and long term challenges for aged care requires coordinated and concerted action by service providers and government. We have a new government in Australia who are making all the right noises about social inclusion and a national reform agenda. Our Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, speaks of bringing together social and economic policy to build prosperity informed by justice. He has announced the development of a national social inclusion agenda and just yesterday at the ACOSS conference in Melbourne, our acting Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, committed to work in partnership with the community sector to ensure that every Australian has access to the means and opportunity for a decent life. Watch this space.

Justice and compassion in action. It's clear from the challenges facing us in the provision of decent aged care that action is indeed what is required. Is there a special place and role for faith based organisations in the provision of supports and services to older people and their families? What are the challenges that faith based organisations face in holding to their course of a primary focus on the delivery of services and supports first to those who need them most, in the kind of environment I have just described?

I believe that there is a distinctive value add that a faith based not for profit, or *for people*, organisation brings. While there are clear differences between the standard and type of service delivered by profit driven and not for profit organisations, we deliver much the same services in much the same way as the rest of the not for profits. Our point of difference is that our faith base gives us a shared goal and impetus to act in pursuit of it. The Uniting Church in Australia speaks of the reconciling of all of creation as one way of expressing the ends we seek.

UnitingCare provides services and supports to whoever needs them. But because we are guided by Christian values, we have a particular focus on those who are the most vulnerable and at need. This focus arises from the Christian understanding of God's preferential option for the poor. Not God's greater love for the poor – God's great love is completely without bias and for every single person – but God's bias to *doing* something *first* to address injustice and vulnerability.

In social services, you can think of it as an approach that invites us to be serious about delivering services first to those who need them most. It's an approach that also compels us to advocate with and on behalf of those who need our services.

I believe that faith based organizations have a clear vision of the ends we seek as we pursue justice and better quality of life outcomes for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Let me share one expression this vision with you, articulated beautifully by a friend of mine who has spent his life in the service of others, in the slums of India and in inner city Brisbane:

“At the heart of humanity lies hope. A hope that is as necessary for our survival as earth, air and water.

And at the heart of all hope is a dream – a dream that something, somewhere, sometime will change. I have a dream.

I dream of a world in which all the resources of the earth are shared equally between all the people of the earth so that even the most disadvantaged among us will be able to meet their most basic needs with dignity and joy.

I dream of a great society of small communities interdependently cooperating to practice political, socioeconomic, cultural and personal righteousness and peace.

I dream of vibrant neighbourhoods where people relate to each other as neighbours.

I dream of people developing networks of friendship in which the private pain they carry deep down is allowed to surface and is shared openly in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and respect.

I dream of people understanding the difficulties they have in common, discerning the problems, discovering solutions, and working together in a spirit of cooperation for personal growth and social change according to the visionary agenda of Jesus of Nazareth.

I dream of every church in every locality acting as a catalyst to make this vision of a renewed world a reality.

Maybe you share some of my dream. It's a dream many of us live for and not a few of us would die for."

*Dave Andrews, from Can You Hear the Heartbeat*

Justice and compassion. Justice as we act for transformed lives and communities in which everyone belongs, can contribute and is valued. Compassion as we put people at the centre and lead with our hearts and guts as we journey in solidarity with those we exist to serve. We face some serious challenges as we strive to operate as faith based organisations in pursuit of our dream of a transformed world.

Our first and greatest challenge is about the co-option of our identity. This challenge could be cast as that of staying grounded. In the not for profit community sector we are

organisations embedded in community. We have relational links and connections into the communities we work in that go back decades and more. And while we are efficient and effective, we are not business. The seductive call to mimic the corporate world must be seen for what it is – a challenge to our core identity. Efficiency and effectiveness, while important, are second order characteristics for us – enablers that help us deliver on our mission rather than our reason for being.

Equally, we have a wide reach and mandate but are not the state. We are not responsible for the establishment and maintenance of an adequate social safety net. While we can and will continue to work with government in the delivery and evaluation of essential support and caring services, in a democracy a social safety net is a core responsibility of the state.

I cannot overstate the crucial nature of this challenge. If we do not have a very clear understanding of our identity and mission then we will forever be at the mercy of funding and political pressures, and will find it extraordinarily difficult to navigate the complex and ever- changing terrain of an ageing population with multiple and complex needs. It is beyond time that we stopped letting others define us as what we are not - “not for profit”, “non-government” – and named ourselves for what we are – “for people”, “for a world reconciled”, “for justice and compassion”. Taking control of our identity is a crucial step to our emancipation from being merely service providers to becoming partners, with government and with the people, families and communities that we serve.

I actually think that as faith based organisations we are called to be more than partners – I believe that we are called to be revolutionaries in pursuit of justice for all. What might our service systems look like if we seriously put people at the centre of all our planning and action? What if we developed services in each community in partnership with those people, families and networks who expect to use them? What if we entered into serious, servant partnerships with our service users and advocated together for better, more just aged care funding, policy and regulation? What if we saw service provision as a means to the end of improved quality of life and so wrapped around and through our service provision relationship and meaning?

Another challenge to us is the cult of the individual. We’ve seen a re-embracing of conservatism over the past few years that has brought with it a shift of focus from the

community to the individual. Systems analysis, particularly around social policy, has become secondary to an understanding that people's lives are what they've made them. It can be tempting in any service delivery system to conceptualise those accessing supports as stand alone individuals rather than acknowledging that the smallest unit of humanity is the individual in relationship. Nowhere is this more tempting than in residential aged care services.

And while individualism and minimal government intervention socially is on the rise, the irony is that government funding bodies are moving rapidly toward micro control of contracts and of service delivery itself – raising serious questions about the respective roles of the state and the non-government organization.

Our third challenge relates to the increasing complexity of demand we face. At the government level, divisions of responsibility make it difficult for well designed and targeted services to be developed and funded, making holistic service construction and delivery problematic.

While both the quantity and complexity of demand for services continues to increase, funding has not increased commensurately and is increasingly constrained to predetermined activity. The competitive nature of most current funding regimes has had a significant effect on the community sector, eroding our core values of cooperation, interdependence and solidarity.

Rising to meet the challenges we face will require us to take a good long look at ourselves, as a good mate of mine says. We must claim our place. We are a critical social partner with government and other civil society actors in shaping our communities and nation, and addressing complex social issues. Together, we can make a difference.

Let me share a story from my own experiences in Australia. My friend who runs a UnitingCare organisation delivering aged care wrote a letter, in despair, to the Minister about her mother's experience in a profit driven residential aged care facility recently. I'd like to share parts of that letter with you:

“As not-for-profit providers we cannot provide the luxuries or the elegant surroundings or the additional services but we are committed to providing care with a focus on dignity and respect, compassion and value of the individual.



My mother had a stroke three and a half years ago. When she was discharged from the “rehabilitation” hospital with three days notice, the only appropriate facility that we could find for her was an Extra Service facility at a cost beyond her own resources.

At the facility in which my mother is resident it is very unusual for her to have the same carer two days running. The level of staff is such that staff run constantly and the few residents who are intellectually competent, like my mother, hate to place an additional load by asking for anything.

It is expected that families will dust, tidy, put away mail, used newspapers, magazines, dead flowers and generally deal with everything other than the basic cleaning of a room.

There is no time to talk to the resident, to pass something that is needed or to exchange the time of day. Bells can, and do, remain unanswered for long periods and the staff are genuinely attending to other people’s needs. There are simply too few of them. This is how the for-profit sector is making money out of aged care.

I know of the lengths that are gone to, for instance, to minimise the costs of food in the kitchens of some for-profit facilities. I know this because we have been berated for not doing so ourselves. Using cornmeal and colouring for instance, instead of puréed broccoli. This is how the for-profit sector is making money out of aged care.

My father-in-law died about six weeks ago, he had been resident in a facility in country Victoria - Council run and subsidised. The care he received there which was every bit as good as the care that we could have provided to him at home, cost him nothing. His room was dusted and tidied, his clothes were always immaculate and he was treated with nothing but affection and respect. He died with dignity, having spent his recent years at peace, in good care.

My mother, on the other hand, at extraordinary cost to the family, lives every day fearful that she will have to ask for something.”

Do we provide services differently from profit driven organisations? You bet we do. We whose bottom line is people not profit ensure that all our financial resources flow into care. We who are faith based for people organisations stand firm in a Big Story that's all about justice, fairness, a decent life for all. We respect the inherent dignity and understand the unique worth of each person, we strive to deliver the highest quality of care, and we understand that our care is only as good as the quality of life people experience because of it.

It takes a special organization; and dedicated, professional, and compassionate staff and volunteers to deliver services targeted at people who are disadvantaged, in a way that improves their quality of life outcomes over the long haul.

In the community sector we have worked hard over the past few decades to develop models that involve working *with* those who use our services. Models in which we acknowledge the serious system barriers that give rise to disadvantage in people's lives. Models that focus and build on people's strengths. And most importantly, models that actively work at multiple levels: with the individual, the family, the community, and the system.

We understand the need for integrated service delivery, for multi-disciplinary team work. We are passionate about putting those people who need the services and supports that we provide at the centre of our doing and our being. We know that service delivery and advocacy form part of the same essential continuum. And because we are for people rather than profit, and operate out of a justice stance, we benchmark all our activity and planning against the single question: "*What is in the best interests of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged?*"

Back to people. Where we begin, and where we end. Where we are grounded and the reason we do what we do. People.

Does it matter that you do what you do in aged care services? Do you bring anything distinctive and value add to your communities? Yes! You bring a different understanding of what it means to be human, a serious commitment to justice, human rights and hope, and an inclusive social schema which has a valued place for everyone. You matter. What you do matters. And most of all, those you work with and on behalf of matter.

You are engaged in deeply subversive activity – not just meeting people at their point of need, but acting for justice and for hope, to transform your communities to be places of connection and belonging for everyone. You work and hope for an alternate vision of a shared future – of fair and inclusive interdependent communities in which all people have the resources and opportunities they need to reach their potential, and belong, contribute to and be valued.

I applaud you for taking seriously the gospel call for justice and compassion in action, and for your willingness to engage seriously with what that means for your organizations, and the services they deliver.

I urge you to continue to challenge the status quo and demand just outcomes for those people in the communities that you are a part of and serve who struggle to live with dignity in the face of vulnerability and disadvantage. I urge you to continue to stand for inclusion, and against inequality. Continue to challenge government to meet its obligation to provide a decent social safety net for all, advocate for better social policy, and lobby for decent provisions and arrangements so that you have the resources and flexibility you need to provide the care your services users deserve.

There is a Maori proverb that goes, I understand: “Tear out the heart of the flax, and where will the Bellbird sit? Ask me what is the most important thing in the world, I will tell you – it is people, it is people, it is people.”

You represent ‘for people’ organisations. You understand that people matter. Your challenge is to continue to rise to meet the changing needs of people and communities across New Zealand with faith, compassion and courage.

I hope that this conference re-energises you to work for a New Zealand characterized by justice and compassion in action. As Margaret Mead famously said “People say to me that the actions of a few won’t change the world. I tell you, it’s the only thing that ever has”.