

Honoring the Sebah: Redeeming Long-Term Care for the Elderly

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**Abstract**

Honoring the Sebah: Redeeming Long-Term Care for the Elderly reflects on how to

supply Kingdom care for those in long-term care services. Looking at data and scripture, this paper will examine and lay out a plan for how the local body of Christ - Grove Reformed Church - can respond well to those who are socially excluded, practice social inclusion, and speak the life and light of Christ into these places and lives.

### **Introduction**

Both of my father's parents had lived the remainder of their lives in a senior housing facility that offered 24 hour care. This was not an easy decision for my father to make, however it became clear that my grandmother could no longer take care of her husband as he was in the throes of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Within a year of my grandfather entering the facility, my grandmother followed suit as a fall had caused her to remain in a wheelchair due to the fact that her body would not support a hip replacement. They both needed care and attention that they could not receive at home. This is not an uncommon narrative, my husband's grandmother spent the remainder of her years at the same facility with a frail body due to years of medical mistreatment and suffered from dementia which accelerated upon entering the facility. Neither household could care for their parents the way their culture dictated that they did rather they had to submit to allowing their parents to be cared for by a third party because the society they lived in told them they couldn't afford otherwise. In the moment, this felt like the best choice - the only choice - in retrospect, this was the choice made already for them. The greatest lack was that all parties needed a deep rooted love, companionship, community, and a vehicle to be heard.

### **Defining Terms**

While there are a variety of people in various long-term care service and support systems, this paper will focus on those who are 65+ and socially excluded. These are individuals that for one reason or another are disconnected from or do not have society, community, and or families.

The long term care services I am speaking of are assisted living - facilities that provide 24 hour care, assisted living program - publicly subsidized housing with assisted living services, homebound, assisted living residence - apartment style facilities with assisted living services, comprehensive personal care homes - licensed facility that provide room and board with assisted living services when needed, nursing homes, and residential care communities.

## **Section I: The Rising Urgency for Reform in Long-Term Care**

### Global and National Data and Statistics

Aging populations requiring long-term care services and supports are expected to increase significantly into the 21st century. Gerontologists John Bond and Peter Coleman report that this steady worldwide increase among older adult populations is due to “improvements in living conditions, sanitation, and health care.”<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the CDC reported the number of Americans over age 65 is projected to shift from 47.8 million in 2015 to over 87.9 million in 2050, representing an increase of 84% and comprising 22% of the population.<sup>2</sup> As this population grows, it poses two significant and unique challenges that will likely compound the problem of social exclusivity among the elderly.

First, illnesses which increase the probability of social isolation, like depression and Alzheimer’s dementia, are prevalent among this demographic. The Alzheimer’s Association reports: “By 2050, the number of people age 65 and older with Alzheimer’s dementia may grow to a projected 13.8 million.”<sup>3</sup> As recent as 2015-16, patients with Alzheimer’s or some other

<sup>1</sup> Peter Coleman and John Bond, *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, 2nd Ed., (London: Sage, 1993), as cited in, Innes A., Archibald C., and Murphy C., *Dementia and Social Inclusion: Marginalised Groups and Marginalised Areas of Dementia Research, Care, and Practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Harris-Kojetin and Manisha Sengupta, Lendon Jessica Penn, V. Rome, R. Valverde, C. Caffrey, “Long-term care providers and services users in the United States, 2015–2016,” *National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Health Stat* 3(43), 2019, 2.

<sup>3</sup> “Facts and Figures,” *Alzheimer’s Association*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/facts-figures>

form of dementia make up roughly 50% of those living in nursing homes, 45% of those living in hospices, about 30% being served through home health agencies, and about 30% of those participating in adult day services.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the CDC reports that major depression in older adults rises to 13.5% among “those who require home healthcare and to 11.5% in older hospital patients.”<sup>5</sup> Long time lecturer in Dementia studies and member of the Bradford Dementia Group Errollyn Bruce agrees that, “The pitfalls for older people in general are magnified in the case of people for whom the stigma of mental illness is added to ageing.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, strained family support systems impact social isolation among this demographic. The CDC, citing a 2004 Congressional Budget Office Report on Financing Long-Term Care for the Elderly, reports that “Decreasing family size and increasing employment rates among women may reduce the traditional pool of family caregivers, further stimulating demand for paid long-term care services.”<sup>7</sup>

Health and social factors like those mentioned above, in addition to sociocultural marginalization, increase the probability of social isolation among this age group. Social isolation, in turn, adversely impacts the health and well-being of those affected. In 2019, the Pew Research Center Fact Tank reported, adults 60 and up who were living alone—37% of the total 60 and older population—spent an average of 10.3 of their waking hours, excluding personal activities, alone.<sup>8</sup> In a 2017 study, “social isolation was ... associated with an increased

<sup>4</sup> Harris-Kojetin L., Sengupta M., Lendon J.P., Rome V., Valverde R., Caffrey C., 22.

<sup>5</sup> “Depression is Not a Normal Part of Growing Older,” CDC, April 30, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/mentalhealth/depression.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Anthea Inne ed., Carole Archibald ed., and Charlie Murphy ed., *Dementia and Social Inclusion: Marginalised Groups and Marginalised Areas of Dementia Research, Care, and Practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), 124.

<sup>7</sup> “Financing Long-Term Care for the Elderly,” Congressional Budget Office, April 30, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yd6lhzun>, as cited in, Harris-Kojetin L., Sengupta M., Lendon J.P., Rome V., Valverde R., Caffrey C., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Gretchen Livingston, “On Average, Older Adults Spend Over Half Their Waking Hours Alone,” *Pew Research Center Fact Tank News in the Numbers*, April 30, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y5tbzdtg>

risk of all-cause mortality, with 23.5% of people dying by the census date in the group defined as socially isolated, compared with 13.7% in the nonisolated group.”<sup>9</sup>

#### State and Local Data and Statistics

A 2010 report from the New Jersey Department of Health and senior services found that 31% of women and 15% of men aged 60 and above live alone, while 41% of women and 13% of men 60 and older are widowed.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, 17% of all New Jersey suicides are composed of those 65 and older.<sup>11</sup> Social isolation among the elderly population is not only a global and national problem, it is a local community problem. New Jersey is ranked 9th amongst states with the largest populations 65 years and older.<sup>12</sup> Although Hudson County is amongst the youngest counties in New Jersey, it ranks among the top 3 counties with the largest noninstitutionalized disabled elderly communities (41–44%).<sup>13</sup> In addition, 31–39% adults 65 years and older report fair to poor health status,<sup>14</sup> while Hudson county ranks highest of all amongst populations 60 and older reporting no physical activity in the last month<sup>15</sup>, compounding the problem of social isolation and social exclusion among this group.

### **Section II: A Biblical Theology and Hermeneutic of Honoring the Elderly**

#### The Status of Sebah in Ancient Israel

Sebah, the gray hairs, the gray headed, or the old age were the ones in ancient Israel who were seen as the elders.<sup>16</sup> They who regarded as ones who were wise, had experience, and ones

<sup>9</sup> Samuel G. Smith, Sarah E. Jackson, Lindsay C. Kobayashi, and Andrew Steptoe, “Social Isolation, Health Literacy, and Mortality Risk: Findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing,” *Health Psychology* 37, no. 2 (February 2018): 164.

<sup>10</sup> “Blueprint for Healthy Aging in New Jersey,” Department of Health and Senior Services, April 30, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y826fhlr>, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>16</sup> “Sebah”, Strong’s Hebrew, Biblehub.com, April 30th, 2020, [https://biblehub.com/hebrew/strongs\\_7872.htm](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/strongs_7872.htm)

whom you sought counsel from. Though the modern world may idolize youth and consider old age a burden, the world of the bible saw aging as an award for experience and an emblem of wisdom.<sup>17</sup> The elders were the teachers of the law and the ones who resolved disputes.<sup>18</sup> They administered the law and controlled the tyranny and oppression in early Israel, “The elders served as an assembly upholding the civil rights of the members of the village and protecting the rights of those without a household such as the widow, the orphan, and the alien.”<sup>19</sup> Though this role was traditionally held by the fathers of the households in the village, even the widows of the villages participated in the judicial structure by protesting the assembly when the poor and the powerless were disposed thus playing a part in the justice system by their perseverance.<sup>20</sup> The father and the mother were seen as the most important members of the household, for they were the ones that functioned as the protector, provider and educator of their household.<sup>21</sup> In practical terms ancient Israel provided healthcare to members of their household, grown children cared for the aged and infirm parents, and parents were also protected against abuse from their children.<sup>22</sup>

#### The Mispahah of the Hebrew Bible

However even those roles within the household or family unit were not done within isolation, “family life was not distinct from whatever roles, prescribed according to age or gender, that individual family members may have played.”<sup>23</sup> Israel saw themselves as households, clans, tribes, villages, as a people group. They functioned not as separate individuals rather as units of people who worked, supported, and lived alongside one another. The world of

17 Don C. Benjamin and Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1993), xviii.

18 Benjamin, Don C. and Victor H. Matthews, 123.

19 Ibid., 122.

20 Ibid., 122 and 132.

21 Benjamin and Matthews., 22.

22 Leo G. Perdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 195.

23 Carol Myers, “The Family in Early Israel”, in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 21.

Israelites was one of community and not individualistic identity, “The Hebrews were not just households with the same biological parents but households with the same sociological experience and a shared legal commitment to one another.”<sup>24</sup> The household functioned as a public character, their economic and emotional needs - formal and informal - impacted the entire village and communities that depended upon them.<sup>25</sup> Psalm 68:5-6 says, “he sets the lonely in families,” the people of God in the Hebrew Bible understood the world did not function in a vacuum. This is evident in the Mosaic law, as the people of Israel move out of their identity as captives and into their identity freed, they are called to bring those on the fringes of society into that freedom as well.

#### Old things, Offices, and the Elderly in the New Testament World

##### *Jesus and the Gospels*

Despite all the honor and reverence attributed with age in the Old Testament—as well as the wisdom associated with it in intertestamental literature—the gospel authors seem, at first glance, to contradict this Jewish cultural axiom. A classic example can be found in Matthew 9:16,17, where the fasting habits of Jesus’ disciples are put into question by the Pharisees. Jesus responds in part by saying, “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment,” likewise, he adds, “Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins.” Similar accounts occur in Mark 2:21–22, and Luke 5:36–39. The word for *old* in this context is *παλαιός* (*palaios*), and is used exclusively in the gospels in this account. More than mere age is implied here: Jesus had rendered futile the covenant that once pointed forward to his arrival. At last the Messiah arrived, thus the law, the temple, and Jewish genealogy were made as useless as old wineskins holding new wine. Jesus wasn’t dishonoring the older generation, rather he refused to honor their

24 Ibid., 8.

25 Ibid., 40.

outdated systems.

Occasionally, the word πατήρ (*patér*) is used in the gospels to refer to ancestors. Jesus employs the use of πατήρ to suggest that the Pharisees *did* indeed show reverence to their ancestors, except that their ancestors were those that persecuted the prophets (Matthew 23:30). Used again in Matthew 15, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of nullifying the word of God for the sake of tradition by withholding help from their πατήρ (*patér*, father) and μητήρ (*matér*, mother). In these two instances, Jesus displays reverence for ancestors and the elderly in the negative, i.e., by pointing to what *false* reverence looks like. In the latter case, Jesus points out that caring for one's parents remains critical to the life of the believer.

We will explore the use of πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*, elder) further below. In the gospels, the word is almost exclusively referring to office rather than age: members of the sanhedrin (i.e., πρεσβύτερος) accused Jesus along with chief priests (Matthew 16:21) and scribes (Luke 20:1). Jesus attacks the old way of thinking, rather than the age, of his adversaries.

The Scriptures teach that as Jesus was on the cross, with his mother and the disciple whom he loved nearby, he says “Woman, here is your son” and to the disciple, “Here, is your mother” (John 19:26–27). Essentially, Jesus restructures family unit dynamics to meet the needs of the most vulnerable member—in this case his mother—who had potentially been widowed and now left without a son as well. A similar account occurs in Luke 7:11–17, when Jesus' path intersects a funeral procession. The mother of the son who had died was already a widow, now making her amongst the most vulnerable members in society. By bringing her son back to life, Jesus restores her social mobility, social inclusion, and dignity.

### *Pauline Writings*

Paul's use of παλαιός (*palaios*, old) in his letters is exclusively negative, however, he

never uses it to refer to ancestors or the elderly. It is always used to refer, as Jesus did, to the things that were rendered useless upon the arrival of Christ: the old leaven (1 Corinthians 5:7), the old covenant (2 Corinthians 3:14), and the old self (Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:9, Romans 6:6). Referring to those older in age, Paul consistently uses the word πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*, elder) or πατήρ (*patér*, father) and μητήρ (*matér*, mother). They are to be honored (Ephesians 6:2) and treated like family (1 Timothy 5:1). Indeed, the Christian that does not care for any member of his or her household—elderly included—has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

### *Systematic Theological Implications*

Overflowing love that embraces the most vulnerable within a community is not anachronistic to God. On the contrary, it is embedded in his eternal character. Speaking of the Triune God of Christianity, theological adviser for the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), Michael Reeves writes, “Here is a God who is not essentially lonely, but who has been loving for all eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit. Loving others is not a strange or novel thing for this God at all; it is at the foot of who he is.”<sup>26</sup> When the apostle John writes “God is love,” it is not to speak in moral abstractions or poetic metaphors; rather, it means God has *always* loved for all eternity (1 John 4:8). Thus, when the people of God share this love with their parents and the elderly, they wrap them up into God’s loving community.

### Historical Perspectives

During the early medieval period, the church generally remained dedicated to caring for the older generations. Written in 409 a.d., Saint Jerome wrote to the wealthy widow Ageruchia

<sup>26</sup> Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012) 41.

that “the honor of parents should focus on the actual provision of the necessities of life ... poor parents should be supported by their children.”<sup>27</sup> At large, vulnerable elderly and aging populations were supported when possible.<sup>28</sup>

In the United States, early settlers who arrived were predominantly young and able-bodied enough to survive the voyage across the Atlantic. Professor of Gerontology Graham D. Rowles writes “the New World was hardly a hospitable place for the old or disabled. In the first century of settlement ... colonial governments provided little institutional care.”<sup>29</sup> The English Poor Law of 1601 mandated that the old be sheltered alongside their offspring. Others however, made use of legal loopholes—at the cost of being chastised by clergy—and continued to neglect their elderly.<sup>30</sup> By the 1700’s, the elderly who had no one to care for them became the responsibility of the colony or state, who would raise funds to find a “suitable family to shelter them.”<sup>31</sup> Not everyone was so fortunate however. Some colonies escorted the disabled elderly with no social support system to the town limits, others escorted them to their town of origin, and still others barred them from entering the community completely.<sup>32</sup>

This led to the development of the first almshouse (c. 1664) in Boston, then followed by New York City in the 1720’s, to support not only the disabled elderly, but the handicapped, blind, insane, and functioned with little to no regulation.<sup>33</sup> Disabled elderly were gathered with orphans, widows, immigrants, and the mentally ill. By the 1800’s, laws mandated that any

27 Thomas C. Oden and Christopher Hall, Eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. II, Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 98.

28 Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2002) 170.

29 Graham D. Rowles, & Teaster, P. B., *Long-Term Care in an Aging Society: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2015) 35.

30 Ibid., 36.

31 Ibid., 37.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 38.

elderly person who desired public support was required to stay in state-subsidized poorhouses.<sup>34</sup> This created a dilemma for any household that didn't quite earn enough to keep their elderly at home, and led to increased social isolation among the elderly and disabled.

During the Second Great Awakening (c. 1795–1835), poorhouse reform became the focus of the church who perceived redemptive potential in individuals instituted living poorhouses.<sup>35</sup> Poorhouses developed throughout the 19th century into old-age homes and other places of refuge and rehabilitation. Established in 1817 Philadelphia, the Indigent Widow's and Single Women's Society was the first old-age home in the U.S. Native-born elderly women perceived as "too respectable to be classed with the poor" and immigrant populations.<sup>36</sup>

Despite efforts in the 20th century through publicly-subsidised pension programs (1911) and social security benefits (1935), to reduce the demand for elderly long-term care, "the period that followed—from the late 1930s to the early 1960s—saw only modest increases in federal social welfare activity"<sup>37</sup> writes Robert B. Hudson, professor and chair of the Department of Social Welfare Policy of Boston University. Today AARP reports that as of 2018, 7.9 million Americans age 65 and up, require long-term care services and support, paying a median cost between \$18,700 weekly and \$100,400 total for a private room in a nursing home.<sup>38</sup> Medicaid currently covers 57% of this national expense.<sup>39</sup>

### **Section III: A 3-Year Strategy for Kingdom Transformation**

#### Grove's Unique Qualifications

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>37</sup> Janet M. Wilmoth and Kenneth F. Ferraro, *Gerontology: Perspectives and Issues, 3rd Edition* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2007), 308.

<sup>38</sup> Edem Hado and Harriet Komisar, "Long-Term Services and Supports," *AARP Public Policy Institute August 2019*, May 2, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ycft9y2s>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Grove Reformed Church of North Bergen, NJ has been part of the township for 177 years. While Grove, its congregants, and surrounding communities have looked changed, participating in the community has always been one of their attributes. The Grove of today serves its community in a variety of ways all stemming from two of their core values: For Hudson County and Radical Generosity. It is these values along with: Next Generation, Shaped by Scripture, and Breaking Bread together, that gives them the foundation to begin engaging with the elderly intentionally in long-term care services. While the core values give them the Gospel foundation, Grove's connection to the township as one of the biggest participants in the town's school supply drive, parades, festivals, and other ecumenical and interfaith activities give them a tier to climb on. Ultimately though, it is Grove's members who are 65+ who are living in long-term care services and support facilities, that give them the connection already established to be present in these places and its residents' lives. Grove is in a position to build upon this relationship, further deepen the need that the community has, and live out their values.

#### Kingdom Compassion Through Listening

Statistics may help to see the problem of social isolation among the elderly with greater detail however, listening to the people that are experiencing, enduring, and coping with it is a different matter entirely. Myself and a core-team will spend the first year visiting HudsonView Rehab and the Harborage Nursing Homes, and listening to first-hand accounts of people who are suffering from loneliness and social isolation. We will produce qualitative research based on ethnographic interviews which will produce data specific to the context we hope to serve.

#### Casting Vision and Building Community

Leaning into the second year, we will cast vision and recruit. We will visit those whose lives have been impacted by having a loved relative suffering from social isolation while

receiving long-term care services and support. As a guiding coalition of Christians and local citizens, we will meet four times a year to share our concerns and solutions, and present them as one voice at North Bergen’s Senior Programs, Senior Transportation, as well as county level Public Health Council meetings.

### Intergenerational Engagement

Working alongside local high school internship programs, as well as church youth and young-adult groups, create a space for intergenerational engagement. Activities can include conversation, board games, and low-impact sports (i.e., table tennis, bocce ball, badminton, bowling, etc.). At the moment, many who live in nursing homes or have elderly friends and relatives, have lost people dear to them due to the current pandemic. In the coming years, intergenerational engagement can serve as a social support system as they process grief.

### Indigenous Empowerment

Empowering indigenous leaders is typically not the kind of discussion you have when the mission field is a senior living center. Spiritual gifts assessments are typically the sort of thing you administer to able-bodied youth. Nevertheless, the elderly have much to offer the body of Christ. By year three, I hope to begin empowering Christian older adults to minister in various long-term care services and support contexts with the gifts expressed through them by the Spirit.

### Conclusion

God tells the people of Israel, “Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save,”<sup>40</sup> in the Kingdom of God one’s age does not determine worth or value. God says: I will be with you, I have made you, I am the one who sustains you, I will carry you and I will save you. Though we live in a world whose rhetoric enforces individualistic ideologies and praises youth, the church’s response - as a people who is

40 Isaiah 46:4 ESV

carried and cared for by God, a people called to carry and care for others- is to care for those whom society has pushed to the side, whose families cannot carry them alone, and who need to see, know, feel, and touch the presence of an almighty God who heals, saves, and is with them.

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