



NEW HUMANITY of the Focolare Movement

Ageing Persons from the Perspective of a United World

Proposal for the Second World Assembly on Ageing

Madrid, 8-12 April 2002

An international workshop on ageing held by New Humanity of the Focolare Movement in 1997 assembled over 1,000 specialists and experts from a wide array of disciplines, coming from various continents, to explore the implications of an ageing population from many perspectives. The title was: "A Society for All Ages: The Ageing Person as a Resource for a United World". This document summarizes the findings that the conference organizers presented to the United Nations in preparation for the International Year of the Ageing in 1999. They emphasized 1) the understanding that the ageing is a challenge for a new model of society, 2) the importance of fostering a culture that perceives the ageing person as a resource and supportive of his/her full participation in the life of nations and communities, and 3) the need to promote fraternity and unity among all social components and all generations.

1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Sharing is the Goal

1.1 The ageing persons are often considered as liabilities for society and this perspective can be a source of inter-generational tensions. Resources are limited, yet we believe that if communities explored how to use these resources more creatively, most of them will have enough for all their people including the ageing.

1.2 A family puts its resources in common and uses them in favor of the weakest achieving a sensible distribution which is beneficial for the development of the family. Likewise, in many communities it has been noted that close relationships based on reciprocity and fraternity enable people to overcome formidable obstacles, generate unexpected economic resources, make better use of natural resources, and improve the circulation of these resources among all.

1.3 The most valuable contribution to a community comes from the people who belong to the community and the relationships established among them. We need to encourage the re-evaluation of the criteria used for judging the value of work and to go beyond a uni-dimensional concept of productivity and the mere pursuit of profit. This could be used as a starting point for redefining the role and the contribution of the ageing. We need to develop a sense of social equity encouraging us to balance our personal needs against the needs of those who are most disadvantaged in society.

1.4 The ageing population generates a growing market for new products, services and professions. Today it is no longer adequate to think of an older person as a passive recipient of products and services

created to satisfy needs, be they real or induced, established by others. It is advantageous to view ageing people not as passive consumer, but as protagonists, together with their families, in their decision making process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That we re-evaluate the human contribution to society, beginning with a recognition of the value of every human person and the “gift” that each of us is for the others.
- ◆ That we view available natural resources as a common patrimony to be administered for the good of each and every one of us – encourage all to bring about a voluntary redistribution of these resources in complete freedom.
- ◆ That we consider the idea that only reciprocity in which personal needs are measured in relation to the needs of the most disadvantaged can allow for the just achievement of social equity.
- ◆ That we review the range of products and services presently available to the ageing person, identifying and subsidizing those for which supply is most inadequate.

2. INTERGENERATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

A World Vision

2.1 In today’s world, people are highly mobile and this mobility puts diverse peoples and cultures in contact with one another in an unprecedented multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic mosaic.

2.2 Migration presents difficulties in assimilation and integration. Conflicts arise along with opportunities to develop new goals and capabilities. When the uniqueness of diverse peoples can be freely expressed each person can realize his/her full potential benefiting both himself/herself and society. This permits societies to advance towards a greater unity within the universal family.

2.3 In our fast moving, modern society, elderly people have the particular ability to preserve and transmit values, traditions and cultural characteristics to younger generations. The capacity of each generation to build its own future depends on its ability to internalise the experiences and the roots of its past.

2.4 The challenge of migration is not met by giving up one’s own cultural roots in order to be immersed in an indistinguishable, assimilated humanity but rather by being able to reconcile dissimilarity and unity through fraternity, friendship, respect, acceptance, and dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That relationships among peoples and groups be reviewed from a perspective, which values diversity as a benefit, putting it at the service of peoples and countries.
- ◆ That recognition be given to the precious contribution that older generations can give towards preserving cultural roots, collective memory, and wisdom from generation to generation.

3. THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON AT ALL AGES

A Quality of Life Ethic

3.1 Ageing persons often have experienced an inner refinement paring down all life's experiences to highlight what is essential and to discard all that is superfluous. Often, people refer to the "quality of life" as if a biomedical gauge exists for determining one's ability to live with an uncomfortable, painful, or debilitating condition. The concept of "quality of life" must be expanded to include all the dimensions of the human person and, above all, a person's self-perception of his or her own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual state.

3.2 The ageing person, as an active member of society, beginning with the extended family, is fully entitled to the same rights and duties as others. Such rights, based on the common value of human dignity, must be translated into laws that guarantee the protection of the ageing person's full participation in the life of society according to their means and abilities.

3.3 Recognition of the importance of the extended family in society is declining sharply. The protection of the family is becoming limited to the expectation that they provide for material needs in cases of extreme indigence. In such situations, the family is unable to realize its full potential for the care of its elderly members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That laws acknowledge, value, and protect the elderly regardless of their physical or psychological state of health.
- ◆ That the extended family be valued as a resource in caring for aging family members offering them financial help and services so that the family may freely carry out its responsibilities.

4. A NEW CONCEPT OF HEALTH

The "Healthy Environment"

4.1 Life has value in itself, in any physical or psychological condition. Health and sickness are not opposing terms. Any environment becomes healthy if it enables people to create fraternal relationships with other people. Establishing new relationships helps people to make sense out of sickness and disabilities. As life evolves, health should be seen as the continual realization of an ever-new state of equilibrium. Besides the physical condition, a healthy environment also includes relationships with other people and with the surrounding environment.

4.3 A "healthy environment" exists in every situation in which people can express themselves in relationship to others. It does not alienate the sick and disabled regardless of age but helps to give meaning to their illness or disability.

4.4 For a new concept of a healthy environment to take root, a cultural change has to happen. In view of this, training of all social and health care workers should be reviewed with the intent of creating a new, ethically motivated concept of health care.

4.4 The offering of every kind of assistance, while rightfully centered on the needs of the individual, should include consideration of the family and the community as co-providers of this assistance.

4.5 Preparing for death is an extremely important stage of life and deserves special assistance. Those who provide this care need adequate preparation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That health care and assistance planning be redirected toward the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well being of the individual. These services should work as a flexible network of support and service to the patients and their families.
- ◆ That the preparation and training of all health care and social workers include a programme in which individuals are viewed in the totality of their human dimensions and relationships.
- ◆ That the process of rehabilitation be re-assessed with the purpose of not only restoring the patients' abilities and strengthening their autonomy, but also of facilitating their ability to form relationships while confirming their social dignity.
- ◆ That the assistance to the dying be reformulated with the point of view that euthanasia be emphatically rejected and that, at the same time, death be accepted as a natural event which is a long way from the aggressive medical treatment that is contrary to the person's dignity.

5. A LIVING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL AGES Balancing Functionality and Aesthetics

5.1 The environment may either accentuate the frailty of a person or alienate him/her from society. It may adapt to the frailty of the ageing person by accentuating their remaining capacities and making them feel completely integrated into the social environment.

5.2 In planning to create a "healthy environment" in the above sense, much can be done in the areas of construction of private homes and communal housing projects, urban planning, and various means of communication and transportation.

5.3 Designing and planning spaces with the needs of the elderly in mind - with green areas, indoor and outdoor accessibility - is a choice that will result in a more liveable environment for all, including children, the disabled, and people who are in good physical condition but who may be temporarily incapacitated.

5.4 Today's technology offers once unimaginable resources to facilitate assistance, to promote autonomy of the elderly, and to encourage them to participate in the life of the community. If chosen and used wisely and with competence, technology extends and promotes the individual's capabilities.

5.5 The quality of the man-made environment, technological aids, and personal assistance represent basic elements that are complementary to the support of the person's autonomy and they must be aimed towards this goal. Autonomy means continually recovering new balance in the relationships with oneself and others in everyday activities.

5.6 People are naturally inclined to focus on and to perceive the essence of existence in the later stages of their lives when they seem to be more sensitive to the aesthetic dimensions of their being. It is not by chance that the world's greatest works of art are the fruit of the artist's maturity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That buildings and urban areas be planned with accessibility and harmony in mind, for the purpose of promoting the general well being and of improving the relationship between ageing and younger people.
- ◆ That those responsible for the professional formation of housing planners offer them the opportunity to fully understand the needs of human persons of any age and at any level of physical ability so that they develop adequate and integrated solutions to problems.

- ◆ That technological research be promoted in the development and supply of mobility aid appliances and that there be intervention in matters of economic and organisational difficulties which often prevent the ageing from having access to aforementioned appliances.
- ◆ That care interventions and support services be reviewed for opportunities to promote the autonomy of the ageing person and their families.

6. EDUCATION ABOUT AGEING

A Culture based on Relationships

- 6.1 To adequately face the issues connected with the ageing of the population, a cultural transformation is needed. Society needs to collectively find new ways of looking at ageing and, consequently, to accept its limitations, suffering, sickness, and death.
- 6.2 Without trying to deny the burden that these realities represent in our lives, it seems necessary to review the hedonistic and hyper-efficient models commonly associated with the dignity of living and to look with serenity at opportunities for sharing what is painful.
- 6.3 Only in this way shall we be able to comfortably and sincerely welcome and care for those who have reached this precious stage of existence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That there be the promotion of an education and a culture capable of addressing our contemporaries on the subject of the painful moments in our own lives and in the lives of others. This will help bring about their acceptance, awareness, and understanding of the precious meaning that such painful moments may have.
- ◆ That institutions encourage moments of dialogue by the elderly with adults, youth, and children that can develop into a fertile process of mutual education and respect contributing to the peace, justice, and fraternity in the community.

7. COMMUNICATION AND AGEING

Ways to Reach Communion

- 7.1 The superficial and sporadic presentation of the ageing in the media, the substantial blackout of communication about ageing, and the difficulty caused by audience ratings seem to prevent an objective and serene communication about and on behalf of the ageing. The messages of the mass media, with the exception of advertising aimed at the elderly as consumers, seem to ignore the reality of life in its entirety.
- 7.2 In addition to the problem of production, strongly conditioned by economic dictates, there is a problem related to the people who make up the audience and who seem to be more interested in avoidance than in the truth. We believe we can achieve a shift in this tendency, a new culture, and a language that keeps up with the richness created by the demographic tendency of an ageing population.
- 7.3 The inimitable dignity of every human person is linked indissolubly to a person's natural drive to associate with others. Sharing about personal life experiences represents the root for an authentic communication, even before other ways of sharing, be it mass media or words, images, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That there be an investment in television programs about values which reveal the beauty and the depth of life, particularly in its last phase. Recognize ageing as a period of inner victories and of a time when one achieves a greater understanding of reality.
- ◆ That we exhort those responsible for the media to aim at a form of communications that is objective and educational and not neglectful of the ageing.
- ◆ That the media be educated and encouraged to have a positive view of technological aids which facilitate assistance and foster autonomy. These aids must not be presented as a stigma of a disability but as an instrument meant to enhance the life of the person and his/her relationships with others.

8. PLANNING AND ACHIEVING IN A COMMUNITARIAN WAY
A Society for All Ages

8.1 The fundamental assumption of the above analyses and proposals is of a society capable of accepting and appreciating every human person. The underlying hypothesis is that there is a political establishment that (as an expression of the social contract implicit among all members of society) has the understanding and skill for making choices that authentically promote the good of each and every person.

8.2 Such choices cannot be imposed from above, but will be the result of decisions formulated, planned, and realized with the firm and necessary contribution of the ageing. Neither will such choices produce oppressive intervention in the free choices of the members of society but, on the contrary, they will aim at giving each one the opportunity to best express his/her own creative potential. In the specific plan, the individual ageing persons, their families, the volunteers with all their energy, the medical and ancillary staff with their professional competence, and those with private resources will be given an opportunity to “give of themselves” for the realization of a society for all ages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ That in politics we aim at a new “pact of participation” among elderly citizens responsible for political and administrative choices; that we plan and carry out interventions intended to improve the lives of everyone.
- ◆ That with such a global perspective in this effort, we educate one another to measure our own choices in relation to the needs of the weakest and most disadvantaged person among us.

THESE CONSIDERATIONS ARE OFFERED TO ALL THOSE WHO WISH TO SEIZE THIS MOMENT OF DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A “SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES”.

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