

Work in the thin space between Hope and Despair – a focus on attending to meaning and purpose in social service delivery with older persons

Presbyterian Support Upper South Island (PSUSI) is a 100 year old people not profit social service agency. The organisation operates in the upper half of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of New Zealand. Since 2004 the agency has been pursuing a strategy aimed at supporting older people to live in the community with dignity and a sense of meaning and purpose. The strategy has evolved from PSUSI's base of services to young and old, and is built around dimensions of connectedness, cohesion, capability and coping, sustainability, and, creativity and hope.

An underlying theme is that the real work of the social services often occurs in the spiritual thin space between hope and despair. Many older people rely on health funded and oriented services like Home Support to remain in their own homes. As a Christian social service agency Presbyterian Support recognises that while practical help and support is important, there is often an unmet spiritual need related to a loss of optimism and retaining meaningfulness in the face of frailty and isolation. As a result social service and community support workers are uniquely placed to create opportunities for restoring the grace of relationships and ensuring older people are in meaningful communion with others in a way that suits each individual. In these days of secular and diverse workforces and communities, a subtle theology of hope is essential that finds the spiritual common ground between professional theory and Christian values and beliefs. The task is to weave a sustainable fabric of social connection that nurtures inclusion.

The conference presentation will focus on the organisational model being used and provide examples of the way the model and strategy creates a focus on meaning and participation tied to ideas of compassion and its component parts of social justice and interdependence - being at one with others and the environment.

Ways of redeveloping community on a human scale through a spiritual dimension of relationships in the fast paced and globalised world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be discussed. The emphasis is on people helping people through connecting people with one another formally and informally, and nurturing social support networks that give meaning and purpose to those who are involved. A hope full perspective emerges on age, and being, in hope's thin space.

Presentation

GIFT by RS Thomas

Some ask the world  
And are diminished  
in the receiving  
of it. You gave me  
only this small pool  
that the more I drink  
from, the more overflows  
me with sourceless light.

## Intro – the relational notion of thin space –meaning and purpose.

The provision of community support to enable older people to age in place is largely driven by health-funded contracts and highly medicalised. As a social service agency there is a curious tension between being a health provider by definition of our contracts and holding true to our history and mission to provide social services that promote a just and inclusive society. The pathway through this tension lies in what I call the thin space between hope and despair, the place where people connect with one another compassionately and are enlivened by the quiet remedy of interdependence and renewed purpose and meaning.

While many of our clients come to us because of some crisis or problem much of our work in the social services occurs in this thin space.

Thin space is a Celtic concept denoting aspects of nature where there is a drawing together of the natural and supernatural or spiritual. Dawn and dusk, sea and shore, earth and sky are examples of thin space. The thin space of our work is the need for people to be able to make sense of their situation – the search for meaning, purpose and belonging. At various times and points through life the need for sense making is heightened, and many elders are working hard at this as they slow down physically or face illness and loss.

There is a prevailing social policy and societal ideology that life is about ‘going forward’ about solutions to problems, the quick fix, and moving on. We need to resist this especially in our work with the very old, our elders, who are not waiting to die but growing old in life and are wise through its experiences. Our task is helping people make sense of their worlds; recognizing that life is full of uncertainty, full of passages and transitions, some of which we just have to experience rather than fix. Our responsibility is to patiently and attentively walk alongside people in this thin

space of the spiritual, where mystery and uncertainty go hand in hand, and encourage hope, optimism and creativity. We need to be alert to the possible and look to provide opportunities that give a chance at life, and nurture meaningfulness. For older people this is all about enhancing cohesion and attending to aspects of daily life such as manageability, comprehension and meaningfulness. If we do this well people are likely to be content and relatively ok in their world. Services like home support, visiting, transport, day activity, Falls prevention and meals on wheels all contribute to the fabric of the ordinary being manageable and being able to stay in a familiar place. Such services are to do with quality of life, with well being.

In these days of rationed access to services and expectation of delayed entry to care or improved functionality we should advocate constantly for this focus on well being.

I believe that this is the point of difference between us and many other social service providers that we need to hang onto. Our work supports cohesion and is built on the quiet remedy of authentic connection and compassion. Our work is relational and hope full.

### Compassion and the grace of relationships

People live and die in relation to one another and their space and place in the wider world. Our oneness and receptivity with others enables a solidarity of response to suffering and hardship and the challenges of everyday life. This empathy in action, this being moved by and for others is called compassion. It is an under recognized driver for social justice and informs the subtle theology of hope that comes through the grace of relationships. Everybody at some stage or other experiences that magic moment where there is a spark between you and someone else. What I have observed in community support work with older people is that daily contact and sharing of intimate moments often leads to the quiet remedy of mutual care and concern, and an

ethical friendship. It is not factored into the prescription for service, but is often the transformational ingredient that provides hope for each day.

### Organisational dimensions

In 2004 PSUSI developed some organizational dimensions. The dimensions are Connectedness, cohesion, coping and capable, sustainability, and, creativity and hope. These dimensions were originally chosen to reflect critical dimensions of resilient, functional, families and communities (Pipher 1996, MSD), as part of the organisation giving shape to its strategic direction. This approach recognizes that organizations that live their values inspirationally based on relationships are more effective and better able to respond flexibly internally and externally. The organisational environment supports the passion and creativity of staff to achieve the mission in diverse ways.

## Relational Model

Table 1: a model of relational community development threaded through compassion.

<p>Connectedness</p> <p>Using relationships to create and nurture inclusion.</p>	<p>Respectful, reciprocal (mutual obligation and accountability) relationships between people driven by authentic connection, intimacy, passionate concern and moral engagement –empathy in action.</p> <p>A sense of community is nurtured</p> <p>Anti-oppressive, values diversity, nurtures social trust.</p> <p>Social capital –bonding, bridging linking.</p> <p>Interdependence</p> <p>Ecological systems theory, transpersonal social work</p>
<p>Cohesion</p>	<p>Meaningfulness: making sense of life through change and difficulty; having a sense of culture, identity and belonging. Manageability: Control over own lives and being able to make good decisions and choices</p> <p>Comprehensibility: having a sense of everyday life and surroundings as orderly, consistent and familiar</p>
<p>Coping and Capable</p> <p>Empowering to achieve</p> <p>Response -ability</p>	<p>Skill sharing, knowledge transfers, strengths orientation, holism, nurturing and developing from what works, response - able, respecting tradition, partnerships, coalitions,</p> <p>Practical help when and where it is needed</p> <p>Empowerment</p>
<p>Sustainability</p> <p>Time and careful development</p>	<p>Using time generously as a resource; enabling and supporting socially sustainable relationships and networks. Access to resources (health, education and housing), intergenerational equity, local self-sufficiency, care of environment, socially just.</p> <p>Evolutionary</p>
<p>Creativity and Hope</p> <p>Being hopeful and creative</p>	<p>Dwelling on and being open to the possible, praxis, matching what we know with what we sense (intuition), (reflexive practice) (imagination) (curiosity)(hope, optimism, passion)</p> <p>Trust and good will</p> <p>Use of narrative</p> <p>Social action, cause advocacy, lobbying, action research that enables voices to be heard and given attention.</p>

Our Enliven positive ageing services have tried to capture some of the elements that provide meaning and purpose in the design of its service philosophy.

A sense of community

Contact with friends, whanau and family- people you love who love you back

Being able to give and receive

A home of choice

Being able to make good decisions for yourself

Practical support, when how, and where you need it.

Some client quotes

“ our tai chi instructor who is so friendly, also the lovely people in the class and their friendship. Must not forget the benefits I get from the exercise.”

‘when I came to Christchurch I thought I wanted to live a solitary life with my interests being gardening, music and reading. Alas I haven’t coped with illness very well and have lost confidence in going anywhere alone.I look forward to the visits and outings from xxxx and have hope I will improve.’”

“ xxx makes a huge difference as I have no family here.In a way she takes the part of my daughters who both live overseas.”

“home help is a great help to me – and most of the workers are very much a friend to me. I am always looking forward to their coming and try to get the place organised for them to start the cleaning.”

“ HomeLink has given me access to places that otherwise might not have been available. I feel as though I am going out with a friend rather than a carer as they don’t fuss or hover, but are there when needed.”

## Conclusion

Interdependence is the common thread in the quilt of community. We are in the world and the world in us. Compassion is our very human and wonderfully spiritual expression of solidarity in response to the hardships of everyday life with those elders we care for and care about. This genuine and authentic relationship where people help one other is hope full and grace full. It gives breath to the verse of Raymond Carver

“and did you get what you wanted from this life, even so??

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved.

To feel myself beloved on this earth.

Vaughan Milner

August 2009.

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