

Forgotten Ministry?

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Australia's leading cause of death is not cancer, domestic abuse, or cardiovascular disease. It is progressive and largely incurable and might be the most feared diagnosis today. An estimated 411,100 Australians lived with this condition in 2023 and this number is increasing. It also challenges us theologically, as it raises questions of salvation, personhood and relationship. Australia's leading cause of death is dementia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025).

Dementia

Dementia is an umbrella term for over 200 progressive terminal neurological conditions, of which the most common is Alzheimer's (Alzheimer's Association, n.d.). Therefore, it is like the umbrella term 'cancer', as the location, type of both diseases impacts the symptoms, a person can have multiple cancers or dementias and dementia and cancer kill.

For example, my dad had Alzheimer's, Vascular Dementia and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Alzheimer's impacts the neurons, the message pathways in the brain and symptoms include thinking, memory and behaviour (Dementia Australia, 2025a). Vascular dementia is caused by strokes and mini strokes stopping blood flow in the brain which results in death of areas which are deprived of blood. Symptoms of Vascular include hallucinations, sleep issues and issues with language. The progression of vascular dementia is directly related to the number of times there is a blood flow issue, and the symptoms relate to which part of the brain loses blood (Alzheimer's.gov, 2025). CTE, which used to be called Pugilistic Dementia, a reference to boxing, is caused by repeated head trauma. In dad's case, probably from

schoolboy rugby and soccer. CTE often impacts mood, thinking and behaviour (Dementia Australia, 2025b).

While avoiding head trauma prevents CTE, the biggest risk factor for dementia is ageing, though children can live with dementia (Dementia Australia, 2019). Dementia impacts not simply memory but everything the brain does including inhibitions, navigation and sensory processing. For example, an early sign my dad had dementia was he started getting lost, despite historically having an exceptional sense of direction.

In terms of being terminal, dementia is most commonly a contributor to death rather than the direct cause, but it can directly kill people as they forget how to swallow (Taylor, 2024). In dad's case dementia contributed to weight loss via lack of initiative, a fall due to impaired thinking, which broke ribs and led to pneumonia.

As dementia is so diverse and the research is ongoing a full introduction is beyond the scope of this article. So, I recommend engaging with Dementia Australia (www.dementia.org.au), Alzheimer's Disease International (www.alzint.org) and Australian citizens can also complete free online courses on dementia through the University of Tasmania to learn more about the biomedical side of dementia (www.mooc.utas.edu.au).

A powerful sociological understanding of dementia is provided by Kinghorn who argues that dementia is primarily a disease of social isolation, rather than of cognitive impairment (Kinghorn, 2024), as friends, family and faith communities' distance themselves from the person living with dementia. Consider how you would feel – facing a dementia diagnosis, your brain deteriorating, being socially and spiritually abandoned by the church?

The social abandonment which typifies dementia is an opportunity for Christian love to shine.

Dementia Theology

Shining Christ's light requires a robust theology of dementia; this theology applies to all people as it is all about personhood.

Our culture bestows value based on ability, impact and particularly cognition (Boland, 2025b; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2016) Therefore, it values people who are young, beautiful and powerful. For example, the WHO reports 50% of people discriminate against older people ([World Health Organisation](#) [WHO], 2021). Another example is the attention given to youth suicide, when suicide in later life is more common (Boland, 2025b; Withall & Mantell, 2022). As Christians however we should value people based on Scripture.

Scripture clearly presents all people as immutably valuable on a threefold basis: people are created by God, bear God's image and are so loved by God he died for them. Therefore, there is nothing a person can be or do to change their value. Nor can other people or anything else impact a person's value (Boland, 2024a; Boland 2025b).

Not only are all people immutably valuable, because of God – they can only be in relationship with God, because of God. Thus, when dad asked me 'What happens if I forget God?' I replied, 'Is your faith dependent on you or God?' We all forget God! Yet, **God** never forgets His people (e.g. Jn.10, Rm.8, Eph.1) (Carder 2019; Swinton, 2017). It is on this basis, that people become and grow as Christians, and this theology explains why people who have dementia can come to and grow in faith (Boland 2024b; Boland, 2025a; Wormell, 2016).

As an older person's chaplain, I see multiple people coming to faith each year and many of these people have dementia. NOT because of me, but because God calls them and sociologically as people age, they become more interested in spirituality (Aglozo, et al., 2021; Al-Nasa'h, 2022; Putney, & Harris, 2015). For example, earlier this year a residential care chaplaincy team in Sydney, took on the challenge of learning to share the Gospel without jargon in under a minute (Boland, 2025b). They saw nine people, seven residents and two staff become Christians in a month. The

question is not can people living with dementia become Christians, but will we share Jesus' love with them?

Having briefly covered a theology of dementia, this article will explore three key reasons why ministry amid dementia is often forgotten.

Fear

Many people find engagement with people living with dementia terrifying. This is not a ministry space where we can focus on training people in exegesis. Instead, we need to think deeply about faith and share Jesus' love simply and powerfully. We can consider Jesus' ministry to the forgotten and the outcast: Jesus actively ministered to the lepers, the outcasts of his day (Mt.10, Mk.1, Lk.17). Jesus was 'deeply moved' by a man with leprosy and touched the untouchables (Mk.1, Mt.8). Are we deeply moved by people living with dementia? When did we last visit a person living with dementia? Or do we segregate the people living with dementia in their own home or a care home and never visit?¹

Training

When we wrestle with theological topics such as church, trinity and salvation we can engage with over 2000 years of scholarship. When we look for practical advice on writing and preaching sermons, or Christian parenting, there is a vast number of resources we can access. By contrast, when it comes to the theology of dementia and practice of ministry with people living with dementia, most Christian books have been published only in the last twenty-five years. Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, was first described in 1906 and so theological literature on the subject is new (Queensland Brain Institute, n.d.).

The "novelty" of Christian thought on dementia means there is a significant gap in terms of training on dementia ministry. We need training on matters such as how to preach in the face of dementia, how to share the gospel with someone living with

¹ Care homes can be the best place for people to live, but irrespective of where people live, they need relationships and visitors.

Alzheimer's and how to minister not only to the person living with dementia but to their loved ones as well.

Strategy

While we know God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, our experience of ministry is often of more needs than resources. One response to this is to emphasise “strategic” ministry, such as focusing on raising up the leaders of tomorrow. Biblically this understanding of strategy is problematic. Jesus clearly had a strategy, most clearly seen in his deliberate travel toward Jerusalem and Golgotha. Yet he did not simply recruit the best and brightest as his disciples. James 2:1–13 rebukes his readers for showing favouritism to the rich. Why were they prioritising the rich, probably because it seemed strategic (Boland, 2024b).

We are called to love people and make disciples, not to simply focus on future leaders. Our values underlay our focus; if we neglect people living with dementia we have lost sight of Scripture. To return to James 2, we are called to “keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’”. Loving our neighbours means reaching out to people including people impacted by dementia in our communities.

History teaches that it was the early church's care of abandoned infants and older people that was critical to the amazing spread of the gospel (Dickson, 2021). Today many Christians are passionately pro-life both in terms of abortion, euthanasia and voluntary assisted dying. Yet too often we fail to care for older people and people living with dementia. Those involved in youth and children's ministry often talk positively about ‘intergenerational impact’, yet often, the elderly—and especially those living with dementia—are neglected in the pursuit of this ideal.

If fear, training and strategy are inhibiting our ministry with people living with dementia: Love conquers fear! Learning provides skills and knowledge. Prayer trumps strategy.

Prayer amid Dementia

Ministry is powered by God, who typically dispenses His power through prayer. Therefore, the starting point and foundation of ministry to people impacted by dementia is prayer (Boland, 2025b). Prayer is both beyond the scope of this article and a well-covered topic, with exceptional resources including “Prayer – a perpetual exercise of faith” (Calvin, 1636/2008) “Praying with Paul – a Call to Spiritual Reformation” (Carson, 2015) and “The Valley of Vision” (Bennet, 1975)

Before moving to love, it is important to highlight that ministry is always **with** not simply **to** people irrespective of dementia. So, while learning to adapt our communication and thus prayers with people living with dementia is important (Boland, 2025b), we can also learn from the prayers of people living with dementia.

For example, early in my ministry I had the privilege of being the chaplain to a retired Baptist minister who lived in a secure dementia unit. He would spend most of the day walking the unit and only spoke occasionally, using very short sentences. One day I asked to pray with him and after his assent, I prayed a textbook dementia prayer – short and concrete. Then he started to pray, the depth and maturity of his prayer was so beyond me I was left speechless.

Love amid Dementia

Love is the centre of Christianity – God’s love for us, enables our love of Him and our neighbour. The ultimate example of love being Jesus, who became human, suffered and died for our lack of love on the cross.

Our love of people impacted by dementia will follow a similar pattern. Just as Jesus came to earth, we need to go to people impacted by dementia, to the aged care facilities, respite centres and people’s homes. We need to journey with them, amid suffering and death, and that will be painful for us.

Yet, suffering because of love is what we are called to as Christians (Eph.5, Col.1 and Jer.1).

Not only are we called to suffer, but we are also called to make disciples (Mt.28) and that includes people impacted by dementia. Note ‘people impacted by dementia’ includes not simply people with a dementia diagnosis but their family, friends and professional caregivers. When we love people living with dementia, we proclaim Jesus’ love thought visiting not only to them but those around them. We also need to share Jesus’ love with words.

The good news is that there are a growing number of resources to help us share Jesus’ love with people living with dementia. Here are three I recommend: “Hymns We Love” (Cramer & Cramer, 2023) an evangelistic series, with videos, built around classic hymns designed for older people. “Celebrating the Seasons” (Pelloquin & Keightley, 2022). which provides resources for fifty-two church services designed for care home and respite centre use. “Messy Vintage” (Norman & Phipps, 2023), part of the “Messy Church” suite, provides great ideas and resources.

Learning amid Dementia

Dementia ministry requires learning. I have outlined the basics of dementia and where to learn more in the previous section - ‘Dementia’. To learn about dementia ministry, I recommend the following: “Ministry with the forgotten” (Carder, 2019) provides a great theology of dementia. The “Spiritual Care Series” (Health Television Network, n.d.) uses video and workbook material to train people about ministry with older people. Finally, my latest book “Priceless People” covers a theology of and practice of sharing Jesus’ love with older people and people living with dementia (Boland, 2025b).

Basic Dementia Ministry

As purchasing the aforementioned resources will take time and as you have become more passionate about dementia ministry,² this paper will finish with a practical pivotal plan. The ‘Three P’s – Prayer, Presence and Pastoral Care’ (Boland, 2025b). Thankfully, the ‘Three P’s’ applies not simply to ministry with people affected by dementia but to almost all ministry.

² I hope!

Prayer, as previously expounded, ministry work is primarily about **God** and His work and power. God typically works and empowers ministry work through us via prayer. Too often I get stuck in busyness and ‘doing stuff’, as if I was the driver of ministry. I find a great self-reflection question is: how much time have I allocated to prayer, to my relationship with God?

Presence, the best way to build a relationship is to spend time with the person. It is possible to build and grow a long-distance relationship, but it’s much harder. We see God’s love most clearly in choosing to become man, to be present, without presence there could be no Calvary. In the dementia context the importance of presence is even more important, as long distance relationships are challenging for people living with dementia and because of the social isolation many people with dementia experience. Visiting a person living with dementia can be hard and scary. Visiting Dad when he could not remember my name was traumatic and I had to remind myself, I do not visit to receive love but to give it. That said, I was often greatly blessed by Dad’s love even amid advanced Alzheimer’s.

When a baby is born people flock to see, touch and love the infant. No baby calls people by name, nor does an infant recognize its visitors. Yet when a person is diagnosed with dementia people, including Christians often flee. The same year dad was diagnosed with dementia, mum was diagnosed with cancer. My parents had been a vibrant part of their community and church for almost fifty years. Mum had so many people who wanted to see her, she had to start booking group visits, dad had people who never visited him again.

This cameo not only highlights the importance of presence it also shows that dementia ministry reaches beyond the person with a diagnosis to their family and community. Mum was deeply grieved by the lack of love dad received. Equally, the care staff at the home where he lived were touched by observing the faithful visits of the few Christians who did not forget dad. Following dad’s funeral, a staff member contacted my sister to ask to find out more about Christianity. Effective dementia ministry is intergenerational and impacts not simply individuals but communities.

Dementia ministry requires ‘Pastoral Care’, which is basically loving people. There are two traps here, we can reduce pastoral care to preaching or we can exclude preaching from pastoral care. We need to constantly come back to our model – Jesus Christ, the ultimate shepherd. Jesus, who stopped to ask - ‘who touched me’ (Lk.8), loved lepers (Mt.8 & Mk.1) and outcasts (Mt.9 & Jn.4). Is the same person who preached with passion (Mt.12, Lk.4, & Jn.14).

We all have different gifts, and some find the ‘soft’ part of pastoral care, e.g. presence and listening, easier than the ‘hard’ e.g. preaching and vice versa (e.g. Rom.12 & 1Cor.12). Irrespective of our gifting, we are all called to love (e.g. Jn.13, 1Jn.4 & 1Pt.4), pastoral care is simply expressing that love, empowered by prayer and typically via presence.

Conclusion

Dementia’s impact is hard to overstate, and we have an opportunity to respond empowered by Jesus’ love. We can pray, love and learn and thus not only see people living with dementia come into and grow in relationship with Jesus, but also see our ministry impact their family, friends and professional caregivers. Our call to share Jesus’ love is clear, the harvest field is ripe, the only question is: Will we go?

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