

TEN STEPS

to creating a place at the table

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To accompany the Social Justice Statement 2016–2017 *A Place at the Table*

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The Australian Catholic Bishops’ Social Justice Statement for 2016–17 is titled *A Place at the Table: Social justice in an ageing society*. It celebrates the value, dignity and significant contributions of older people to the life of the community. In solidarity with all generations, older people have a rightful place in the heart of community life. The Bishops confront the utilitarianism in our society that values people only for what they produce and contribute economically and that, at worst, regards older people as burdensome or dispensable.

The Bishops call for communities of mercy and love – where people reach out and minister to vulnerable older people, where bonds between generations are built up, and where no one is cast as a burden or as rivals to younger generations.

Following are ten steps we can take to create a place at the table for everyone.

1. Give thanks

We should give thanks to God for the grace of a long life and for the prosperous and modern society we live in. We should be grateful for the inheritance we have received from previous generations. Their generosity can be seen, not only in the fruits of their labour and advances in science and technology, but also in the many institutions and policies promoting the common good and assisting people struggling through difficult times.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

We can all give thanks for the gift of a long life, either for ourselves or for family, friends and loved ones. How will we use this gift for the benefit of our families, communities and our nation?

2. Get informed

In Australia, around 75 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women are now reaching retirement age with around 20 years of life ahead of them. They are in relatively good health and with significant opportunities for leisure, family life, social engagement and continued employment.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

The Statement points out that we are in a new moment in human history, when so many of us are living longer and have many active years ahead of us. What are the implications for Australians? Do we see the same benefits elsewhere, especially in poorer countries?

For further information see:

<http://www.treasury.gov.au/PublicationsAndMedia/Publications/2015/2015-Intergenerational-Report>

www.helpage.org/global-agewatch

<http://www.helpage.org/global-agewatch/population-ageing-data/global-rankings-map/>

3. Help your parish include older people in the life of the Church

Through the simple acts of gathering and talking, eating and drinking, Jesus made manifest the mercy and love of God.

The sacramentality of this shared table is held for us now most strongly in the Eucharist ... The Christian community is built on the Eucharist, and older people have an important place around that table. For them it is a place of prayer and offering, comfort and petition, hope and sacrifice.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

Ways the parish can help include: arranging transport to the church for Sunday Eucharist; providing a comfortable facilities for older people; bringing communion to older people in their homes; or arranging seminars, books, films or talks on spirituality of ageing.

4. Visit elderly people in aged care facilities, or at home.

Pope Francis challenges us all to change the way we view aged care facilities. Rather than being places where people are hidden away, he says, they should be regarded as the 'lungs of humanity' in our neighbourhoods and parishes.

There are many good organisations and groups working to combat loneliness in these settings, but there is still more to be done.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

Families, parishes, schools and individuals can visit the elderly, especially in aged care facilities where they may feel isolated or lonely. A visit may be simply talking together, sharing some events in your life, sharing the excitement of children's exploits, a walk in the garden or a drive to a favourite place.

5. Assist with activities in retirement facilities or in the community.

There are many programs designed to reduce isolation among older people. There are home visits and pastoral care in the hospital and residential care settings, and transport and social activities aimed at developing community networks and peer support. All of these are vital to maintaining a healthy life and good social connections. Other interventions like support groups, skills development, bereavement support and counselling also help to manage the transitions of later life.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

Most retirement and aged care facilities already have activities programmes. Offer to help with these or volunteer your skills in some different activities such as crafts, music or dancing.

Offer to help with special events such as celebratory dinners or Christmas lunches. You could also assist with Meals on Wheels or similar services in the community or help on a board if you have experience in governance.

6. Older people, volunteer your time and talent

Old age is a vocation. It is not yet time to 'pull in the oars'. This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat 'invent it ourselves', because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life. Indeed, it was once not so normal to have time available; it is much more so today.

(Pope Francis)

Many older or retired people already volunteer their time and gifts in many ways, in their families and communities. Check the local papers or inquire in your parish and at community centres for ways you can contribute your time and talent.

7. Listen to the stories and life experience of older people

The memories these men and women possess are your heritage. The story-telling shows you who you are rather than what you do or how much you possess. You may come to better understand your own place in the narrative – the 'living history' of your family, your neighbourhood and your country.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

There are many possibilities for hearing the stories of older people:

- Sit with older relatives and neighbours and ask them to share past experiences.

- Invite guest speakers to schools to speak about their experiences – past *and* present!
- Arrange a project to collect stories from older people around their memories of special events, either local or important world events (for example, the first moon landing).
- Make a video or a sound archive of these stories.

8. Find out your local Federal and State Members' policies on matters affecting the elderly

The ageing of the population carries with it key challenges that have social justice implications across all areas of policy and at all levels of government – from taxation and retirement savings to spending in health and aged care services, from labour market and industrial relations to town planning, transport and housing policies.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

Call on our political leaders to ensure the benefits of a longer working life extend to all, promote positive ageing and value the non-economic contribution of older people. To forge a national strategy for positive ageing, we must bring all people to the table. Most importantly, we must defend the dignity of older people who are frail and vulnerable and ensure that older citizens are never portrayed as burdens or as rivals for younger generations.

9. Make a plan in case of illness or frailty

No one likes to be a burden. We can lessen the strain on loved ones by making a valid will, for example, or speaking with family, trusted friends and health care professionals about how we would like to be treated in the event of illness.

(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

We all face the possibility that we will become ill or frail or become dependent on others for care and support. For the sake of our carers and loved ones it is important to be clear about what decisions we would like to be made and who can represent us if we cannot express our wishes. The Church in Australia has developed a guide for people considering their future health care and planning ahead.

Guidance and suggestions for those wishing to make such a plan can be seen at www.myfuturecare.org.au.

10. Plan to initiate and join in events over the coming year

The wisdom of age brings with it the ability to be a prophetic witness in society and a force for positive change. Older people will have a considerable political influence in the years to come. The challenge for this older generation is whether it will use this political influence for its own benefit or for the good of

society as a whole. The way we shape our community will set an example and the standard for future generations
(Social Justice Statement 2016–17)

The Social Justice Statement is current for a full 12 months until Social Justice Sunday 2017. Join in 2016 and 2017 Events for Senior Citizens. Create an event for Seniors Week.

There is information and help on State Government and COTA (Council on the Ageing) websites:

<http://www.nswseniorsweek.com.au/events>

<https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/festivalsandawards>

<https://www.qld.gov.au/seniors/>

<https://www.wa.gov.au/information-about/health-wellbeing/seniors>

<http://www.catalystfoundation.com.au/>

<http://www.cotatas.org.au/>

<http://www.cotant.org.au/programs-events/>

http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/wac/senior_card