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Marita Grudzen and Gerald Grudzen

grudzen@gmail.com

ELDERS AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY



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indicate that Americans' engagement with religious organisations is tending toward further secularisation of society and a decline in participation in these institutions. **The decline of social connections for families can lead to further marginalisation and isolation of the elderly population.**



Even though scientific research into dementia is well-funded today in American society, the social, economic, and cultural factors are not as well studied and documented in the field of dementia studies.

The polarisation in the past few decades has led to the marginalisation of many elderly persons and their placement in institutional settings lacking regular family and other social connections.

The for-profit senior care industry has taken over much of the care for seniors. This pattern of separating elders from their families of origin has led to further depersonalisation. This impacts the experience of solidarity with the wider society and the needs and concerns of the world at large.

Our society requires higher education to advance economically and attain the 'American Dream'. Individual success and financial prosperity have often become more important than family solidarity in some sectors.

The mobility of the contemporary family has often led to the movement of family members to areas distant from their place of origin. The Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays have become the few times families gather to share interpersonal concerns. The culture now has a dominant model of reliance upon institutional care for ageing family members since most families need two incomes.

The advancements in medical technology and the resulting longer life spans have led to a growing number of elders living into their nineties with an increasing percentage experiencing either dementia or a need for daily care for life functions. This has led to a decreasing role of the extended family in caring for elders and the reliance on specialised companies that provide this care.



The past reliance on the community for family support structures such as the church or other non-profit groups has largely been replaced by businesses that serve the needs of elders. The decline of the church's social role in communities has become another factor influencing the isolation of seniors.

In the past, senior activities were also carried out within the local community and provided a strong sense of connection for elder family members. Many of these activities are declining as churches and local governments have reduced budgets due to declining membership and subsidies.

Approximately 30 percent now have no religious affiliation. In the past, elders found great solace in their affiliation with a religious organisation, but this source of engagement for many families no longer exists.

The recent studies of the Pew Centre for Religious Research indicate that Americans' engagement with religious organisations is tending toward further secularisation of society and a decline in participation in these institutions. The decline of social connections for families can lead to further marginalisation and isolation of the elderly population.

Women have usually undertaken the care of elder family members, but society presently does not support an economic role that family members can play in caregiving for elder family members.

Family members (either men or women) could play a key role in caring for elders with the proper incentives from the federal government in taking on this task rather than an institution, such as a senior residence or an assisted living facility. Tax credits could be provided for families that assume the care of older family members at their homes rather than in an institutional setting.

We can create an effective argument for allowing immigrants to enter America. The church can play a key role by acting as a sponsor and supporter for new non-profit organisations staffed by immigrant minorities seeking employment as caregivers. **Community colleges could play an essential role in providing this training for non-profit organisations sponsoring such training and placement programs.**

A caring society will generally be a society at peace with itself.

A revival of the extended family model may be needed to overcome polarisation and the encouragement of a new community support system for families who care for ageing elders at home.

Intergenerational households could be a model for future generations that emphasises human solidarity rather than the separation of younger and older family members. These structures could be aligned with faith-based organisations that already may provide some senior services to the community.



The funding of senior activity programmes and daily noon meals can be an important social structure for involving seniors in the life of their community and providing social connections that help to prevent the onset of dementia.

The cost of such community services is far lower than the cost of institutional settings, and provides a way for seniors to continue an active presence in the community.

Seniors also vote in greater numbers than younger cohorts, and they can be more attuned to international concerns and conflicts than those more occupied with career advancement and raising their family.

The decline of social connections is a factor in the militarisation of societies. Fear of the ‘other’ can lead to a growing need for self-protection and reliance upon police or military protection against some alien force.

Security can best be found when we experience solidarity at the local, national, and global levels. Pope Francis has provided a blueprint for experiencing global solidarity in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. Interreligious dialogue and cooperation can be a sign of a healthy society and provide a method for healing the fractures in our communities and our world.

Many of the caregivers for our elderly population have come as immigrants. This factor alone can

provide an impetus for realising the message of *Fratelli Tutti*. There is a current need for new non-profit organisations to provide services to our elderly populations while still living at home.

We can create an effective argument for allowing immigrants to enter America. The church can play a key role by acting as a sponsor and supporter for new non-profit organisations staffed by immigrant minorities seeking employment as caregivers.

Community colleges could play an essential role in providing this training for non-profit organisations sponsoring such training and placement programs. We need to understand the complex systems necessary for promoting the care and integration of our elders into a diverse society and overcoming the isolation and neglect elders often experience in institutional settings.

*Gerald Grudzen is President,
Global Ministries University, San Jose,
California, United States.*

*Marita Grudzen is Deputy Director, Stanford
Geriatric Education Center, Stanford, California.*

