

Building a Community of Grace, Dignity and Hope

***A Report on the Charis Senior Housing Development in
Lacombe, Alberta***

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Executive Summary

The following report was commissioned by the Charis Housing Society (CHS) in support of their proposal to build a senior housing development in Lacombe, Alberta. As noted in their original proposal, the long term vision of CHS is to build the kind of housing community in Lacombe that will enable seniors to live with grace, dignity and hope. Understanding the current housing situation and the degree of community support for seniors in Lacombe as well as how seniors and other stakeholders feel about the current and future “place” of seniors in the community required that we draw upon different sources of information. Demographic data was drawn primarily from the 2006 national census as well the 2009 Lacombe municipal census, while information about housing, community activities, services, organizations and businesses in Lacombe was retrieved from a variety of government reports and agencies as well as from a number of websites of service organizations in Lacombe. Qualitative data used in the study was gathered through interviews with representatives from a cross section of community organizations and businesses in and around Lacombe, participants in a number of senior and other stakeholder focus groups, government and consultant reports on senior housing, as well as residents and administrators that live and work in Elim Village in Surrey, B.C.

The purpose of this report is to provide both context and hopeful direction for the proposed development of the CHS senior housing development in Lacombe. The report will provide this to stakeholders by:

- (1) briefly outlining of current demographic and housing trends in Lacombe and surrounding areas,
- (2) highlighting the manner in which the unique talents and abilities as well as the spiritual, social, material and health-related needs of seniors are understood and addressed in the community,
- (3) telling the story of how seniors and soon-to-be seniors view their lives, including what they think about their current living arrangements and place within the community as well as what they hope for in the future, and,
- (4) presenting a brief overview of a well-established senior housing community in Surrey, B.C. that seeks to cultivate grace, dignity and hope in the lives of residents

Introduction

The following report on the current and future state of senior of housing in Lacombe, Alberta was commissioned by Charis Housing Society in the spring of 2010. Between 2010 and 2012, individual seniors as well as representatives from a wide variety of government agencies, community service organizations and businesses in Lacombe were invited to share their hopes and concerns in relation to the building of a new kind of senior housing facility in the city. The 18 key informants that were interviewed for this study represented a cross section of people from government agencies, churches, businesses, and non-profit groups in the community. All but 2 of the key informants had lived in the Lacombe area for at least 5 years. In order to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of Lacombe seniors, a number of focus groups with a total of 57 participants ranging in age from 56 to 85 years were held from the summer of 2010 through to the summer of 2011, and then again during the fall of 2012.¹ Many of the interview and focus group questions were adapted from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) study *Planning Housing and Support Services for Seniors*.² Although the Charis study was much more focused than the CMHC project, it does engage a number of the major areas of concern explored in the CMHC study that focused on: current demographic and living arrangement information, personal care and daily living activities, health and social support services, future housing needs and hopes, and community involvement. Particularly insightful questions, insights and suggestions from respondents are incorporated throughout this report.

The two rather broad questions that animated this study were: what contributes to hope in the lives of senior people living in a particular community? and what hinder seniors from experiencing hope? Along with examining data on demographic and housing trends as well as supports within the community, seniors and soon-to-be seniors in our focus groups were asked a number of related questions: what contributes to hope in your life?, how do you view your current living arrangements?, and what do you hope for/what concerns might you have in relation to your future living arrangements? Interestingly, responses to the first question echoed the sentiments of contributors to the popular website *Gives Me Hope*.³ It would seem that most everyone experiences hope when they feel appreciated, respected, and meaningfully included in the lives of others. It is also clear that hopeful relationships are reciprocal as well as thoroughly practical, for most focus group participants stated that they experience hope in the everyday contexts of mutually beneficial relationships with family, friends, co-workers and others members of their community. Experience had evidently taught them that a community cultivates hope by ensuring that all members mutually support, respect and appreciate one another.

¹ The purpose of the 2012 focus group was to gauge public sentiment following the City of Lacombe's decision in January of that year to cancel the Residential Housing Development Initiative (REHDI). Given that the REHDI included some provision for senior housing, it was important to hear what people thought about the cancelling of the development plan.

² Retrieved on January 15, 2011 from: <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/publications/en/rh-pr/socio/socio056.pdf>

³ Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from: <http://www.givesmehope.com/>

The comments, concerns and questions of participants in this study highlight the importance of understanding the relationship between how the lives of seniors are structured and their experience of hope. There was, for example, the apparently innocent concern expressed by a participant in the first focus group who said: “I hear Jim⁴ isn’t doing too well, and that he isn’t sure what he’s going to do with himself and his big house now that his wife is passed.” While numerous focus group participants shared their experience of loneliness, confusion and concern about their future, a number of them also mentioned that they had heard he was “a bit out of sorts” and intended to pay him a visit. Research indicates that expressions of compassion and concern for others are vital to the growth of healthy individuals and communities,⁵ and those who expressed concern for Jim and others in their community felt quite strongly that having daily opportunities to help care for and support others is an important source of hope not just for seniors, but for all members of a community. They all expressed hope that any future senior housing developments in Lacombe would enable seniors to participate as fully in their community as possible. As noted in more detail later in this report, a number of respondents were concerned about the cancelling of the Residential Housing Development Initiative (REHDI) by Lacombe City Council in January 2012 since they felt that it held the promise of providing direction and support to those interested in building affordable housing for seniors in Lacombe. Others pointed out that the REHDI had never lived up to its promise and that there were currently many individuals and organizations in the community committed to developing not only flexible and affordable living arrangements for seniors in Lacombe, but also the kinds of living arrangements that provide opportunities for seniors to be meaningfully engaged in the lives of their neighbors and their community.

The REHDI had initially been envisioned as a way for housing stakeholders to cooperatively address the changing circumstance and housing needs of seniors and others living in and around Lacombe. For purposes of this report, we recognize that it was important to understand the experiences, circumstances and perspectives of seniors in the context of broad demographic trends as well as interpersonal, cultural and structural supports for seniors in this community. As discussed in the following section, Lacombe along with the rest of Central Alberta has experienced not only a gradual and steady “aging” of their population over the past 20 or so years, but it has also experienced a relatively rapid rate of growth during this time. This discussion is followed by a brief examination of current housing arrangements in Lacombe and how the cultural as well as structural landscape of this city has changed as individuals, families, community organizations and government departments have sought to address the diverse circumstances and ever changing needs of people in their community, particularly in relation to the current and estimated future growth of the senior population. Our concern in this section is to not only

⁴ This is a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

⁵ Retrieved on August 14, 2012 from: <http://rootsofaction.com/blog/how-to-instill-compassion-in-children/>

describe how and why Lacombe has been changing, but also to understand how community stakeholders view these changes in relation to the current and future needs of seniors in the community.

The Demographic and Residential Character of Lacombe

Community and government stakeholders committed to building healthy, hopeful communities have long recognized that successfully attending to housing and community support needs of seniors and other community members requires understanding the social as well as economic significance of demographic and housing trends. Census data from cities and towns in Central Alberta indicate significant population growth in this area since the early 1990s. According to the 2011 census, Red Deer, Sylvan Lake, Blackfalds and Lacombe are among the fastest growing communities in the country, while the populations of Innisfail, Penhold, Stettler and many surrounding counties have also experienced significant increases in population over the past 15-20 years.⁶

Data in Table 1 indicate that while the median age of the population in central Alberta communities was roughly 36 years in 2006, almost half of the people living in this region were over 40 years of age. While people over the age of 60 comprised roughly 15% of the total population in and around Lacombe in 2006, Statistics Canada estimated that more than one in five Albertans will be seniors by 2031,⁷ though more recent research suggests that the largest proportion of the baby boomer generation will begin placing significant demand on senior specific services and housing beginning around 2025.⁸

Table 1 - Age Distribution of Major Municipalities in and Around Lacombe (2006)⁹

	Pop'n	Median Age	0-14	11-31	32-40	41-60	61-65	65+	80+
Red Deer	82772	33.4	18%	35%	13%	28%	5%	10%	3%
Lacombe	10742	36.4	22%	30%	12%	26%	5%	15%	6%
Innisfail	7316	40.2	19%	27%	11%	28%	6%	17%	5%
Ponoka	6576	40.9	18%	27%	10%	28%	6%	19%	8%
Bowden	1205	38.9	20%	27%	11%	29%	9%	14%	2%

While understanding demographic trends is vital to forecasting future housing needs, population stability and housing composition data are also useful for understanding the current and future residential character of this and other communities. As we see in Figure 1,¹⁰ as of 2009 approximately 30% of all Lacombe residents had lived in that community for over 10 years. That percentage increases to almost

⁶ Retrieved on June 12, 2012 from: <http://www.reddeerregion.com/population.htm>

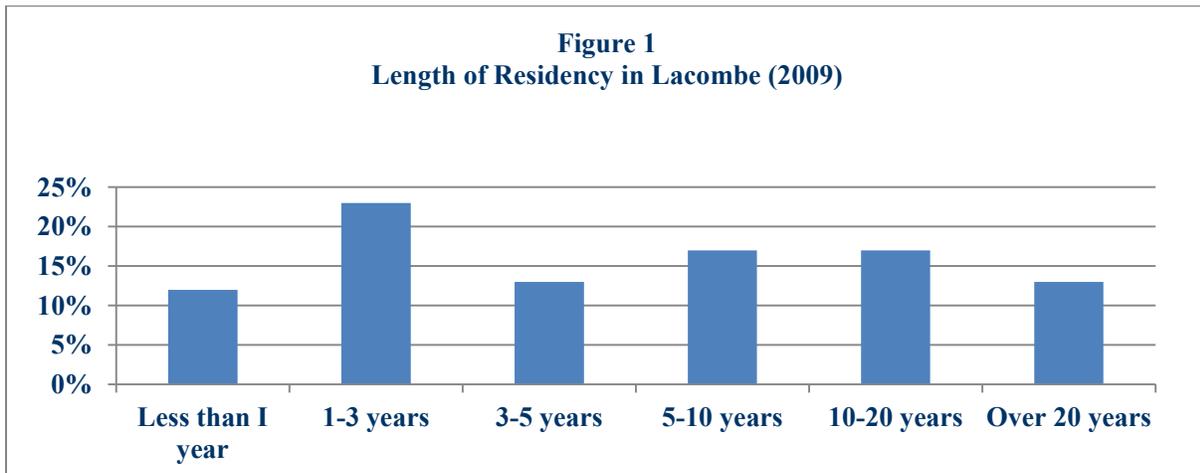
⁷ Statistics Canada, *Seniors and Community Supports*, 2006.

⁸ Lumina Report, 2010

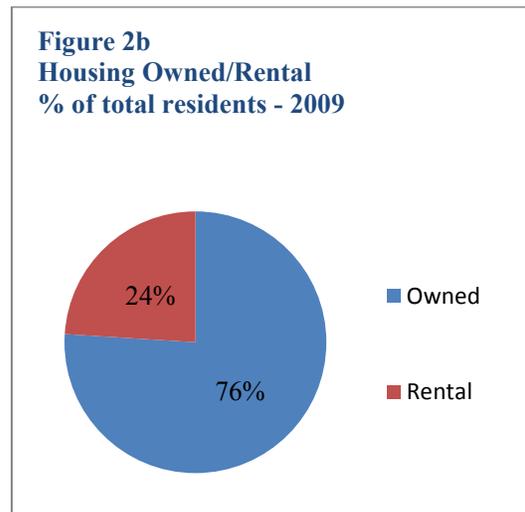
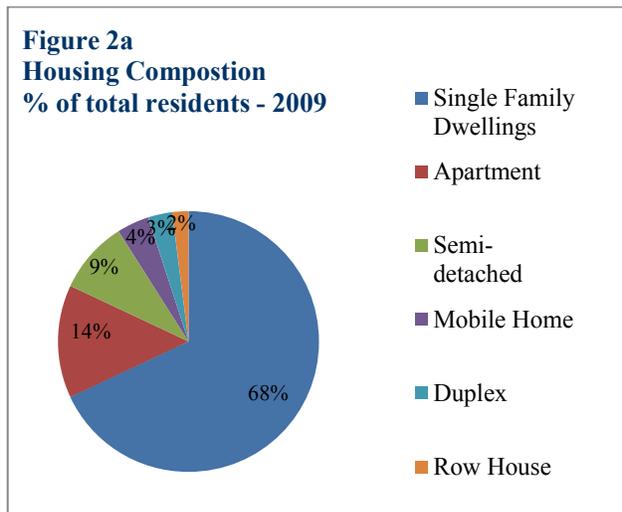
⁹ Data from 2006 Lacombe Municipal Census.

¹⁰ Data from 2009 Lacombe Municipal Census.

50% for 5 year residents of Lacombe, and over 60% when residents of Lacombe County are included.



Moreover, housing composition data in Figures 2a and 2b indicate that in 2009, 68% of all Lacombe residents lived in single family dwellings. Although not all of these residents owned the house they were living in, 76% of Lacombe residents did own their housing unit.¹¹



Length of residency and housing composition data indicate that Lacombe’s stable residential base is currently comprised mainly of single family dwelling homeowners. This is not surprising when we consider that single family dwellings have until quite recently been relatively inexpensive to build and purchase in Lacombe. Also, residents of Lacombe along with most other Canadians have long been committed to the concept of private home ownership. As discussed in more detail later in this report, this presents a number of significant challenges to Lacombe seniors as well as to residential developers and

¹¹ Data from 2009 Municipal Census.

city planners. One of the most noteworthy issues is that some of the values that underlie support for private home ownership are at odds with certain basic values traditionally associated with community. Specifically, communities that emphasize the value of a strictly private, independent and self-sustaining lifestyle for each member are quite different than communities in which members share the commitment to not only respect and appreciate the contributions of everyone in the community, but also to support and care for one another as the circumstances and needs of the members of the community change.

Understanding and addressing the current and future housing needs of seniors in Lacombe thus requires taking into account not only demographic changes, but also a number of related economic and social cost of living issues. We see, for example, that an increase in the population of Lacombe by one-third between 1996 and 2010 coincided with an almost 50% increase in the city's corporate boundary.¹² During this same period, the average cost of a 1200 square foot bungalow in Lacombe increased from \$100,000 to just over \$300,000.¹³ Substantial corporate growth and increased housing prices obviously benefitted certain businesses and homeowners during this time. Less obvious, perhaps, were the ways that such growth exacerbated the financial instability and housing insecurity among those whose economic circumstances were already fragile. While the lack of affordable housing in general negatively affects vulnerable individuals, it also has significant long term social and economic consequences for the community as a whole. As noted on the City of Lacombe website,

Seniors, young people and others unable to obtain suitable housing will migrate elsewhere, negatively affecting the diversity and demographics of this vibrant community... Several of Lacombe's major employers have been expressing serious concerns that their new employees can't find places to live that they can afford. Some are commuting to Lacombe from as far away as Edmonton. Others are taking a look at Lacombe's housing situation and turning down job offers. Industrial and commercial development will not occur in Lacombe if there's not a corresponding supply of housing for new companies and new employees.¹⁴

Indeed, the steady increase in the population of Lacombe and surrounding areas since the mid-1990s led the Alberta government to identify the City of Lacombe as both a high-growth and high-need community. It is obvious that while population growth benefits communities in many ways, growth does not come without economic and social costs. For example, the construction of relatively inexpensive single family housing units during "boom times" helped to draw people into the community as well as generate, support and grow local businesses. This of course increased infrastructure costs associated with developing and maintaining the kinds of organizations and social networks necessary to support the health and well-being of people in this growing community. Steady and rapid population growth in the area also increased demand for a variety of housing options.

¹² Statistics Canada, 1996 & 2006.

¹³ Retrieved on November 8, 2011 from: <http://www.remaxlacombe.com/Lacombe-real-estate-stats-news/Lacombe>

¹⁴ Retrieved on August 5, 2012 from: http://www.lacombe.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1487&Itemid=283

In order to address the housing challenges associated with being a “high growth and high need community,” Lacombe Town Council decided in 2007 to launch the Residential Housing Development Initiative (REHDI). According to Mayor Judy Gordon,

The REHDI project signals Lacombe’s municipal government’s commitment to working to create solutions for our community’s growing housing problem. This encourages development of the diverse types of housing Lacombe citizens deserve and need most. Lacombe has a demonstrated shortage of diverse housing, and Town Council will address our Community’s overall housing needs because no one else has. Current trends in building do not fulfill the range of housing needs existing in our community.

Just over one year into the project, the global economic downturn led the Town council to put the REHDI on hold in 2008. It then languished for the next few years due to confusion and disagreement among city councilors, administrators and property development stakeholders over how and even whether or not development should proceed.¹⁵ The eventual termination of the REDHI by the Lacombe City Council at their January 9, 2012 meeting was viewed positively by most everyone in attendance, including a former developer who stated after the meeting that he was "happy the town finally moved ahead and killed the deal because they have killed land sales in the town of Lacombe for two or three years. Now we can all move on and do what we do best and that is developing."¹⁶ While key informants and a number of focus group participants interviewed during the fall of 2012 agreed that it made sense to bring an end to the REHDI, they all expressed deep concern that there appeared to be a lack of the kind of leadership and vision they felt were necessary to address the wide array of current and future housing needs of seniors in Lacombe.

Although many focus group participants expressed concern over whether they would be able to afford to continue living in Lacombe, questions surrounding what kind of community Lacombe would become were also in the forefront of their minds. Those who had lived in the area for some time noted that over the years they had become deeply attached to their community. As one long-time resident of the area stated:

My wife and I, we still live on our own on the outskirts of Lacombe. Pretty comfortable little house we have, and our health, thank the Lord, it’s still pretty good. We know the time will come when we’ll need to move, and to be honest we’re both a bit concerned ‘cause we don’t see there being a lot of choice for seniors in Lacombe at the moment. And the community sure is changing. I don’t know if this is right, but it seems like our choice is to move to Edmonton or Calgary or Red Deer or just put our names in for a room at the seniors lodge in town. To be honest, neither of us really likes them options that much because we really like living in this area and all of our friends live here.

While it is understandable that a number of seniors in the focus groups who were relatively new to the area did not yet feel strongly attached to this community, both established and newly-arrived seniors

¹⁵ Retrieved on June 12, 2011 from: <http://www.lacombeglobe.com/2011/03/08/city-council-debates-rehdi-project>

¹⁶ Retrieved on February 12, 2012 from: <http://www.lacombeglobe.com/2012/01/11/city-scraps-rehdi-project>

expressed concerns related to their future living arrangements. There was much discussion about how Lacombe was changing and whether it would continue to be a good community to live in as they got older. It was clear that underneath concerns regarding the future of affordable housing in Lacombe were somewhat unsettling, quality of life questions that centered on the “place” of seniors in the community and whether there would be opportunities, regardless of their age or ability, for them to continue to enjoy and contribute to their community in meaningful ways.

The Challenge of Building a Community of Grace, Dignity and Hope

A number of respondents spoke appreciatively about the opportunities available to them and others to be involved in the life of Lacombe as well as for the many, often unrecognized contributions seniors make to everyday life in their community. Many of them felt that active involvement in one’s community is important to one’s health and well-being, and also that the economic health and social well-being of a community depends on the active participation of a broad range of people. In community development terms, residents help generate their own social capital as well as to foster its growth in the community as a whole. In contrast to economic capital, social capital represents the many formal as well as informal networks of trust, cooperation and support that enable people to work, play and live well together.¹⁷ Although participants in this study did not use the term social capital in interviews and focus group conversations, it was clear that they believed that many people in Lacombe are committed to the health and well-being of everyone in their community.

In particular, a majority of respondents agreed that Lacombe has long been relatively “senior friendly.” They noted that there are a large variety of community groups and organizations that serve and/or seek to engage seniors in community life. They also had positive things to say about the “Heart of Your Lacombe” (HOYL) community planning project initiated by the City of Lacombe in the summer of 2010. As noted on the City’s website, the purpose of the HOYL planning project was to invite all members of the community to help Lacombe become “a welcoming, safe, prosperous, vibrant and compact community where everyone is welcome and all their needs are met locally”.¹⁸ As one longtime resident of Lacombe put it, “Lacombe is a welcoming place because the people here care for one another as best they can.” The HOYL hoped to build on that which Lacombe already offered its residents and visitors, which included:

- a vibrant network of community clubs, social groups and volunteer services
- efficient hospital and related medical services
- a wide array of first class recreation facilities
- over 120 community organizations committed to supporting recreation, sport and cultural

¹⁷ Fukuyama 1995:10; Putnam 1995:67.

¹⁸ Retrieved on August 1, 2011 from: <http://www.heartoflacombe.ca/home>

- opportunities for community members of all ages
- well-established roots in the heart of a strong and diversified agricultural region with a relatively stable and community involved rural population base
- a business community dedicated to both strong economic growth and community well-being
- 16 churches from a variety of denominational and ecclesiastical traditions.¹⁹

As is evident in Table 2, there are a significant number of community groups and organizations that currently provide services and programs for seniors who live in and around Lacombe.

Table 2 – Lacombe Community Groups and Organizations²⁰

Lacombe Community Groups and Organizations	Overall/Senior Specific
Churches	16
Community Groups	50/17
Cultural Groups	24
Service Organizations	7
Sport Groups	43/11

Along with providing programs, services and other kinds of support to seniors, a sizable proportion of community groups and organizations are dedicated to cultivating and maintaining opportunities for seniors to contribute in positive ways to their community. The importance of such opportunities was noted by one key informant, who stated that:

Many of the seniors I come in contact with in my work have told me that when they were younger, they simply did what they felt they needed to do to support their family, their church, and their community. For many of them, “retirement” has meant that they are no longer appreciated or even needed. Much of my work involves finding or creating opportunities for seniors to contribute in meaningful ways to our community. The people in our organization believes that it benefits us all when seniors are actively involved in the life of our community for as long as possible.

Most focus group participants agreed that Lacombe was both small enough to be a friendly community and big enough to offer a wide variety of support services as well as opportunities for community involvement. Many also expressed appreciation for the way seniors tend to be treated by younger members of the community, and recognized that there are a large number of groups and organizations that provide opportunities for seniors to be as actively involved in the life of Lacombe as possible. A number of focus group participants nonetheless noted that although many community groups and organizations depend quite significantly on the volunteer efforts of seniors, the actual contributions of seniors are not always obvious or publicly recognized. As one woman said:

Me and my friends at church have been organizing all kinds of activities for seniors and

¹⁹ Retrieved on August 1, 2011 from http://www.lacombe.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=65&Itemid=257

²⁰ Retrieved on August 1, 2011 from: http://www.lacombe.ca/images/stories/62/community_contact_web.pdf

others in our community for I don't know how long now. We raise a bit of money for our church to help people out in the community, and it's too bad that people don't know what we are doing and that there are also lots of other seniors in Lacombe doing the same.

Others also noted that even though there are a large number of healthy, actively involved seniors in the community, people would never know that by listening to how the government and newspaper writers talk about their need for "assisted living," "graduated care" and even "aging in the right place." These respondents felt quite strongly that talking about seniors in these ways while at the same time ignoring their many contributions to the community negatively affects how people feel about seniors. A couple of respondents also stated that the lack of regular public recognition for the contributions that seniors make to the life of Lacombe makes it challenging for organizations that try to help seniors be as actively involved in the community as possible. As one focus group member stated in rather blunt terms:

Sure we all gradually get older as we go through life, though when the government and others insist on talking about us seniors the way they do it seems more like they think we are all just gradually dying.

A few respondents were annoyed about a comment they had recently heard on the radio about seniors that they felt was not true at all. As one man put it:

I couldn't believe it when I heard on the radio the other day about it seeming like most seniors don't really care about their own personal development after a certain age and just want to be taken care of by someone else. I don't know who they were talking about, but I sure don't know anyone like that and I'm 84!

When asked about the challenges that getting older can pose for community involvement, many focus group participants agreed with the respondent who said:

It's awful feeling so dependent on others since it used to be me who helped others out. I know I can't do everything I did before, and some days I struggle with how to ask for help and who I should ask. As for me helping others out? No one asks anymore and so it gets easier and easier for me to just not offer. I wish it wasn't that way as I always liked feeling that others kind of depended on me and appreciated my help.

Clearly, seniors who are active and relatively independent face a somewhat confusing and even disconcerting problem. Well over 50 per cent of the respondents stated that their sense of confusion and concern about their place in the community is due in part to what they feel are negative attitudes towards seniors that are held even by those who say they appreciate the past contributions of Lacombe's "elderly citizens." As one life-long, 83 year old member of the community stated:

Some people say they are thankful for the contributions that us "elderly citizens" made to our community when we were younger. But we aren't given many choices about the kinds of things we can be involved in and how we can contribute to our community anymore, and to me that shows what lots of people in our community really think of us.

Following this comment, quite a few focus group members expressed concern about how future living arrangements for seniors would affect not only their sense of connection to the community, but also the

freedom and ability they would have to choose their level and types of involvement. Many expressed hope that the “right” kind of senior housing community could help raise the profile of seniors in the community. They envisioned Lacombe becoming the kind of community that would support seniors as well as provide them with meaningful opportunities to remain as actively involved in the community as they would like.

Other focus group participants noted that not all seniors are interested in being involved in the community.²¹ Indeed, some were quite worried that senior housing developments would gradually take away their dignity by limiting their freedom to choose how they would like to live their life. As one person whose family had pressured him and his wife to move into a senior apartment complex when his wife became ill expressed it, “senior housing can pretty much feel like an end-of-the-road warehouse for old people.” When others pointed out that this was not everyone’s experience and that he had in fact regained some of his “freedom” after his wife had passed away, he acknowledged that his concern was more about not being able to make important decisions that would affect his life. He admitted that he was grateful for the genuine care and support his wife had received from others, particularly since he had been unable to care for her as much as he would have liked to have done. He also said that he truly appreciated the many different services and types of facilities designed to meet the needs of seniors. His experience, however, had taught him that the wrong kind of senior housing development can result in residents feeling disconnected from others as well as having less and less control over their own lives. A number of focus group participants shared his concern that the wrong type of senior housing development could contribute to residents feeling even more socially isolated than they already do. More pronounced, however, was their concern that any housing initiative that disconnects seniors from their community can reduce the appreciation and respect that others may have for them.

Whether respondents felt a sense of connection to their community or not, it is evident that long-standing cultural attitudes and practices surrounding home ownership contribute significantly to their confusion and concern surrounding their future living arrangements. Throughout Canada’s history, individual home ownership has been the dominant mode of housing. People in this country are encouraged to own their own home and to view home ownership as a long-term means of building and maintaining a certain standard of living and quality of life. While it is universally accepted in Canada that every person has the right to an adequate standard of living that includes decent, affordable housing, home ownership in this country has always represented much more than simply having a place to house oneself and ones’ family. The word “home” implies a sense of intimate connection and belonging, and cultural and institutional support for home ownership in Canada has long been bolstered by the belief that

²¹ One participant stated rather angrily that while many younger people aren’t interested in being actively involved in their community, they have never heard that given as a reason to “retire” those younger people from community life.

everyone in this country can and should strive to own their home. While most people agree that housing is a basic material need, it would thus also appear that most people in Canada experience home as a cultural and even spiritual necessity.²² As numerous focus group participants noted, this is a far cry from how the government and others seem to think about the living arrangements of seniors.

The difference that many focus group participants saw between attitudes and expectations surrounding pre- and post-retirement living circumstances is clearly evident when we compare discussions of home ownership with discussions surrounding the “place” of seniors in Canada. Many people in Canada view the owning of one’s home to be a right as well as a reward. Home ownership represents stability, and signifies that one has been able to achieve something special for themselves and possibly those they love. Furthermore, it is assumed that home ownership is accessible to anyone and everyone who is willing to work hard and remain committed to supporting themselves and possibly their family and community. Owning one’s home is therefore regarded as both a material achievement as well as a symbol of the autonomy, privacy and independence that someone has earned. Moreover, purchasing one’s own home helps cultivate a hopeful vision of the future since it invites home owners to see themselves as being able to settle down and actively contribute to the life of their community.

In contrast to the hope associated with home ownership, most discussions of why seniors move and where they move to tend to focus on them “retiring” from society and their inability to care for themselves due to a decline in health. Focus group participants told stories about friends who had moved in with their children when they needed more care and support or about people they knew that had been “placed” into senior homes and/or care facilities when they were unable to care for themselves and/or their spouse. They believed that many of these people had difficulty adjusting to their new, unfamiliar living environments in large part because they had had little if any control over the decision about where they would live. Focus group participants who talked about their immigrant experience were quite disheartened about discussions around senior living arrangements that tend to draw on the passive and largely unhelpful language of graduated care and assisted living. It became clear to them over the course of our discussions that even the most well-intentioned discussions of “aging in the right place” end up focusing on the “problems of aging,” which unfortunately results in seniors being viewed as passive recipients of care and support regardless of their abilities and living arrangements.

It was interesting that focus group participants also identified a number of problems with the emphasis that government reports and even community organizations place on the importance of seniors remaining independent for as long as possible. While many respondents said they assumed that policies and programs supporting senior independence were well-meaning, a number of them felt that the emphasis on specialized treatment for seniors and assisted living arrangements seemed to be at odds with

²² Social Analysis, 2003:24

how they understand community.

One focus group member clearly felt that most current attitudes towards seniors are misguided, and he questioned why “this whole idea of assisted living only applies to seniors, since it seems to me that community is all about helping one another out no matter how young or old we are.” Another respondent followed that comment by sharing a story about how they saw community:

When my family and others settled here in Lacombe 70 years ago we all needed to help each other. Sure there was some kind of pride in owning your own home, though the government was pretty generous to lots of settlers in this area when they were getting started. Also, we all knew that without family, friends and community to support us, we would be pretty lucky if we were able to keep our homes at all. Whenever anyone needed something fixed or help to get by, nobody hesitated to lend a hand or share what they had.

Study participants recognized that building community of grace, dignity and respect requires much more than a commitment to providing senior community members with an affordable, comfortable and secure place to live. As important as these issues are, they felt that all stakeholders need to be committed to a fully inclusive vision of community that fully appreciates, respects, and gracefully invites seniors into the everyday life of their community.

Towards a Senior-Inclusive Vision of Community

It is evident that cultivating a “senior-inclusive” community means much more to the participants in our study than simply providing older citizens with comfortable housing arrangements and age appropriate activities. Rather, they see it as a vision that treats seniors with dignity and respect, and that invites them to enjoy the benefits of their community and to actively contribute to the lives of others in whatever ways they like and are able to do. There was consensus particularly among the key informants that any community benefits when the experiences, insights and concerns of seniors are taken into account by policy, program and project developers. As one key informant who has worked for many years with a number of organizations that support seniors noted,

We try to ask seniors about their lives, what activities they are interested in, and what services and supports they would find most helpful because we think it important that community life be developed with the experiences, circumstances and needs of seniors and other community members in mind.

The two organizations that currently provide housing for seniors in Lacombe are committed at least in part to this vision of community. One of these organizations is The Good Samaritan Society, whose Royal Oak Manor has offered senior residents a “safe, comfortable community that inspires involvement and where people experience a sense of caring, belonging and purpose.”²³ In contrast, the Lacombe Foundation is a public management body under the Province of Alberta that provides affordable housing

²³ http://www.gss.org/loc_royalOakVillage.htm

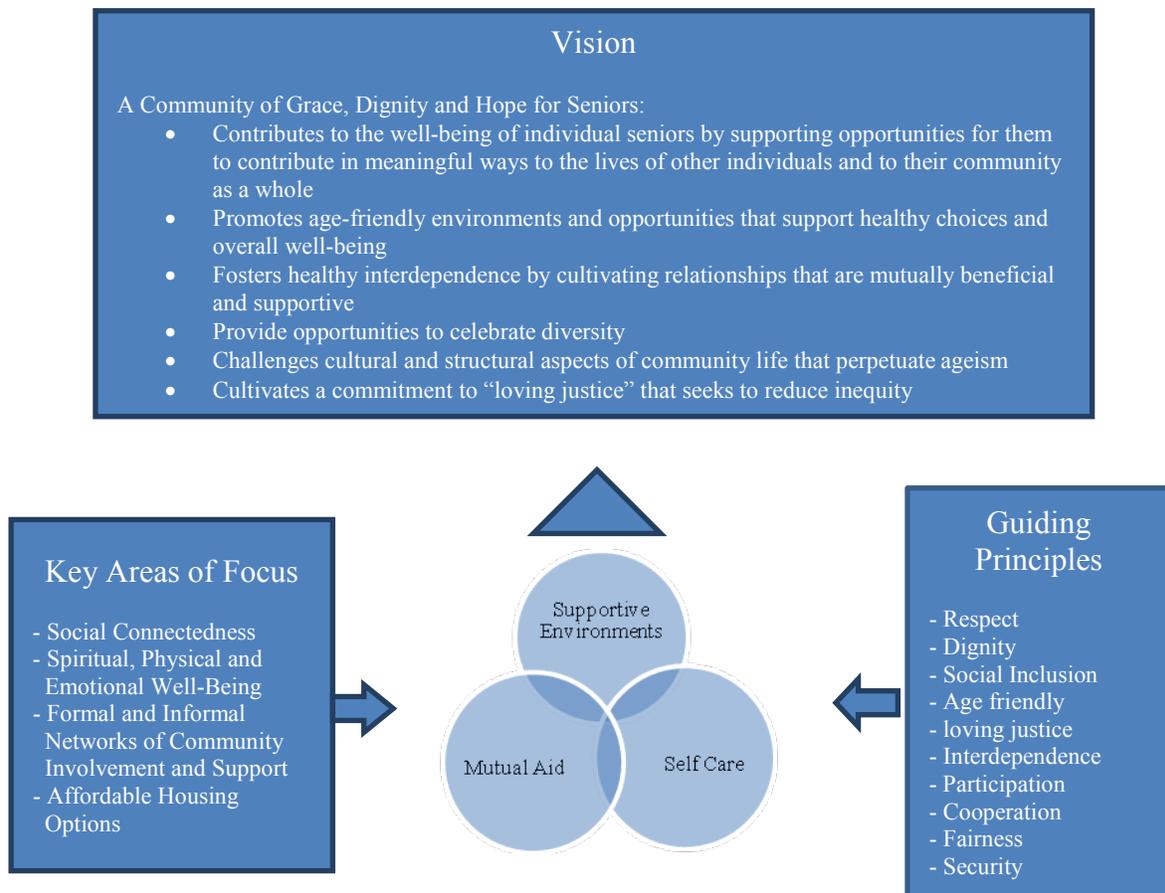
for seniors and low-income families in the region. Their philosophy, which appears to place less emphasis on residents being appreciated and actively engaged in the community, is that:

Everyone needs a home; a place to belong; a place of safety and security; a place that gives them roots, stability, and a feeling of worth; a place that assures them of their human dignity; a place to feel relaxed and comfortable; a place to entertain family and friends; a place to maintain their independences and make their own choices; a place they can take pride in.

Despite their differences, the senior facilities runs by the Lacombe Foundation and The Good Samaritan Society are part of a network of community care that seeks to cultivate well-being, health and hope in the lives of Lacombe seniors.

Needless to say, cultivating a community of grace, dignity and hope for seniors is a challenge for not only these organizations, but for everyone that has a stake in the future of Lacombe. While Figure 3 represents an ideal vision of community, it captures the essential characteristics of an inclusive, caring and hopeful community.

Figure 3 – A Model for a Community of Grace, Dignity and Hope for Seniors



Adapted from Canadian Community Health Survey, Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental challenges facing communities that seek to promote healthy,

hopeful aging is for community members to see social diversity as a valuable characteristic of their community rather than as a problem to be solved. Communities of grace, dignity and hope are committed to social inclusion, and therefore seek to eliminate barriers and provide opportunities for everyone to contribute in meaningful ways to the lives of others. They also recognize and show appreciation for the contributions of all community members, which cultivates a vibrant array of social networks and mutually beneficial, supportive relationships. Comments by focus group participants confirm research findings that indicate how beneficial it is when individuals feel included and are actively involved in their community. Most notably, seniors who report a strong sense of community belonging are much more likely to be in good health and experience overall well-being, which in the end benefits the community as a whole.^{24,25} As discussed in the following section, Elim Village in Surrey, B.C. represents an attempt by some to build this very kind of community.

The Elim Village Alternative

In the early nineties, during a Bible study of the Book of James, a group of Christians were profoundly impacted by this principle: “Evidence of faith is demonstrated by good works.” They had a vision to create a comprehensive Christian community, professionally managed, enriched with amenities, celebrating community, independence and the joy of life. Elim would be a village built on love, where spouses and friends need never worry again about being separated or having to move away if they required different levels of care.

Unlike most senior housing communities, Elim Village was built from a desire to serve God by building a community that would seek to address the housing, financial, health, social and spiritual needs of their older Christian sisters and brothers. As one of the original participants from this group noted, those who became involved had quite personal reasons for doing so.

Most of us had parents, other close relatives and people in our churches that were reaching the age where they were going to have to move, and we were aware that there was nothing in our area like Elim. We also knew that without proper care and support, it would be challenging if not impossible for many of them to adjust to changes in their living arrangements that were the result of financial or health related issues.²⁶

Their discussions eventually led to the formation of the Elim Housing Society (EHS), which was incorporated as a not-for-profit Society under the Societies Act of British Columbia in 1996, and immediately began developing plans for a Christian housing development that would enable seniors to remain in their community regardless what type of living arrangement and level of care they needed and desired.²⁷ It was also during this time that the Elim Foundation began gathering seed money for early development costs, and soon thereafter 70 people took the collective step of faith to purchase a large plot

²⁴ For extended discussion of this see the chief public health officer's report on the health and well-being of Canadian seniors at: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respeacsp/2010/fr-rc/cphorsphc-respeacsp-06-eng.php>.

²⁵ Retrieved on January 15, 2012 from: <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/publications/en/rh-pr/socio/socio056.pdf>

²⁶ Interview with Marten Van Huizen, November 12, 2011.

²⁷ <http://www.elimvillage.ca/Residences/ResidentialCare.html>

of land in Surrey, B.C. Members of the EHS and the Elim Foundation recognized early on that while Elim Village would have to be based on a loving commitment by residents, staff and all other stakeholders to support and build this community of faith, they also understand that it needed to operate as a viable business. Along with their commitment to build slowly and deliberately, the EHS also established quite early on a close working relationship with two registered charities. One was the Elim Christian Care Society, which was contracted to provide care services primarily to those who live in the Emerald and the Harrison residences. The other charity was the aforementioned Elim Foundation, whose continued mandate has been to ensure the ongoing financial viability of the EHS by raising funds through charitable gifts and planned giving.²⁸ The first set of duplexes and a condominium complex were completed in 2001, and by 2011 Elim Village had grown into a vibrant Christian community that provided almost 500 residents with three distinct housing options, multiple levels of care, and a vital and active community life.²⁹

Everyone associated with Elim Village continues to be encouraged to view all relationships and levels of interaction within the community as interdependent, and residents as well as staff do their best to treat one another with dignity, respect, and love. As a manager of one of the facilities in the village noted, people who live and work at Elim recognize that:

We are not our own. Everyone here understands that one cannot simply do what they feel like doing, for whether we like it or not we affect many people by our actions. Our common faith reminds us that we live for God and one another.

Residents as well as the staff of Elim Village are particularly committed to easing the transition of new residents into community life. Whether they are neighbors, volunteers or paid staff, the people in Elim Village look after one another. Residents had of course at some point experienced this same transition, and many of them go out of their way to welcome and help new residents settle into their new living arrangements. Indeed, helping potential residents see and understand the transitions they are going through begins as soon as people inquire about the availability of the various living arrangements at Elim. The sales and marketing staff work closely with prospective residents to help them understand not only what Elim Village has to offer, but in a much more substantial way what it means to be an appreciated and active member of this caring community. Prospective residents are invited to take part in a number of tours of the village, some of which are provided by volunteers who are established residents. One relatively new resident shared the impact that her tour had on her.

I had been living on my own for a few years after my husband had passed away. But my house was too much for me to take care of and I had a couple of health issues, so when a friend in my church told me about Elim I thought I would come and see for myself. Well, it just felt like home from the start! A lady who had lived here for some years told me all about

²⁸ <http://www.elimvillage.ca/TheElimStory/HousingSociety.html>

²⁹ <http://www.elimvillage.ca/TheElimStory/History.html>

life in our village, and by the time I left to go back home I had made up my mind that I wanted to live here.

There are, of course, many formal as well as informal ways that people associated with Elim Village seek to cultivate a sense of Christian community. The EHS is governed by a Board of Directors that is elected from its membership,³⁰ and the *EHS News* keeps EHS members and residents of Elim Village informed about current and future EHS projects and developments.³¹ While not all residents and staff are involved in every community decision, input is welcome from everyone in relation to activities, provision of services, and the development of housing and care facilities. As is true of every community, disagreements arise between Elim neighbors and residents about property issues, the use of facilities, or how different aspects of the community should be developed. Although there are a number ways that disputes can be resolved, most everyone is encouraged to follow the Biblical principle of going to their sister or brother if they are concerned about something they have done. Still, as the CEO of Elim noted: “We are still a young, adolescent community, and oh my, those adolescent years!”

The primary facility for activities and village-wide special events is the Oasis, a 15,000 square foot amenity center situated in the center of the village. Residents encourage and invite one another to be actively involved in the life of the community, and they even publish the *Elim Village Voice* newsletter once a month to offer their fellow community members an entertaining and informative perspective on life in Elim Village.³² Each living area also produces its own calendar of events and activities.

Living and Care Arrangements

The 36 duplex and 161 condominium units sold as life lease agreements are one of three different living arrangements available to residents of Elim Village. The four condo buildings also house a library, exercise room, multi-purpose room, fireside lounges, woodworking shops and more.³³ Although duplex and condo residents live on their own with no formal care or service, the common bond of faith and commitment to building and celebrating Christian community together are the “ties that bind” all residents of Elim Village. Life lease residents initiate and organize their own activities and events that include informal gatherings, a wide variety of drop in gathering and classes, and more formal, village-wide events that are open to all Elim residents and guests.

Private or subsidized rental suites at The Emerald are available to those that require slightly more assistance. Each of the 109 units in the Emerald features a full kitchen as well as a stacking washer and dryer. The building has a computer lab, small grocery shop, hair salon, fireside lounges and numerous activity rooms. In a spirit of pastoral care and with a commitment to providing opportunities for residents

³⁰ Board members do not receive any remuneration, profits or advantages from their position on the Board.
<http://www.elimvillage.ca/TheElimStory/BoardofDirectors.html>

³¹ Retrieved on August 12, 2012 at <http://www.elimvillage.ca/NewsandEvents/ElimHousingSocietyNews.html>

³² Retrieved on August 12, 2012 at <http://www.elimvillage.ca/NewsandEvents/VillageNews.html>

³³ Retrieved on August 15, 2012 at <http://www.elimvillage.ca/Residences/IndependentLiving.html>

to be as actively involved in the life of the community as they like, recreation staff help facilitate a wide variety of clubs and activities and outings, including Sunday morning worship services.³⁴ All services are provided in a spirit of respect, dignity and appreciation for all residents. Basic services available to Emerald residents include lunch and supper, morning and afternoon snacks, light housekeeping/laundry, social, recreational and wellness programs, pastoral care, and a 24-hour emergency call service. Service available for a small additional cost include personal care, escort or mobility assistance, tray service when needed, night time monitoring, medication monitoring, and assistance with convalescent, transitional situations.

The third type of living arrangement in Elim Village is The Harrison, which is a full care, home-like facility with 112 private and 6 semi-private ensuite rooms intended for couples or friends. While medical and other staff provides professional care to Harrison residents, a pastor works with a team of trained pastoral care volunteers to provide spiritual, emotional and personal support to residents and their families and friends.³⁵ The décor throughout the Harrison is bright and welcoming, and the size of rooms and windows in this facility are larger than government standards require. There are also a number of comfortable common lounge areas with open access to large balconies or secured gardens for residents and their guests. Certainly the Harrison, the Emerald and the duplex/condo units in Elim Village provide spacious and comfortable living arrangements for the seniors that live there. But there is much more to Elim Village than comfortable, well-maintained buildings and a well-organized calendar of community events and activities. Residents and staff understand that it is the faithful, loving commitment of everyone associated with Elim Village towards one another that brings grace, dignity and hope to those who live and work there.

Concluding Remarks

People committed to building a community of grace, dignity and hope recognize and accept the challenge of cultivating mutually beneficial and supportive relationships. They seek to promote a wide array of volunteer opportunities, express appreciation for the contributions of all community members, support formal care giving, and seek to honor as well as strengthen the many informal and more “natural” networks of familial and neighborly support that hold communities together. In contrast to social environments that place the highest value on mobility, independence, and individual achievement, communities of grace, dignity and hope place these and many other social values in the context of caring, mutually interdependent and meaningfully inclusive relationships.

Although there were some senior residents of Lacombe that expressed concern about issues surrounding affordability as well as security and access, exactly what focus group participants wanted

³⁴ Retrieved on August 15, 2012 at <http://www.elimvillage.ca/Residences/AssistedLiving.html>

³⁵ Retrieved on August 15, 2012 at http://www.elimvillage.ca/pdfs/elim_times/winter_2009.pdf

their future housing units to look like and where they wanted them to be situated varied widely. Most every participant did however express hope that Lacombe will seek to be the type of community that fosters a sense of dignity and respectful interdependence among all its members, and that at the heart of their Lacombe will be senior housing developments that contribute meaningfully to the building of a community characterized by grace, dignity and hope.