

## COMMEMORATIVE SERVICE MARKS DEMENTIA AWARENESS WEEK

Last month the Bacchus Marsh Clergy agreed to participate in the program for Dementia Awareness Week with a service to mark the occasion. Coordinated by the Rev Dr Bob Faser at St Andrew's Uniting Church, it sought to draw attention to the growing number of sufferers in the community and provide an opportunity for prayer for them and those who have the task of caring for them. Some forty people attended. Four churches were involved in preparations for the event, which was also a cooperative venture between the churches and the newly formed "Bacchus Marsh Dementia Information Network". The network was set up this year with the help of Alzheimer's Australia Vic, operating from its Ballarat office.

The event contained prayers and hymns appropriate to the occasion. It included a presentation in the form of an interview with Lucy Griffiths, who has Alzheimer's, and her husband, Doug Dargaville. Dr Faser discussed with the couple how they came to discover the problem, and the process of diagnosis. Lucy had fronted up to her local GP, with the feeling that "something was no quite right". This had initiated scans, and subsequent referral to Ballarat, to the CDAMS – "Cognitive, Dementia, and Allied Memory Services", where further testing was available. Dr Yates confirmed the diagnosis as Alzheimer's – the major form of dementia (70%).

Lucy described how she hadn't fallen apart about the news. It was something of a relief to know what was wrong. Alzheimer's causes a progressive build up of abnormal protein in the brain, with a consequent shrinkage of brain tissue. Lucy is still in the early stage of the disease, with such symptoms as short term memory loss and manipulation problems (her handwriting has suffered, and she is no longer able to drive). Emphasising what she can do, she sees exercise as important, and regularly walks the 1 km into town. She told how the Ballarat program of six sessions for sufferers and carers had been a great help. While to date there is no cure for Alzheimer's, although research is promising, drugs are available to delay its progress, and she is currently working with a body patch, changed daily.

In response to the question about what kind of support was needed, Doug said that he needed patience – "to walk at Lucy's pace". Dementia sufferers should be accepted for who they are. They need plenty of care and reassurance. The family had taken the matter on board. Too often Alzheimer's is seen as a stigma – not to be talked about. Consequently it is difficult to set in place programs of care, he said.

Alzheimer's Australia was represented at the Service by Ms Tanya Petrovich, Coordinator of Quality Assurance for Victoria. She listed the services offered by the organisation in the fields of education, advocacy, counselling and research. Her own work focused on workshops assisting carers. With respect to advocacy she said that state and federal Governments were lobbied on behalf of people with dementia and their carers, on many different aspects. Alzheimer's Australia was part of a group that was successful in implementing a 2005 Federal Budget with \$320 Million in funding given over 5 years. Regrettably the program has been concluded and more lobbying is necessary to restore Dementia as a national health priority.

The counselling services provided by the Association were a significant help to support to people with dementia, their carers and their families. These services are offered free of charge and for as long as the support is required. The service is delivered in our locality by Glenda Hipwell at the Ballarat office. She has helped set up the Bacchus Marsh program. The local group meets every second month at Holy Trinity Hall, meeting next at 10 pm on October 11<sup>th</sup>, when the speaker will be Julia Meek, Director of Nursing, Djerriwarrh Health Services.