

Bill and the 'Art of Accompaniment'

This small group task includes three discussions. Please budget your time so that your group does discuss all three. Also, please don't read the following section until you have completed each discussion.

You are Sophia. You provide pastoral care at a Catholic residential aged care facility.

You know Farida, who is one of the staff at the facility. Farida and her family were resettled in Australia after fleeing civil war in Africa. She has worked at the facility for just over two months. She is hardworking and kind. In her culture, older people are given much respect, and Farida is always respectful, kind, patient, and happy. A Catholic herself, she likes working in a Catholic institution.

You also know Bill. Bill is a resident at the facility. He came to live there around the same time that Farida joined the staff. He is in his late 70s, and very overweight. He has a number of health problems including diabetes. Bill is Catholic, but non-practising. He is always polite and grateful for the care that he receives. While he is friendly, he's also very private.

One day, Farida comes to see you. She is very upset. She was cleaning Bill's room, and she found some male pornography in an open drawer. There were "many dirty magazines" with photographs of naked men. Some of them were doing "terrible things." In her culture, Farida explains, people like Bill are shunned. Farida says that someone like Bill has no place in a Catholic aged care home, and that he should be sent away. "There are priests who have done bad things to boys," Farida says. "He is like them."

First Discussion: How do you respond to Farida? In the days and weeks ahead, what follow-up do you undertake? Should you escalate this matter to other staff in the facility, such as Farida's supervisor? If so, who would you escalate to? What policy and procedures, resources and training might be available in your organisation to assist Farida? How would you access these materials? Also, Bill does not know what has happened. What if anything do you say to him?

Your conversation with Farida causes you to think more about Bill. When you first met him, you asked if he had ever married. After Bill said no, he added that he "wasn't really the marrying kind." You have also observed that Bill has a frequent visitor: another elderly, overweight man named Bernie. When you ask around, you learn that Bill hasn't completed his Advance Care Planning forms. The staff member responsible for this tells you that she had asked Bill if he had anyone who could be his substitute decision maker. At first, he said, "There may be someone..." However, he quickly added, "No, that wouldn't be possible. It certainly wouldn't be possible here."

You wonder if Bill is a gay man who is in a relationship with Bernie. You also wonder if you have taken a few stray facts, and made them into something which they are not.

Second Discussion: What considerations would guide you as you tried to decide whether or not you would ask Bill about what you are wondering? If you went ahead, how would you go about this? What responses or questions from Bill might you prepare for?

You did ask Bill. You visited him in his room, and told him that you had a personal question to ask him. You said that Bill didn't have to answer if he didn't want to, and that it was a question about his sexual orientation. Bill smiled. "I think you have found me out," he said. A long conversation followed. Bill *is* gay, and he *is* in a relationship with Bernie. They had always been discrete both about their sexual orientation and their relationship. They maintained two residences. A few folk in both their extended families knew about them, though many thought that they were just friends. Bill said that Bernie was "the love of his life." Because this is a Catholic facility, Bill thought that he couldn't reveal his relationship with Bernie. He had dropped a few hints, hoping that someone would pick up on them. He was so happy that you had. At times during this conversation, you both cried. At times, you both smiled and laughed.

As time passes, your relationship with Bill and with Bernie grows and develops. Perhaps because of your support or perhaps because of many other factors, both Bill and Bernie become progressively more at ease in telling others about their orientation and their relationship. At the facility, they tell a few other staff and some of the other residents too. You are a bit surprised that almost all of the elderly residents take it in their stride, and respond calmly and acceptingly. Some of the staff – particularly some from CALD backgrounds – were either uncertain or upset. Your facility provided training about its expectations, and about what words, behaviours and attitudes are not acceptable. Bernie becomes Bill's substitute decision maker, and Bill becomes Bernie's substitute decision maker. With your support, and with some embarrassment, Bill apologises to Farida. "I shouldn't have left that drawer open," he said. "I promise it won't happen again."

Both Bill and Bernie progressively tell almost everyone in their extended families. Quite a few had already guessed. Most were accepting. Bernie is from a somewhat fundamentalist Catholic family; a few of them were negative. Both Bernie and Bill take this in their stride. "We've had so many positive responses," says Bernie. "We have to expect some negativity too."

On a few occasions, you have spoken with them about spirituality and religion. Both identified experiences which give them a sense of meaning. These include caring for one another, recognising the kindness of other people, and connecting with the beauty of creation. Both have been hurt by church statements about homosexuality, and both are at this time alienated from the Catholic Church. Both have good memories of the church from their childhood and early adult life. You invited them to pray the Our Father with you. This felt good for both of them, and may have opened a path back to the church. If they came to Mass at your facility, would they be welcome to receive Communion?

One day, Bill and Bernie ask to speak to you. They have two questions. Eventually, Bernie will also need to move into the facility. They know that some married couples have shared rooms. "Would we be able to have shared rooms too?" they ask. Also, they want to get married. They understand that dear old Fr Murphy who visits the facility will not be able to do their wedding, but they know of a lovely civil celebrant. "It'll only be a small crowd," Bill says. "We'd like it to be in the hall here at the facility. And we'd like you to be there."

Third Discussion: Would Bill and Bernie be welcome to receive Communion at your facility? Why or why not? Can Bill and Bernie have shared rooms at your facility? Why or why not? Can they have their wedding in your hall? Why or why not? Will you attend their wedding? Why or why not? What does all this make you think? How does all this make you feel?