



Finding the way

A theology of ageing

SUMMARY REPORT

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Summary prepared by Lisa Rees.

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Why a theology of ageing?

Anglican Aged Care Services Group was established in 1948 by a small group of volunteers from the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne who saw a need to provide care and support to older Victorians in need. More than 60 years later the organisation is now known as Benetas and is one of the leading not-for-profit providers of aged care services in Victoria.

This heritage, together with its membership of the Anglicare Australia network and active connections with the Anglican Church means that Benetas is a ministry in the Christian faith tradition. It is guided principally by its mission and vision, but also operates on the latest business and professional research and principles. Its primary focus is to provide the highest-quality aged care services and to actively advocate on behalf of older people. Benetas works to overcome the barriers that prevent older people from realising their true potential, especially those who live on the margins of our society.

There are different understandings of ageing – medical, economic, sociological. A ‘theology of ageing’ offers an understanding of what it means to grow old in the light of belief in God. Given that Benetas stands in the Christian

tradition, this is a Christian understanding of God. It is used to illuminate an understanding of people ageing well in Australia. It addresses spirituality in old age, the nature of personhood and becoming a whole person, as well as the ambiguity of ageing.

Benetas commissioned the paper *Finding the way: A Theology of Ageing* in order to:

- see what it means to be an ageing person in Australia, especially what it means to have a positive experience of ageing
- have a basis for its faith-based organisation in service provision and advocacy, ensuring older people have ample opportunities to enjoy a positive experience of ageing
- influence other organisations, government and the general public in ensuring older people are supported in these opportunities.

A snapshot of ageing in Australia

In the last century, life expectancy has nearly doubled, at least for people in industrialised countries, which has been made possible by breakthroughs in natural sciences and the expansion of the market economy.

An increasing number of people can be counted among the older population, and there is now not only a third age, but also a fourth age which requires us to adjust to ageing in a way unknown to our forebears. There is the ‘young old’ (65–74), the ‘old’ (75–85) and the ‘very old’ (85+). Elders today are truly pioneers — exploring for us all what it might mean to age in this way.

This leads to the presumption that since science and economics have brought us so many benefits, including this extension of life, they should also provide the terms in which to understand life, especially what counts as a good life.

One such area concerns ‘ageism’. This is the risk of ageing being understood only in terms of what it is not: not young; not energetic; not productively employed; not having more life ahead of you; not being autonomous and independent; and not belonging to the present.

This negativity is also seen in anti-ageing proposals, from cosmetics and laser treatments for removing signs of ageing, to promises to one day reverse the entire ageing process altogether.

It is further perpetrated by advertising images of the skydiving older woman and the jet-skiing older man. These images ‘show no more tolerance for the intractable vicissitudes of old age than the older stereotypes; older people are now (or should be) healthy, sexually very active, engaged, productive and self-reliant — in other words, young’.¹

We need another way of understanding ageing so as to be able to age well without pretending to be something we are not and without ignoring the real difficulties and pain that ageing often brings. A theology of ageing offers another approach.

Spirituality and life's big questions

In 1986 Professor Gary Bouma published the results of a survey of Australians titled Religious Factors in Australian Life.² This study revealed, apparently for the first time and against the general self-understanding that despite the secular context of public life, a vast number of Australians had a private spirituality which took different forms and was not necessarily connected to religion.

Since then spirituality has become more overt in public life and discourse with people seeking to address their spiritual needs from ancient and contemporary resources, including one or other religious traditions, and sometimes a combination.

Spirituality is what addresses a person's 'spiritual needs' – for meaning, identity and worth, and answers to the 'big questions': Who am I? What am I here for? What value am I? To whom do I belong?

Spirituality is integral to the fabric of our lives. It is what we wake up into each morning and why we get out of bed. As time goes by we may find our pattern of life is too 'thin' to meet our spiritual needs. A spiritual quest may ensue. On the other hand, our lives may be radically changed by a traumatic accident or by falling in love, or by unexpected challenges. Our spirituality may prove insufficient for the new situation. The 'big questions' again become explicit. We experience a period of confusion with some personal turmoil as we find our way to a new 'settlement' about our lives and thus to a new spirituality so we can live well (or well enough) with ourselves and with others.

As Professor Bouma's study, and several others since have revealed, many people don't see themselves as religious. They do not belong to a church, synagogue, mosque or temple. They might say they are into spirituality rather than religion. In fact they might say we are all 'spiritual', and it is only a question of what we

value, and what stories we tell to make sense of life and our lives in particular. A person's spirituality may not have anything to do with an idea of God. Conversely, the major religions have centuries-long traditions offering what would count as 'spirituality.' A Christian belief in God and the associated way of life is one of these forms of spirituality.

Christianity engenders a spirituality based on the strange story of the God who is the creator of our magnificent universe, whose presence is intimated in ordinary daily life, who spoke through the law and the prophets of Israel, who amazingly came into the world as a baby in a manger and ended up as a man on a cross. So the story goes a 'new reality' came into the world through this Jewish child named Jesus.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection demonstrate God's love for the world. This is a foretaste of the glory that Christianity promises for the whole universe, which God has created in love. All this shows the God-given unconditional worth and dignity of creation and of human beings in particular. Human worth is also indicated by God entrusting humankind with the power and responsibility to explore the world, so that we may recognise the glory of God in creation and ensure that the earth's abundant good is discovered and distributed for the benefit of all humankind. We recognise this God-given dignity and worth whenever we act kindly and justly, whenever we exercise power responsibly. We deny it whenever we act otherwise.

Why would God create an ageing universe?

In seeking to understand our ageing we realise that it's not just human beings who age. Everything ages. Not just chronologically, but in terms of flourishing and declining to eventually dying – even this ageing universe.

Evolutionary science says that complex chemical and biological systems evolved on earth and possibly elsewhere in the universe. New things and new life continually come into existence. All this 'coming into existence' must be counted as part of God creating, just as in 'the beginning', God created existence 'out of nothing' and continues to sustain it. Scientifically we can trace the history of the universe back to first few moments, but not directly to God's creative act.

We live in a universe that began in a 'big bang' explosion 13.7 billion years ago. The universe has continued to expand to produce billions of galaxies, each with a myriad of stars, of which one is our sun. We now know that this expansion started to speed up a few billion years ago.³ The universe, it seems, will go on expanding until everything decays into a dark, cold sea of energy of maximum disorder, which oddly means there will be no distinctions, no information, and no life.

It is this increasing disorder that is integral to how complex systems are formed and maintain themselves over a long time before eventually breaking down. This decline to elementary constituents means such systems can be recycled (all the atoms in our bodies are continually recycled) and new complex entities formed. The increasing entropy, and the decline and death that accompany it, is part of the way God enables created things to be co-creators in this universe. Human procreation is one such example.

Our ageing as human beings is because we are part of such a universe in which disorder is increasing. Our bodies are subject to this disorder. We wear out because everything wears out.

It is not because there is something 'wrong' with us that our bodies decline. It is not due to 'sin'. In this light, our decline and dying are part of the God-given process by which life is brought into existence. Our decline and dying are an expression of our commonality with all created things. They show that we are finite creatures and are a consequence of our being co-creators, as are all God's creatures. We all have our time to contribute and then comes the time to allow a place for others.

Christian theology asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and are therefore capable of a personal relationship with God. There are many implications of this belief, one of which is whether this gift of 'personhood' can be lost through the ageing process. According to Christian faith, each one of us was brought into existence in a life-producing universe for a relationship with God. It would be self-contradictory of God to allow ordinary processes of the created universe such as decline, decay and death to unravel our being persons (or personhood).

Ageing well is part of living well

For the Christian faith, living well is living in communion with God, with one another, with creation, and with one's self. Christian faith and spirituality help us live well even with the ambiguity of ageing, which can be seen as the tension between old age as a time of fruition and fulfilment, as well as a time of decay and loss.

One can also think about the structure of a human life in terms of 'morning and afternoon' (Jung) and while life is lived forwards it is understood backwards (Kierkegaard). Not to revisit one's past is to suffer a great loss and to inhibit others from learning how to live better. It is to lose access to a great source of creativity for the second half of life and a lively interest in the present and the future, with wisdom to contribute.⁴

Recently the Brotherhood of St Laurence convened a forum on 'Later Life Learning'. It was a lively audience and there were vibrant presentations. At the end of one talk the presenter said, 'of course older people want to talk about the big questions, spirituality and ethics and ...' He waved his hand as he said the last three words and sat down. Many in the audience were nodding as he made this last comment. However, this was the first and only reference to the matter. There was also discussion around other signs of spiritual needs, for example, in older men's need to find a new identity, for which the 'men's shed' movement has contributed positively; and the reported remark during the forum from older people that 'we are more than consumers'. These were hints that older people's spiritual needs are not being addressed. Perhaps this is because the things or activities that answered these needs earlier in life are no longer prominent in older age such as raising children or pursuing careers. There is time now, in our 'afternoon' lives, to reflect. Our felt spiritual needs show

that we cannot live on 'bread alone' — there is more to life, but not more of the same.

Turesky and Schultz⁵ report on research on spirituality in older adults. Without distinguishing too sharply between spirituality and religion they take 'spirituality' to refer to a more individual, personal, non-institutionalised search for the sacred. Older adults face more existentially oriented issues, which may well lead to an interest in spirituality and religion. Their spiritual needs include coming to terms with death and dying, forgiveness, and finding meaning at the end of life. They consider the spiritual needs of older adults a developmental change associated with ageing.

The ability to age well includes being able to focus on these spiritual challenges of ageing. For many older people with religious beliefs, the traditional prayers, scriptural passages, and sacramental rituals they absorbed earlier in life are still powerful enough to address these themes and tasks. A rich theological 'story' framing older people's lives is evoked in which they can find comfort and encouragement to continue their spiritual journey up to and beyond their death.

Becoming whole

Throughout our lives, Christians are called upon to live by two great commandments; to love the Lord our God; and to love our neighbour as ourselves. The relationship to the living God calls forth all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. This is the way to being a whole person.

At times in our lives we realise how much we have adjusted to our lack of ‘wholeness’ when we meet a truly whole human being. The Gospel offers us the person of Jesus as one such whole human being. He is the true ‘image of God,’ he is the one who lived the two great commandments and he refused idolatry.

In this light we can see that becoming a whole person is our vocation. This means claiming and reclaiming the aspects of ourselves that have been denied, neglected, forgotten or never accessed in our life journey. This holds for any stage of life, but especially the second half

during older age. It is the theological framing of what it is to be a whole person that opens up the possibility of unlimited potential for growth as we age.

Christian theology asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We were created in God’s image for communion with God, and with one another. We are capable of a personal relationship with God. Activating this capacity has to be learned and practised. This is God’s gift and call to us to be whole persons.

Ambiguity of ageing

As we age, we grapple with balancing the opposing tensions of fruition and decay, and of fulfilment and loss.

The fulfilment includes enjoying the fruits of one’s lifelong work in valued practices as well as serendipitous gifts: seeing one’s grandchildren; having long-term friends; celebrating decades of marriage; and earning the honour having a lifelong career. For those with financial security, retirement offers the prospect of leisure and freedom to turn one’s energies

to new interests and pursuits. This includes new kinds of employment opportunities. This experience of ageing is presumably the basis for the very positive assessment of life among Australians 65 to 74 in the 2010 General Social Survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: 83% of them found that ‘life is sweet’.⁶

However, growing old one also finds one's life becoming undone on a number of levels: personal capacities diminish; former proficiencies fade as does youthful appearance; identity changes as the centre of life is taken away — career, home and community unravel with the death of those who have formed part of one's life. Ageing can be accompanied by real financial impoverishment, disappointment of dreams unattained, betrayal by children or spouses and the burdens of caring for physically and mentally diminished parents, spouses and friends.

Unfortunately, this view can lead to the assumption that one's very self dissolves. If it is assumed that worth and personhood is defined in functional terms, then, as functionality unravels, so does the sense of personhood and worth. This assumption becomes deeply engrained in us through our daily life and work.

There is also a view that our loss of function and disease such as dementia gradually destroys the self until finally the person disappears.⁷ Fortunately, the opposite view is also maintained. Neurological capability is only one dimension of personhood. What is crucial to maintaining personhood is the quality of the person's relationships.

If those around are well attuned, the person is sometimes able to 'reappear'. There are many very moving stories of carers discovering how a person with dementia 'comes back' or is recognisably present as a person when communication is directed to them through the arts, music, ritual and symbols. Their personhood needs to be continually replenished, their selfhood continually evoked and reassured by others relating to them well.

Oliver Sacks⁸ tells of his experience with 'Jimmy', who while highly intelligent, could not retain immediate memories. Sacks diagnosed him with Korsakoff's syndrome. Jimmy seemed to Sacks to be a 'man without a past (or a future) stuck in a changeless meaningless moment'. Sacks thought of Jimmy as a lost soul. Because medical science couldn't help Jimmy, Sacks thought he was beyond help. Was it possible that Jimmy had been 'de-souled' by a disease? 'Do you think he has a soul?' Sacks once asked the Catholic Sisters who ran the aged care facility where Jimmy was being treated. They understood why Sacks asked the question but recommended that he watch Jimmy in chapel and then judge. Sacks described his findings:

“ I was moved and profoundly impressed, because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watch him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass.⁹ ”

There are many stories¹⁰ of personhood 'being replenished' because those around a person with dementia learn to be attuned to the 'wavelengths' they emit for communication. Theology rejoices that personhood is not lost as we age and this seems to be borne out, in a sensitive human community, even when someone has dementia.

Using a theology of ageing

This theology of ageing presents Benetas and like-minded organisations with an opportunity to hold together what we can learn from the different forms of human inquiry about the world and ourselves. It also frames those inquiries in relation to our faith in God.

What follows shows how a theology of ageing provides a practical basis for Benetas' work as a faith-based organisation with regard to what it means by a 'positive experience of ageing', service provision and advocacy. The following suggested actions are specific to the work of Benetas, but several have a broader reach and have been shared in this summary for the purpose of inspiring others to act similarly.

Pastoral care

Benetas already has an ongoing commitment to pastoral care, which is how the organisation responds to clients' spiritual needs, and a way in which it connects with its theology of ageing. A team of Pastoral Care Practitioners provides specialist pastoral and spiritual care, a service that goes beyond the base requirements of the Aged Care Standards. Social inclusion is another aspect of pastoral sensibility: all staff are committed to encouraging all faith communities, local parishes, denominational chaplains/visitors and pastoral care volunteers to be actively involved.

Benetas staff are also called upon to act with a pastoral sensibility, that is, to see its clients as people with whom to nurture a relationship rather than in terms of the tasks one needs to get through. A formal pastoral orientation process would help all staff (especially new staff) become aware of this dimension of their own lives, without imposing on them how their spiritual needs could or should be addressed. It could also include a 'sampling' period where staff document the details of when clients express, directly or indirectly, concerns to do with spiritual needs and how these concerns are addressed.

Benetas could also offer a public forum for the many organisations working with older people to recognise spiritual needs and the various ways they can be addressed, while respecting the differences among all involved.

Personhood and self worth

This theology of ageing supports the view that personhood is the irrevocable gift and call of God. The theological view that personhood cannot be lost has some empirical support, and Benetas should explore and defend this publicly, while promoting valuable strategies of care. This would allow Benetas to be a respected, informative voice on the subject.

Another possibility would be to create a short workshop experience directed to those who have been engaged in a specific role for some time (at work, at home etc.). They could reflect on the ways their 'person' has evolved over time through the 'agenda' of their role and how the prospect or reality of stepping out of that role affects their sense of self and life-worth. This could target older people in parishes, as well as the University of the Third Age and other Later Life Learning groups. Such workshops could introduce the themes of the human vocation to become a whole person, its dimensions and possibilities, and that 'ageing well is living well' and how the prospect of a larger sense of self could come into view as one ages.

Another consideration is what Benetas has already learned about helping people regain/retain a sense of dignity as the ambiguity of ageing deepens. There is an opportunity for Benetas to further explore how people regain a sense of dignity, in what terms, and how does this stand in relation to Benetas' theology of ageing? Benetas can put systems in place to help keep track of how themes on becoming a whole person are being worked out in the lives of clients, for example: remembering one's life story; being a person in a community; continuing self respect and dignity as the ambiguity of ageing deepens; and adjusting to becoming (more) dependent and vulnerable.

A related set of questions could also be applied to Benetas employees to discover whether the organisation does anything to help them become whole persons. The desired outcome would be for employees to find that working for Benetas strengthens their sense of dignity and worth. It would include examining some of the following areas: sense of dignity/worth; lower staff turnover rate; trust; and face-to-face communications.

Value of older people in our society

Benetas can consider forming a group of articulate older people who want to reflect on Australian society from the standpoint of old age. This could be a great cultural resource to help us think about how we live our lives. We recall Kierkegaard's maxim that life is understood backwards and lived forwards. This also recalls Bernard Lonergan's maxim that living precedes learning. If the right way could be found to voice these insights it would go towards reinstating the wisdom of the elders about living a whole life. Perhaps such a collection of writings could even be useful in secondary education curriculum streams such as religion and society or ethics or even philosophy.

Corporate spirituality

The term 'corporate spirituality' can be used in a general way to refer to the ethos and culture, the esprit de corps of an organisation. For an organisation such as Benetas, standing in the Christian faith tradition, the corporate spirituality should be marked by an openness to God. This could be fulfilled in many ways including: having an annual service of worship for the whole organisation celebrating and giving thanks for Benetas; compiling a book of particularly relevant scriptures and other readings from the Christian faith tradition; and beginning board meetings with the Benetas Prayer. When the board must deliberate on new issues or situations, they may also benefit from asking, 'what light does our theology of ageing cast on this matter for decision?'

It is also important to deepen the level of corporate self-awareness, including examining how the theology of ageing can inform Benetas' vision and mission, and most importantly how it does or has yet to inform the actual practice of Benetas.

Conclusion

In seeking a theology of ageing Benetas has taken an ambitious step towards a new level of corporate self-understanding.

This theology of ageing will also help Benetas influence other organisations, government and the general public in ensuring older people have ample opportunities to enjoy a positive experience of ageing. It is recognised however that governments and other secular organisations may not be especially open to these ideas. Yet they may be interested in and influenced by Benetas' clarity about its overall theology of ageing, how that connects to its mission, vision, values and its actual operations; and the way Benetas will use its theology of ageing to consistently bring to light aspects of ageing in Australia that would otherwise be overlooked or downplayed, especially to do with older people having a positive experience of ageing.

Endnotes

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Founded by the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne in 1948