Finding the way
A theology of ageing

Rev. Canon Dr Stephen Ames
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*A theology of ageing* 3
Executive summary

Benetas has been very specific in seeking a theology of ageing rather than a theology of aged care. But what is a ‘theology of ageing’ in the context of people’s lives?

There are different understandings of ageing — medical, economic, sociological. A ‘theology of ageing’ is an understanding of ageing in the light of belief in God. This understanding engages with but is not controlled by the other understandings of ageing. Indeed a theology of ageing casts its own light on the other approaches to understanding ageing.

Not everyone believes in God or is familiar with reasoning in terms of belief in God. These are introduced in terms of people having ‘spiritual needs’, which is understood here as the need for answers to life’s big questions: Who am I? What am I here for? What value am I? To whom do I belong?

Research shows these are questions for people of all ages. The questions find their place within a life narrative within which life is lived, often with answers to these questions remaining tacit, taken for granted.

Belief in God and the associated way of life is one way of addressing these big questions. Since Benetas has its origins in the Christian faith, what follows draws on a Christian understanding of God. This is set out as thoroughly and concisely as possible within the limits of this paper.

It is used to illuminate an understanding of people ageing well in Australia. It covers spirituality in old age, personhood as the irrevocable gift and call of God, becoming a whole person, and the ambiguity of ageing.

Three strong messages emerge from this theology of ageing. First, ageing people, including those suffering from dementia, do not lose personhood. Second, the worth of human beings is not just a means to some end, but is unconditional and not measurable. Third, ageing is a deeply counter-cultural phenomenon that has much to offer society.

Benetas has also been very specific in asking for not just a theology of ageing but for particular things to be done with this theology. Specifically, it seeks to provide a basis for:

- the work of its faith-based organisation in service provision and advocacy, ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing
- influencing other organisations, government representatives and the general public in ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing.

In meeting this second request over 27 tasks have been identified by the writer, with suggested short, medium and long-term timelines for completion across three years. These have been set out under the different time frames in the paper.
1. Introduction

Benetas is one of Victoria’s largest providers of aged care services. It is a faith-based organisation founded by the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne in 1948. It is a member of the Anglicare Australia network and has active connections with the Anglican Church through its Constitution, Board membership and services.¹

These foundations mean that Benetas is firstly a ministry in the Christian faith tradition and not simply a business. It is guided principally by its mission and vision, while always seeking to operate on the latest business and professional research and principles. Its primary focus is to provide the highest-quality care and to actively advocate on behalf of older people who are suffering many different forms of disadvantage.

Integral to the gospel teachings is the God-given worth and dignity of each person and it is in this spirit that 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.

Benetas is ‘out and proud’ about its origins and wants to be forthright about how its Christian tradition can more fully inform all it seeks to be and do. Hence the desire for a theology of ageing.

Drawing from a theology of ageing, Benetas has three particular objectives:

- to see what it means to be an ageing person in Australia, especially what it means to have a positive experience of ageing
- to have a basis for the work of its faith-based organisation in providing services and advocacy, ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing
- to influence other organisations, governments and the general public in ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing.
2. Various approaches to ageing

2.1 A snapshot of ageing

Australia is experiencing an extended life span. The senate report in 2009 states that an estimated nine per cent of Australia’s population or approximately two million people are aged 70 years or older. Those aged 80 years and over comprise around four per cent of the population and this number is expected to increase to 10 per cent by 2051.2

The vast majority (85%) of people over 70 are not receiving residential aged care. They live in their own accommodation in the community.

Demographic trends:

• “Australia has both a growing and an ageing population. Of the 21 million people living in Australia in 2007, 13% were aged over 65. Data projections from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimate that by 2030, Australia’s population will be between 27–31 million people. Of these, 19–21% will be aged over 65.”3

• By 2050 the number of people with dementia will be one million compared to 250,000 today.

A recent poll showed 83 per cent of Australians between 65 and 74 years said life is ‘sweet’ (The Age, 1 October 2011, p. 3).

On the other hand,

Although limited, Australian research on older homelessness indicates that there are two distinct sub-groups of older homeless people: those who have been chronically homeless for much of their adult life, and those who first experience homelessness in old age. Some initial research in 2007 indicates 70% of participants over 60 years of age were experiencing homelessness for the first time.4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a much lower life expectancy than the general Australian population. Indigenous Australians born in the period 1996–2001 are estimated to have a life expectancy at birth of 59.4 years for males, and 64.8 years for females. This is approximately 16–17 years less than the overall Australian population born over the same period.5 The Australian Government has identified the need to narrow this differential in life expectancy as a priority in health policy. Aboriginal people can expect to live up to 20 years less than non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous life expectancy is 45 per cent of Aboriginal men and 34 per cent of women die before the age of 45. Seventy-one per cent die before they reach 65.6

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission identified three key concerns about participation for older Victorians in age-friendly environments: discrimination in employment, volunteering, and service delivery for older Australians.7 The Australian Human Rights Commission recently identified trends concerning age discrimination in employment. These include negative stereotyping, presumptions about retirement, inflexible work arrangements around career possibilities or phased retirement arrangements, and missed opportunities for training and promotion.8
2.2 The general approach to understanding ageing

In the last century, life expectancy has nearly doubled at least for people in industrialised countries. It has undoubtedly been made possible by the expansion of the market economy and the natural sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As a result we ‘bury fewer of our children, our parents and grandparents live longer and healthier lives, we physically suffer less from diseases and poor health’. Not only a third-age but also a fourth-age where we have to adjust to ageing in a way unknown to our forebears. An increasing number of people can be counted among the older population. There is the young old (65–74), the old (75–85) and the very old (85+). This is a huge change. ‘Elders today are truly pioneers — exploring for us all what it might mean to age in this way. With them we confront truly unknown territory’. (This prospect serves to widen the gap between Indigenous and other Australians.)

These positive gains are rightly valued. So too is the story about life that they allow us to tell. But 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. At least two ‘realisations’ are needed.

One 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 of life ahead of you, not being autonomous and independent, and not belonging to the present. From a scientific and economic aspect, there appears no real place for older people, their living and ageing and their dying. This negativity is also seen in the anti-ageing proposals, from cosmetics and laser treatments for removing signs of ageing, to proposals to one day reverse the process of ageing! Ageism is challenged, but the anti-ageism movement can be anti-ageing as well.

Traditionally, ageism saw older people only in terms of the old stereotypes of the ‘bad’ old age — dependency, decay, disease; conservative, unproductive, disengaged, senile, poor and sick. Opposition to this ageism is now replacing the old stereotypes with the new, captured in advertising images of the skydiving older woman and the jet-skiing older man. These ‘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’. Another ‘realisation’ is that having availed ourselves of the benefits of medical science and of the market, we still have to face the question of how we shall live.

“Having satisfied the social requirements of middle age and avoided or survived many previously fatal diseases, older people are often able to live ten or twenty years beyond gainful employment. But then what? Is there something special one is supposed to do, or not do? Is old age really the culmination of life? Or is it simply the anticlimax to be endured until medical science can abolish it?”

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. Little help comes from the post-modern positioning of the self as the beginning and end of all meaning, in a universe that supposedly has no purpose.

A theology of ageing offers a different approach. It is an understanding of growing old in the light of a belief in God. Given that Benetas stands in the Christian tradition this will be a Christian understanding of God.
3. A Christian understanding of God

3.1 Our story and God’s story

In 1986 Professor Gary Bouma published the results of a survey of Australians titled Religious Factors in Australian Life. Many such studies have followed but I mention this because it created a stir, with radio and television interviews.

The study revealed, apparently for the first time and against the general self-understanding, that despite a secular context of public life and the adapted secular persona 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, sometimes a combination. A tangible indicator of this is the enormously popular university subject exploring spirituality offered by Dr David Tacey at Latrobe University.

Spirituality is what addresses a person’s ‘spiritual needs’. These are the need for meaning, identity and worth, and lived answers to the ‘big questions’ — Who am I? What am I here for? What value am I? To whom do I belong? Most of us reflect on these questions at some stage of our lives and have formed our own view of the world and understanding of reality according to our experiences. Often the answers to life’s ‘big questions’ go unspoken.

Our ‘spirituality’ refers to us engaging those experiences, beliefs, practices and relationships that meet or ‘answer’ our need for meaning, identity and worth, perhaps very intentionally or perhaps taken for granted.

This is a ‘second order’ definition of spirituality, for it doesn’t indicate the kinds of experiences, beliefs, practices and relationships that meet our spiritual needs. Many different possibilities are covered, without any being singled out. On this definition, the major religions have centuries-long traditions offering what would count as ‘spirituality’. There is no suggestion that these are the only forms of spirituality.

On this reading, spirituality is integral to the fabric of our lives. Spirituality is what we wake up into each morning and why we get out of bed. These ‘resources’ of our spirituality may be engaged without the ‘big questions’ being explicitly posed and addressed.

As time goes by we may find our pattern of life is too ‘thin’ to meet these spiritual needs, now explicitly evoked. A spiritual quest may ensue. On the other hand our lives may be radically changed by a traumatic accident or by falling in love, by betrayal, by unexpected challenges. Our spirituality may prove insufficient for the new situation. The ‘big questions’ again become explicit. We are in a period of confusion with some serious personal turmoil — even if we manage to keep functioning — 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. Of course denial is an option for avoiding this growth.
Every culture has a ‘cult’ and the cult determines the understanding of reality and worth that is variously lived out in society. On a daily basis in our society it is the techno-sciences that tell us what is real, with ‘measurement’ a key mark of reality. An encompassing approach to identity and worth is that of being producers and consumers: you have value if you add value (as producer); you get value if you can pay for it (as consumer). These are significant themes in many people’s spirituality informing and informed by the ‘spirit of the age’. This suggests the possibility of a spirituality formed differently and standing in a different relation to the ‘spirit of the age’. Examples might be found in the spiritualities engendered by religious traditions or by parts of the environmental movement.

Many people don’t see themselves as religious. They do not belong to a church, synagogue, mosque or temple. They don’t understand religious traditions, though they often think there is a war between science and religion. They might say they are into spirituality rather than religion. Fair enough. In fact they might say we are all ‘spiritual’, it is only a question of what we value, what stories we tell to make sense of life and our lives in particular, with the world-view the particular story carries, and what energies or power we feel flowing within us.

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, something new came into the world through this Jewish child named Jesus.

This ‘new reality’ was like a door being opened to us from within the inner life of God. Now God was revealed to be more like a community, than a solitary person: three persons, one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, the Father’s divine Son took human form in Jesus, born of Mary of Nazareth. This Son shared our human life so we could share in the divine life. He is the opened door. At the heart of this ‘new reality’ is his relationship with his Father. Jesus taught his followers the ‘Our Father’ inviting us all into this relationship.

A ‘new reality’ had come into the world, a foretaste of what is to come — the ‘reign of God’, for which we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. This is the fullness of life that will flood the whole universe. This ‘new reality’ shines through Jesus’ person, his teaching, his mighty works, his forgiving sins, and his fellowship with the spiritually outcast and marginalised. It is the anticipation of the coming of the reign of God in glory — for believers the only future that is coming.

One indication of the radical nature of the ‘new reality’ that has come into the world through Jesus are his words, commonly called ‘The Beatitudes’:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
These people are all declared ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’ because the final coming of the ‘reign of God’ will mean a great reversal, which will be greatly to their advantage — whoever they are! This doesn’t mean simply going along with or exploiting the way things are now. These ‘Beatitudes’ uphold the most passionate and dispassionate acts of justice, mercy and peacemaking. Without fear or favour, Jesus challenged all to turn their lives around to enter the ‘new reality’ of the ‘reign of God’, which he made present.

The world could not bear this ‘new reality’ so it rejected Jesus, even to the point of crucifying him. But this was not the last word. Just when the door God had opened had effectively been slammed shut, the new reality triumphed. Jesus remained open to his Father even in his final suffering. By the Spirit the Father raised Jesus to glory, to vindicate him and so keep open the possibility of everyone, indeed the entire universe, sharing the divine life. This opening of the divine life to the whole creation is the costly love of the triune God, a cost felt to the uttermost depths of God.

This is good news because we were created in the image of God, who came in human form, at such a cost, for us to enter the life of God within our world. This is what we are worth to God. We might use the words of the old marriage service to imagine hearing the incarnate God saying to us: ‘with my body I thee worship’. For the ‘new reality’ that has come into the world through Jesus is a foretaste of the ultimate marriage of heaven and earth. This is the love of God for all God’s creatures and what was intended for the whole creation. This prayer sums up God’s story.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ’s life live his risen life, whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world. Keep us in the hope that we have grasped, so we and all your children shall be free and the whole earth live to praise your name.

Other theological themes will come to light as we proceed, but this is the essential understanding of God with which we seek to understand ageing. Let’s develop our theology by addressing a matter that may have already attracted your attention: why would God create an ageing universe?
3.2 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.

Our best science tells us we live in a universe that began in ‘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. 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, no life. It is called the ‘big freeze’. The universe is ageing; not just chronologically, in what I call a continuing ‘dead end’.

Our ageing as human beings is because we are part of such a universe in which such disorder (entropy) is increasing. Our bodies are subject to this disorder. We wear out because everything wears out. Of course before we wear out we have to be built up and the amazing thing about life is that it locally and temporarily defies the overall direction of disorder and decay.

Theology says that this universe is created and sustained by God for some purpose. Yet it is not obvious that we should expect the God Christianity speaks of to create such a universe. One reason is that life on this planet has come into existence through the pain, suffering and death brought about by natural selection. This is the so-called problem of ‘natural evil’. Another difficulty is that to many scientists the universe appears completely pointless, whereas Christian theology says the universe is created for a purpose. If we are going to have a theology of ageing we need to address the question, ‘why would God create an ageing universe?’

What kind of world should we expect an all powerful, all knowing and wholly good God to create? Based on the theology of St Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, we should expect such a God to create a world in which things have their own powers, operating lawfully to bring other things into existence. Creatures would be co-creators of other things. Human procreation is the classic example. But the theme of creatures as co-creators is broader, as I will indicate.

We should prefer to think this way about God, because it would be a lesser exercise of divine power, knowledge and goodness for God to create a world where things were good in themselves but had no power for working good for others. The excellence that God is bids us to think of God in the highest terms. For this reason we should expect God to maximise this co-creating to include life, and intelligent life. In short we should expect such a God to create a life-producing universe.

This is a better way of creating than God creating a world all at once, or an inert universe where created things have no power given them by God, or a merely mechanically interacting universe, or indeed a universe already realising God’s purpose in creation, all at once. It is ‘better’ because such a universe is more like the life-giving God, than any other universe.

What we want to know is what such a life-producing universe might be like. Theology cannot say. This is because the creation is a free act of God. There is no way it could be worked out by thought alone. We have to explore this, using our senses and our reason. As a result of doing this for 400 years, we know the universe began with the big bang 13.7 billion ages ago and has gone on expanding according the laws of nature, producing the amazing complexity of billions of galaxies. The universe began in a very low state of disorder, including it being finely tuned to produce complex carbon-based life. The fine-tuning makes it a bio-friendly universe. The laws of nature and physical parameters like the speed of light or the mass of an electron would only need to be varied by tiny amounts for this to be a very different universe.
Evolutionary science says that complex chemical and biological systems evolved on earth and possibly elsewhere in the universe. New things come into existence. Eventually, life comes 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 empirically trace the history of the universe back to first few moments, but not directly to God’s creative act.\textsuperscript{34}

Remarkably, 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. Complex chemical and biological systems are open, self-organising systems. They take in energy from the environment, use it to repair and maintain themselves, and sometimes to evolve to a new level of complexity, against the tide of disorder. At the same time they expel waste energy at a higher level of disorder than the energy taken in. Eventually, they all break down, and of course this includes human bodies. 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. By causing new things to come into existence, creatures are indeed ‘co-creators’ in our life-producing universe. The greatest example of human beings as co-creators is human pro-creation.

We can now at least begin to see the increasing entropy, and the decline, decay and death that accompany it as part of the way God enables created things to be co-creators in this universe. Our discussion allows us to begin making some theological sense of increasing entropy and so of ageing.

It is not because there is something ‘wrong’ with us that our bodies decline. It is not due to ‘sin’. This is different from the common idea of the Bible teaching that death is punishment for sin and that death entered the world through the sin of Adam and Eve. Though I cannot defend the claim here, a careful study shows that ageing and death in the Bible concord with the view presented above. In this light our decline and dying are part of the God-given process by which life is brought into existence, becomes more complex and diversified and then declines and dies to make room for replacement and different forms of life. 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. But this also includes the ‘food chain’ through which life is sustained by death.\textsuperscript{35} We all have our time to contribute and then comes the time to allow a place for others. As told by the larger Christian story, however, this is not the last word.

I have been showing a little of how theology can hold the grand story told by science about our universe within the still larger story of God. Of course there is more to say. For example, I have mentioned the idea that God creates this universe for a purpose but have not explained how this relates to science’s grand story.\textsuperscript{36} It is present in other aspects of the theology of ageing: the coming of the ‘reign of God’ in glory to enact the consummation of creation.
4. People ageing well in Australia

Ageing well is part of living well. For Christian faith, living well is living in communion — with the triune God, with one another, with creation, with one’s self.

Christian faith helps us age well by helping 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 and a time of decay and loss. In this section I will be talking about the following matters: spirituality in old age, personhood as the irrevocable gift and call of God, becoming a whole person with dignity, our bodies and the ambiguity of ageing.

4.1 Spirituality in old age

Earlier I said that spirituality is what addresses a person’s ‘spiritual needs’. These are the need for meaning, identity and worth, living answers to the ‘big questions’. Who am I? What am I here for? What value am I? To whom do I belong?

Ageing provides many challenges including challenges to our spirituality. We feel the significance of the ‘big questions’ as we face the changes ageing brings.

Recently the Brotherhood of St Laurence convened a forum on Later Life Learning. It was a lively audience and there were vibrant presentations on the good work of many government and community organisations around Victoria. The last speaker presented overseas trends in Later Life Learning. At the end of his talk he 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. I could see many in the audience nodding as he made this last comment. However, this was the first and only reference to the matter. There were other signs of spiritual needs, for example, in men’s need to find a new identity, for which the ‘men’s shed’ movement contributed positively, and the reported remark from older people, ‘we are more than consumers’. These were hints that older people’s spiritual needs were not being addressed.

Research by Elizabeth MacKinlay, in the form of extensive interviews with older people, has identified a number of spiritual themes that emerge as people age. These themes were identified in the data of transcribed interviews with older independent-living people, rather than the ideas of the researchers. Associated with these themes are the spiritual tasks of ageing.

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For many older people 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.

D.G. Turesky and J.M. Schultz 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. Older people carry regrets, failures and guilt. For these authors forgiveness is an intra-psychological stance towards those who have offended the older person and this is correlated with mental health.

The authors report research indicating that this turn to spirituality is not a ‘cohort effect’ — as if the differences between older and younger generations were due to successive decreases in spirituality among successive younger generations. They consider the spiritual needs of older adults a developmental change associated with ageing and examine how this is understood by different theorists of human development — Erikson and Jung.

Ageing well includes being able to focus on the spiritual challenges of ageing. Theologically, this is better than ignoring these important matters. It is an important human ‘moment’ to be respected wherever it may lead.

But there is more to say from a theological standpoint. None of this is accidental. Each of us is created for a life lived in communion with God, whether, at any stage in our life, we recognise God’s presence or not. Our felt spiritual needs show that we cannot live on ‘bread alone’ — there is ‘more’ to life, but not more of the same.

We also need to place our discussion about ageing in the larger context of Western history since the Renaissance. Our history has led to a form of life in which human beings are increasingly separated from close relationships to nature, to others, to oneself and to God.

One can 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). Yet life is lived forward in the light of an understanding of life that is up for renegotiation as life goes on. This revisiting is a personal endeavour responding to prompting forces within us and without. It is God’s way of moving people to an awareness of God as the gracious reality who has been present to them all along but incognito. In fact the willingness to face reclaiming one’s life is itself a sign of God calling one to wholeness of life. However, it is possible to avoid this work by distracting and diverting ourselves when we don’t want to attend to the promptings.

Not to revisit one’s past 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. It is a great loss.

4.2 Personhood as the irrevocable gift and call of God

Christian theology asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This has been understood in three ways: ontologically, relationally and functionally.

The ‘ontological’ concerns who and what we are. We are embodied persons created in the image of God and therefore capable of a personal relationship with the God, who is constituted in the mutual relations of three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, each sharing the same divine nature.

The ‘relational’ concerns our being drawn into a personal relationship with God and with all human beings, recognising each and all as the image of God on earth.
The ‘functional’ concerns our being given real power (dominium) to be used as good stewards for all humankind now and into the future. This ‘original blessing’ on mankind is God’s gift to the whole creation.

But there is something more powerful that illuminates the gift and call of God to human beings to be persons. It was always the Father’s purpose in creation that the divine Son take human form to live amongst us, to enable everyone to enter into the inner life of God. Here human nature is forever united to divine nature in the person of the Son. The gift and call of God to human beings to be people in relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are irrevocable. We all belong to God, whether we acknowledge it or not. Who we are is most deeply whose we are. This is shown in the story of the God who comes into the world as a baby in a manger and ends up as a man on a cross to bring to fulfilment the purpose of creation. Amazingly, this includes redeeming us from pursuing a path that ultimately has no future.

There is a great story to tell of Christian theology’s historically original (from the 4th century AD) and unique contribution to understanding the term ‘person’, first in regard to God, and then to human beings. It is something to own with pride. Historically this was the beginning of the idea of persons only being persons in relation to others. Another is the distinction between human nature and person. Human nature is shared and can be reproduced, but being a person cannot be shared, for a person is ‘a unique centre of relation, freedom, thought and action that can only be itself’. These ideas were not borrowed from the culture of the day, which had different ideas. They were freshly minted by Christian theologians wrestling with the biblical testimony to God revealed in and through Christ.

Jesus’ life, death and resurrection shows God’s love for the world. This is a foretaste of the glory that is coming 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. Within this large understanding, human dignity and worth are also indicted by God entrusting humankind with real power and the responsibility to explore the created world in its breadth and depth, that we may recognise the glory of God in creation and ensure that the earth’s abundant good is discovered and justly distributed for the common good 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.

4.3 Becoming a whole person — a continuing journey

I begin by reviewing just three of the many theological themes that inform the hope of becoming a whole person.

Theological themes

Firstly, we are created as embodied persons, able to be in communion with God, each other, ourselves and the natural world. Activating this capacity has to be learned and practised. This is God’s gift and call to us to be whole persons.

A second theme about our relationship with God, as understood in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, is the counter theme of replacing the relationship to the living God with one to an idol — a false god. This is a way of ‘losing the plot’. It has effects. The Bible presents this to us in many places including Psalm 115. The psalmist’s point is that the idols people run after have mouths but they cannot speak, eyes but they cannot see, ears but they cannot hear, hearts but feel nothing, feet but cannot walk. The key point for the psalmist is that those who worship idols become like them. When we worship idols we lose touch with our full humanity. We acquire identities — as children of lesser gods — who do not allow for the full flowering of our humanity, the unique person God has created us to be.
Compare this to a third great theme regarding our relationship with God — Jesus focusing all the laws and the prophets into two great commandments. The first is the commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is to love our neighbour as ourselves. Notice the difference from worshipping idols. 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. It not only calls forth our full humanity but authorises us to access all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This ‘authorising’ is to be treasured over the many institutional and relational realities of life where we are discouraged from being able to ask questions, explore, express what we feel, and to use all our strengths.

We need both commandments so that we do not ‘love’ our neighbours as if they were ‘a child of lesser god’, with a lesser human identity. The first commandment lifts us up to the prospect of a full humanity for ourselves and our neighbours. The theological point is that we only 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 refused idolatry.

**Implications for becoming a whole person**

In this light we can agree with D. J. Maitland\(^51\) 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.\(^52\)

This holds for any stage of life, but especially the second half. But there is more. 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. Maitland rejects any ideology that denies people, especially older people, this journey of unlimited growth.

We make commitments, choices, experience consequences and yet we persist in all of this because we want to uphold their value, that we were right, not mistaken or fooled. We often seem to prefer the various aspects of our lives to be separated from each other, rather than nourishingly related. Experience can become one damn thing after another unless we see it as part of the ‘ensemble’ we recognise as a human life.\(^53\)

The forward thrust of the ‘morning of life’ with its driving agendas, all drawing on the real powers given to men and women, and the goodness of the world — can become an end in itself and the complementary capacities to those intrinsic to the morning — a reflective life — are devalued, made suspect. Here are the driving agendas Maitland has in mind.

- An emphasis on external rather than internal achievements
- Seeking a measure of control and seeking to shape the future
- Selective emphasis on ‘parts’ rather than ‘wholes’
- Selectively presenting only the ‘best self’
- Tending to conceal one’s uncertainties (compare best self with selective self-presentation)
- Preferring will over imagination (compare part with whole).

The possibility of ‘good ageing’ depends on people loosening their grip, relativising their importance compared to other aspects of living. Maitland would help us move from ‘rush to reflection’. The theological issue is that these driving agendas are idolatrous — we become children of lesser gods, forgetting our dignity, stature, future, and capacity for full life now as children of the living God. This is our vocation, our true life, representing our true interests.
At some point questions start to arise. Perhaps it is fatigue, perhaps aspects of ourselves we suppress for the sake of getting on now seek expression: the sense of the brevity of life, the boredom of familiarity — continuity without discontinuity — the restriction of our roles, the impact of feedback from others, the yearning for a more accurate or fuller appreciation and presentation of ourselves — the ‘more’ to us than has so far appeared. All this is part of the second part of life. Preferring to explore rather than ignore these things is a search for a greater truth/value/meaning in our lives. This can be considered an effect of God’s presence in our life though this presence may not be recognised. It is easy to be blind to the divine agenda, which gradually emerges as we grow older. What is this emerging agenda? It is the lure to wholeness:

- Tasks once dominant give way to tasks once unimaginable.
- The attitude, ‘that was then this is now’.
- Realising there is less time left than one has already lived
- What does it mean to act one’s age, when you are getting old?
- Continuity — memory, recollection, reclaiming for integration — as well as discontinuity — issuing through the new awareness.

The mundane facts of life matter not least because they too are ways God fashions us in God’s image.

4.4 The ambiguity of ageing

The ambiguity of ageing is the tension between old age as a time of fruition and decay, and of fulfilment and loss. The fruition and fulfilment include 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, 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 life is sweet’.

We also need to appreciate the diverse experience of ageing regarding longevity, morbidity, health, wealth and sexuality, across different genders, ethnicities, classes and cultures. ‘If 70 can be fulfilling, 82 may be more ambiguous or adverse.’

Growing old one 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. There is also the threat of “dementia, deafness, blindness, arthritis, helplessness, even repulsiveness; and worst of all the loneliness of outliving one’s contemporaries.”
Taken together, it almost seems one’s very self dissolves. The point is that if it is assumed that personhood and worth are 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. It is a social assumption that becomes part of our accepted ‘anthropology’.

Lysaught offers an example of this anthropology in the work of H. Tristram Engelhardt’s, who identifies the elements needed for personhood:

“that an entity be self-conscious, rational, free to choose, and in possession of moral concern. When rationality and self-consciousness are effaced via dementia and speech is impaired and physical afflictions occur, as well as economic impoverishment and the need to rely on others subverts freedom to choose and self-sufficiency, it could be concluded that ageing impairs personhood.

What happens to a person with Alzheimer’s disease? Does the person fade away? Lysaught quotes David Keck: ‘Is there a metaphysical basis for the human person, which this disease does not destroy?’ The same question about personhood arises with the ordinary frailties of ageing.

A theological response

Christian theology has a different ‘anthropology’, a different assumption about personhood. As already noted, we are created in and as the image of God. This means we are created with the capacity to be in relationship with God. Activating this capacity has to be learned and practised. This is God’s gift and call to us.

Can this gift be lost? In the story of God told by the Bible God has never revoked this gift and call. However people lose the plot, when it comes to God and each other, this gift has never been revoked. Because of the context in which I am born and grow up and because of my life choices, I might lose touch with this capacity, fail to activate it, practise it, and so deploy my God-given powers to serve other ends within a limited horizon. Yes, I will develop a certain way of being a person, which may go with or against the grain of my being in the image of God. But the grain of my being a person is God’s gift as my creator. I may enhance or diminish this capacity, as might others, especially in the ways we relate or fail to relate to each other. But the gift has not been revoked by God, nor can it be taken away from me by others. I can only lose this gift by ceasing to exist, which would be a fate beyond dying and not something God wants for any person.
Could this gift be lost simply by ageing? No, because as we have seen, ageing all the way to dying, is part of God’s creation. God has created each one of us as persons, brought into existence in a life-producing universe, for relationship with God — now in anticipation, finally in glory. It would be utterly self-contradictory of God to allow ordinary processes of the created universe (like decline, decay and death) to unravel our being persons; this gift transcends our bodies even as we are embodied. Losing this gift would undermine the possibility of our relationship with God for which we have been created, and for which old age, as a time for gaining the wisdom to become a whole person, is no barrier. There is indeed a point in heeding the ‘nudges’ to revisit and explore our spirituality.

You might think this is a beautiful theory but what about the experience of ageing? Doesn’t experience of people with dementia undermine the idea that our personhood cannot be lost? One view is that neurological damage prevails. Dementia gradually destroys the self until finally the person with dementia disappears. The opposite view is also maintained. How? Neurological impairment is only one dimension. What is crucial is the quality of the relationships with the person with dementia. If those involved lack insight in these relationships the person may withdraw, leading those around them to give up on the now (supposedly) lost person. If those around are well attuned, the person comes to the fore. ‘Their personhood needs to be continually replenished, their selfhood continually evoked and reassured’ by others relating to them well. 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 directed to them through the arts, music, ritual and symbols.

Oliver Sacks 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 ‘desouled’ by a disease? ‘Do you think he has a soul’ Sacks once asked the Catholic Sisters who ran the Home for the Aged where Jimmy was being treated. They understood why Sacks asked the question but recommended that he watch Jimmy in chapel and then judge. Sacks describes 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.”

There are many stories 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.
5. Using a theology of ageing

What a theology of ageing does is different from what one might do with it. Benetas seeks its theology of ageing to do two main things.

Provide the basis for Benetas’ work.

The theology of ageing will provide the basis for Benetas’ work as a faith-based organisation providing services and advocacy, and ensuring older people have ample opportunities to age well.

Help Benetas influence other organisations.

The theology of ageing is to help Benetas inform and influence other organisations, government representatives and the general public in ensuring older people have ample opportunities to age well.

The two objectives are interrelated. Governments, other secular organisations and the general public may not be especially open to Benetas’ theology of ageing as such. I think they will be very interested in and influenced by the following:

1. Benetas’ clarity about its overall theology of ageing, and how that connects to its mission, vision, values and actual operations.

2. The way Benetas uses its theology of ageing consistently to highlight aspects of ageing in Australia that would otherwise be overlooked or downplayed, especially regarding older people having a positive experience of ageing.

One hopes these would be among the benefits of Benetas pursuing its first objective. The two objectives are addressed in 5.1 and 5.2.
5.1 Provide the basis for Benetas' work

This theology of ageing is to provide a basis for Benetas' work as a faith-based organisation working in:

• service provision
• advocacy
• ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing.

This means that Benetas' deepest assumptions are to come from its theology of ageing and inform its mission, vision and values and operations.

By calling for a theology of ageing that can provide a basis for its own work, Benetas is engaged in deepening the level of organisational self-awareness.

The new level of self-awareness relates to 'foundations' that mark out what is real (the construal of reality at Benetas) and so what it means to 'get real'. It also relates to the vision of the good to which it is called, to which it aspires, which it seeks to promote and by which it wants to be known.

This is about the world view Benetas consciously adopts to inform its understanding of the world and of what it wants to be and do in the world.

This deeper level of self-awareness is to expand appropriately throughout the different levels of the organisation and bear fruit in service provision, advocacy and ensuring older people have ample opportunities to age well. This is a very ambitious move on Benetas' part.

5.1.1 Benetas' deepest operating assumptions

By seeking a theology of ageing, Benetas recognises that what it means to be realistic has to be carefully explored. It cannot simply be taken from the phenomena of social life, nor be finally given by scientific, economic, sociological, medical research, nor by philosophy or theology.

Let's be clear that this is no Luddite rejection of human inquiry and innovation. Theologically, God is ultimately the source of all truth. Thus reason and revelation cannot ultimately be opposed when each is correctly understood, since they have the one author. The proviso is important. We cannot afford to be naïve either about the distortions of human reason or the distortions in our reception of revelation.

This theology of ageing is an opportunity to correctly hold together what we can learn from the different forms of human inquiry about the world and ourselves, and those inquiries by which faith seeks to understand the God we believe was revealed in Christ. Furthermore, this theology of ageing provides strong impetus to enact this integrated understanding.

Anglican tradition does not blink in the face of glorious human cultural productions in any sphere of life. But nor is it seduced by that glory into forgetting God, or ignoring the horrendous cultural distortions and contradictions that human beings also produce. It remembers well St Irenaeus' teaching: 'the glory of God is human beings fully alive'. But just what is it to be 'fully alive'?

Jesus' critique of his day was that people could read the sky and predict the weather, but they could not read the signs of the times. St Paul's urged the Christians in Rome not to conform to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds.

So it is that Benetas stands in a faith tradition that has noticeable 'resonances' and 'dissonances' between the way it construes reality and the way reality is otherwise construed in our society. Identifying and navigating its way with regard to both resonances and dissonances is a learning curve for all at Benetas, especially the leadership.
By way of example: could Benetas ever take the ‘golden rule’ to be ‘those who have the gold make the rules’; could it consistently promote care of ageing persons by impersonal robots simulating human care; could it take the attitude that every scientific and technological break-through should automatically be realised (e.g. the prospect of living to 150 years)?

What follows shows how this theology of ageing provides a basis for Benetas’ work as a faith-based organisation, with regard to what it means by ‘a positive experience of ageing’, and the ‘service provision’ and ‘advocacy’ by which it ensures older people have this experience of ageing. (This accounts for the same themes in the following section as appeared in section 4.) Then follows a discussion of Benetas as a ministry of the Christian faith tradition and finally a review of its mission, vision and values. Again, the aim is to promote:

1. Benetas’ clarity about its theology of ageing — how that connects to its mission, vision, values and its actual operations.

2. The way Benetas uses its theology of ageing consistently to highlight aspects of ageing in Australia that would otherwise be overlooked or downplayed, especially to do with older people having a positive experience of ageing.

5.1.2 Ageing well

The theology of ageing offers resources for understanding ageing well. These have been the focus of sections 3 and 4. Following are examples of how this material could impact on Benetas’ operations so as to promote the aims above.

The theological and sociological realities of the spiritual needs of human beings, including older people

The sociological realities are recognised for example by the new standards for residential aged care needing to attend to older people’s spiritual needs. However, that these needs were not really acknowledged at the Later Life Learning forum mentioned earlier shows the sociological realities are at risk of not being recognised. Here is an opportunity to influence other organisations (see below). Benetas’ ongoing commitment to pastoral care is a way it connects with its theology of ageing and a way it responds to clients’ spiritual needs. Benetas has a multilayered model of pastoral care.

- All Benetas staff need to have 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.

- Social inclusion is another aspect of pastoral sensibility; all staff are committed to encouraging faith communities, local parishes, denominational chaplains/visitors and its Volunteer Companions (or pastoral care volunteers) to be actively involved. They play a vital role in nurturing the faith dimension of clients’ life and provide them with a sense of connectedness to the local community. This aspect comes under the umbrella of Lifestyle/Volunteer Services/Case Management.

- The team of Pastoral Care Practitioners provides specialist pastoral and spiritual care.

As specialist pastoral care providers, the team of practitioners are assigned a geographic service area that includes several residential sites, day centres, and is a pastoral care partner with the Community Care team providing limited secondary consultation and support for Care Managers.
This specialist pastoral care is a value-add; a service provision that goes beyond the base requirements of the Aged Care Standards. Likewise the services provided by the clergy and local congregations bring the value-add of evocative prayers and hymns of particular traditions familiar to particular clients.

Benetas can draw on its experience to discuss the spiritual needs of older people, the ways these manifest and are interpreted from the standpoint of a theology of ageing. Practically, this could include an orientation process, helping 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 include a ‘sampling’ period where the (pastoral) staff document the details of when clients had expressed — directly or indirectly — concerns to do with spiritual needs and how these concerns were addressed.

From the Later Life Learning example, Benetas could offer a public forum for the many organisations working with older people on recognising the fact of ‘spiritual needs’ and the various ways they can be addressed, while respecting the differences among all involved.

One of the differences is the way Benetas understands these spiritual needs from the standpoint of its theology of ageing. It would be good if this could be engagingly brought to light in such a context.

**Personhood as the irrevocable gift and call of God**

The theology of ageing supports the view that personhood is the irrevocable gift and call of God. This is a contested view not only with respect to God but with respect to being irrevocable. Many may refuse this aspect of a theology of ageing through the belief that personhood is lost with severe decline of brain and body as in dementia.

The earlier discussion of this theme shows that this is not the last word in the matter. The alternative view that personhood is not lost is thinkable, has empirical support, and can be explored and defended publicly, while promoting valuable strategies of care.

Benetas could keep up to date with the full range of that debate drawing on firsthand reports, pastoral experience, and medical and neurological approaches as well as philosophical and theological considerations. It could also draw on many resources in Melbourne and invest in research on this matter. Some of the staff’s time could also be dedicated to this matter. This would allow the whole organisation to be a respected, informative voice on the subject.

Benetas could incorporate into its own understanding of ‘personhood’ a brief sketch of the original Christian contribution to the understanding of the term ‘person’. Suitably presented, this could become part of the narrative Benetas tells about what it is to ‘get real’.

Benetas could also promote the Great Personhood Debate as it promoted the Great Housing Debate in October 2011. The different viewpoints on understanding personhood and whether personhood is lost with dementia and similar disabilities could encourage healthy discussion.

**Becoming a whole person with dignity**

The theology of ageing provides strong lines of thought about becoming a whole person. How might Benetas turn this into action?

One possibility would be to create a short workshop experience directed to those who have been ‘in role’ for some time (at work, at home etc.). They may welcome opportunity to reflect on how their ways of being a person have become engrained over the years by the ‘agendas’ of their role and how the prospect or reality of stepping out of that role is impacting on their sense of self and life-world. I have in mind older people in parishes as a possible target group. But CAE, University of the Third Age and other Later Life Learning groups are other possibilities. This might also be offered to Benetas staff. Indeed interested staff may like to be part of the design process.

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The workshop would introduce the themes of the human vocation to become a whole person, its dimensions and possibilities. It could then explore the theme of common ‘spiritual needs’ and life journeys. It could also take up the theme of ‘ageing well is living well’ and how the prospect of a larger sense of self could come into view as one ages. Possible too is the idea of sensing oneself as a mystery that continues to flower even in the process of ageing. The workshop could discuss what the theology of ageing offers in line with the best insights from other contexts. It would need to be well designed with suitable opportunities for reflection.

An important theme of becoming a whole person is remembering one’s life story and of being a person in community. Another is retaining respect for oneself as the ambiguity of ageing becomes increasingly apparent. This is especially the case in terms of respecting one’s body and encouraging one’s sense of being a person to grow for as long as possible. Another is adjusting to becoming dependent and vulnerable. The theology of ageing is especially encouraging of pursuing these and other themes about becoming a whole person.

A question for Benetas is whether it keeps track of how these matters are being handled in the lives of clients living in their own home and living in residence. Again it may be possible to have a sampling process as discussed above to see what Benetas has learned about this matter through caring for its various clients. How has this theme come to light, how has it been promoted, and with what effect for clients — and for the staff?

Another consideration is what Benetas has learned about helping people regain/retain a sense of dignity as the ambiguity of ageing deepens. When the ways people have maintained a sense of their own dignity are no longer intact, how have they been helped to regain a sense of dignity, in what terms, and how does this stand in relation to Benetas’ theology of ageing. This is entirely consistent with Benetas’ innovative research into the different understandings and practice of showing ‘respect’ between different age groups. Of considerable interest is how Benetas will apply the results of this research within and beyond the organisation. A valuable complement to this research would be for Benetas to have a theological reflection on this research and possibly its other research work.

There are different views on human dignity or human worth, and differences between what is espoused and what is practised. It would helpful to have such material available to be able to locate Benetas’ position in this regard. A related set of questions for Benetas is whether its employees find that the organisation does anything to help them become whole persons and to strengthen their sense of dignity and worth? There are two kinds of answers to this as well as consideration of the culture of Benetas.

An example of the first is that the aged care industry has a staff turnover of 15–20%. Benetas has a turnover rate of 10–15%, which is clearly an indicator of the comparatively positive working conditions at Benetas. Care of residents is hard work with low pay — as per the award. Governments refuse to pay more. There is an opportunity for Benetas to promote the dignity of workers and their work. This could mean advocating for the workers to ensure the Government provides funding for adequate salaries. There is also the question of whether anything can be done to improve the demanding work of caring for clients.
The desired outcome is for employees to find working for Benetas does help them to become whole persons and to strengthen their sense of dignity and worth. Many things can make this possible. Here I want to highlight how a theology of ageing can contribute.

To affirm an understanding of God as the Holy Trinity is to affirm the personal, and therefore interpersonal relationships, as primary. The personal is thus prior to the institutional (organisational); the institutional exists to nurture and sustain human relationships joined, as far as possible, in a resemblance to the life of God. The personal, meaning persons in community, has priority over the institutional; the institutional is to serve the personal. And all this should happen as the institution goes about its business.

This is no maverick thought. What Jesus said of the Sabbath — it was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath — surely applies to other institutions. Elsewhere scripture says we now see as through a ‘glass darkly’, but then we will see ‘face to face’. Even now the embodied, face-to-face character of human communities and institutions is understood here as a sign of the glory that is coming, manifest in us — whether we currently recognise it or not. The more obvious implications of this relate to the way trust is sustained, the way we handle our politics, the way the institution makes decisions about individuals, the way we handle conflicts between individuals and groups, the ways we can be constructively more accountable to one another, even life giving, the quality of our speaking to and about one another, especially when the other person is absent.

Benetas accords with this in its pastoral policy with everyone expected to display pastoral sensitivity to all clients. It is hinted but not stated that this pastoral sensibility be deployed to co-workers as well as clients. By making this explicit Benetas would take an important step towards espousing a culture in which the ‘personal’ is given priority. There need be no anxiety about how all this relates to Benetas’ concern to apply best business practice to its operation. There is a close connection between good relationships as robust bridges between people across which all kinds of two-way traffic can flow. This is a key means to a greater increase in trust and to people being creative about building this into their work and their relations with each other.

Past research in pastoral practice explores what makes for effective helping relationships. Truax and Carkhuff found three ingredients: accurate empathy, non-possessive warmth and genuineness. Clearly, these are marks of good relating between persons in whatever context. I heard the same ‘ingredients’ noted in a lecture from a visiting CEO from a US hospital. Her point was that there had been a notable improvement in patient outcomes following the skilling of all staff in these elements of good relating and of course there being leadership by example.

In my own experience in working with organisations, this shift in communication by managers has proved productive — everyone was involved in a great reduction of spin, hype and ‘fudging’ along with much more truthful speaking about the business — what is needed and what is getting in the way. There was also a notable shift in the personal energy given to work. I took this to be a resolution of a potential conflict between the intrinsic dignity of people and the dignity of work, which is in part the use-value of the work and workers. The shift in the form of communication had a significant impact on people feeling their intrinsic worth was being acknowledged, which released their willingness to contribute. There is no reason to think this would automatically disappear when it came time to negotiate pay and conditions.
The contribution of older people to our society and culture

Following the theologically informed reflections of D. Maitland it would be useful for Benetas to consider forming a group of articulate older people who want to reflect on Australian society and its formation of people in the ‘morning of life’ and ‘afternoon of life’, 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 in our Western society the wisdom of the elders about living a whole life. Perhaps such a collection of writings could be useful in some of the Years 11 and 12 curriculum streams such as religion and society or ethics or even philosophy.

The theological basis of this proposal echoes the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing (1982): ‘A longer life provides humans with an opportunity to examine their lives in retrospect, to correct some of their mistakes, to get closer to the truth and to achieve a different understanding of the sense and value of their actions’.

The Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission has registered a number of concerns about the participation of older people in our society. These are taken up in the segment on ‘advocacy’.

5.1.3 Service delivery

The theology of ageing encourages Benetas’ service delivery to inspire in its clients a palpable sense of their dignity and uniqueness. It tells clients that while they may have problems, as persons they are more than their problems, and help them discover and explore the ‘more’. Where staff live these ideas in their own lives, the more effective they will be in delivering their services. In this they will be ‘client centred’ while not losing touch with the ministry available from the Christian faith tradition.

5.1.4 Advocacy

The theology of ageing provides Benetas with a sound basis and encouragement to advocate for older people in Australia.

At the centre of the Christian faith tradition is Jesus announcing the coming of the reign of God, now in anticipation, finally in glory. This immediately sets up a vast field of ‘resonances’ and ‘dissonances’ between the reality of the reign of God and the realities of the way people construe their lives. The ‘resonances’ are where people are living out the beatitudes; where people like the good Samaritan love their neighbours, especially those who are strangers, who are hungry, sick, naked, in prison, homeless... where our God-given powers are being used to the common good, ecologically, technologically, economically and politically.

The theology of ageing aims to proceed from a thorough understanding of God and so promotes a thorough understanding of human beings created as unique persons to live in community and to be good stewards of the earth. Our God-given power is to be lived and used in the image of this God rather than idols human beings have created. Such idols oppose any understanding of God or are the denial of God, serving the other ‘golden rule’ — those who have the gold make the rules, or the axiom — do it to others before they do it to you. By embracing this theology of ageing Benetas is standing with God in this radical position.

The discussion so far orients Benetas towards advocacy for marginalised older people, in particular older Indigenous Australians, and therefore advocacy towards overcoming the factors leading to their much lower life expectancy. Benetas could also continue its initiative towards older homeless Australians. It would include advocacy for a global economic order that did not put financial resources, such as the homes and saving of older people, at risk through greed.
In the context of opportunities for participation for older Victorians, the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission presented three key concerns:

- age-friendly environments, including the built environment and transport
- discrimination in employment and volunteering
- service delivery for older Victorians.

The theology of ageing also promotes Benetas’ advocacy on these matters for older Australians. Another kind of advocacy was touched on in an earlier section with the idea of mobilising a group of articulate older people to develop and publish their reflections on life in Australia from the standpoint of ageing and what it means to age well. If ageing well comes from living well there would be reflection on what this comprises. The discussion also leads Benetas to consider the longer-term transformation of our society into what Charles Taylor calls the impersonal order, as if the ‘personal’ were only a product of a fundamentally impersonal material order. This would draw on the work proposed above under ‘Personhood, the irrevocable gift and call of God’.

Documenting the various instances of advocacy, the outcomes and the learnings would be a sign of taking this impetus from the Christian faith tradition very seriously.

5.1.5  **Benetas is a ministry in the Christian faith tradition**

What does this mean? Christianity has contributed enormously to Western culture in many ways. However, this is not always acknowledged, partly because it is not always remembered. Eastern Orthodox theologian Dr David B. Hart claims:

> Occasional attempts have been made by scholars in recent years to suggest that the paganism of the late Roman empire was marked by a kind of ‘philanthropy’ comparable in kind, or even in scope, to the charity practice by the Christians, but nothing could be further from the truth. Pagan cult was never more tolerant than its tolerance — without any qualms of conscience — of poverty, disease, starvation, and homelessness; of gladiatorial spectacle, crucifixion, the exposure of unwanted infants, or the public slaughter of war captives or criminals on festive occasions; of indeed almost every imaginable form of tyranny, injustice, depravity or cruelty. The sects of the Roman world simply made no connection between religious piety and anything resembling a developed social morality ... [nothing] like a religious obligation to care for the suffering, feed the hungry, or visit prisoners ... The old and new faiths represented two essentially different incompatible visions of the sacred order and of the human good ... The old gods did not — and by their nature could not — inspire the building of hospitals and almshouses, or make feeding the hungry and clothing the naked a path to spiritual enlightenment or foster any coherent concept of a dignity intrinsic to every human soul; they could never have taught their human charges to think of charity as the highest virtue or as the way to union with the divine.  

The Anglican Church was standing in this long Christian faith tradition of ministry when in 1948 it initiated what is now known as Benetas. While Benetas is organisationally independent from any church, it too stands in this long and powerful Christian tradition of ministry. Benetas continues to value its historical connection to the Anglican Church as indicated in its stated values (see below) and its constitution.
By developing a theology of ageing Benetas is opening within its own life a ‘gyroscope’ and a ‘compass’ drawn from Christian tradition, about what it wants to be and do in the world. In that tradition it would be essential to understand ministry in relation to the mission of God in and for the world, to understand all ministries as given by the Spirit to work together for the common good, and the appropriateness of being accountable for this ministry and of seeking the leading of the Spirit.

**Mission**

Theologically, all Christian ministries serve the mission of God in and for the world. Since the 1980s the worldwide Anglican Church has agreed on the five marks of this mission:

- proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- teach, baptize, and nurture new believers
- respond to human need by loving service
- seek to transform unjust structures of society
- strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

It is the third and fourth of these marks that are the most prominent in Benetas’ work. Many organisations would support the last three marks, without any religious or theological connections. But at Benetas they are obtained from and promoted by a theology of ageing. This theology is, in brief, an exposition of the good news of the reign of God, and so is intimately connected to the first mark.

Likewise the fifth mark is part of what defines the penultimate context in which we live. We all need to live in a sustaining and sustainable environment. The extremes of climate change threaten the life of the planet and so represent a major justice issue. Theologically, ignoring ecological damage is a serious ‘falling short of the mark’ as it goes against God’s intention of creating a life-producing universe. It is a threat to older people, especially the frail aged in our society and around the world.

**Working together**

Theologically, all ministries are given by the Spirit to work together for the common good. Benetas cooperates with church-related agencies and churches. What does Benetas offer and receive in this working together?

Benetas offers high-quality care for older people, so they may age well. Church people may avail themselves of this ministry. Through its theology of ageing, its other research and its experience of the issues for ageing people, Benetas can offer a perspective on ageing and on our society from the perspective of ageing people. This is an offering that could be further developed. Benetas receives acknowledgement from the wider society and from agencies that it is doing a good job in bettering the lives of older people. It gratefully acknowledges the contributions it receives from clergy and local congregations to the spiritual wellbeing of its clients. Its association with other agencies including Anglicare Australia provides greater strength and solidarity in advocacy.

**Accountability**

Benetas publicly identifies itself as a ministry of the Christian faith tradition and is so recognised by the wider society and by the churches. This public self-designation calls for some thought. It is present to some extent under ‘responsibility’, the last of Benetas’ values set out below. To illustrate what could attract further thought, another paragraph has been added to ‘mission, vision and values’. It concerns ‘identity’. If ‘mission’ says why an organisation exists, ‘identity’ says what it is and so comes first.

Benetas’ accountabilities include being accountable for its work as a ministry in the Christian faith tradition. Here ‘accountability’ means Benetas takes pleasure in giving an account of itself in these terms, but it is not clear where Benetas does this kind of accounting at present.
Corporate spirituality

This is Benetas seeking the Spirit’s guidance in what it should be and do. This is an important part of the corporate spirituality of the Christian faith tradition.

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. This parallels our use of ‘spiritual needs’ to refer to ways of answering the ‘big questions’ of life for individuals — without any particular ‘spirituality’ being in view. Yet another common usage speaks about the ‘zeitgeist’, the ‘spirit of the age’. The three levels of spirituality — individual, corporate and cultural — of course intersect with their own ‘resonances’ and ‘dissonances’.

For an organisation standing in the Christian faith tradition the corporate spirituality will be marked by an openness to God. For Benetas this is indicated in its history, in its theology of ageing, and in this section under the headings of ‘Mission’, ‘Working together’, and ‘Accountability’. This corporate spirituality also includes seeking the Spirit’s guidance for both the pattern of its life and the path along which it journeys as an organisation.

Without denying human responsibility for leadership, it acknowledges that in the Christian tradition what is ultimately important is God’s leading and drawing us, even luring us into the future. This presupposes that human leadership is personally disposed in this way.76

What follows are some practical ways to create this openness as part of the Benetas culture. For example, by:

• listening to Benetas’ clients to hear what the Spirit is saying to Benetas about its service and advocacy
• having a retreat for senior leadership
• 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
• beginning board meetings with the Benetas Prayer.

5.1.6 Benetas’ Mission, Vision and Values

Reflecting on Benetas’ Mission, Vision and Values, I propose adding a clause under ‘Identity’ to come before ‘Mission’. This reflects Benetas’ pride in being an organisation founded in the Christian faith with its origins in the Anglican Church in Melbourne. It is important to say who Benetas is as well as why it exists and the vision for the future. Here is the proposed addition:

Identity

Benetas is a faith-based aged care organisation for all older Victorians.
It was initiated by the Anglican Church over 60 years ago and proudly stands as a ministry in the Christian faith tradition.

The values of ‘respect’ and ‘community’ have strong links to the theology of ageing with regard to human beings created in the image of God. The value of ‘Spirit’ signals openness to the good energies of human life intimating something more that is set out in the theology of ageing — all this without ‘dripping in religion’.77 The value of ‘responsibility’ makes clear the wide range of ‘partners’ with whom Benetas engages with integrity, including the broader Anglican community. This too has strong links to the theology of ageing.

This theology of ageing could also be used to develop a framework for ethical decision making, at board level and at other levels of the organisation.
5.2 Influencing Other Organisations and the General Public

5.2.1 Conditions for influence to work

This theology of ageing is to help Benetas influence other organisations, government representatives and the general public in ensuring older people have ample opportunities to have a positive experience of ageing.

Governments and other secular organisations may not be especially open to Benetas’ theology of ageing. Yet they will 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.
- The way Benetas uses 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.

These are the outcomes one hopes would be among the benefits of Benetas pursuing ways in which its theology of ageing could and did influence the life of its organisation.

On the other hand Benetas could expect churches and people in other faith traditions and their faith-based aged care organisations to be more interested in its theology of ageing, especially as it compares to their own positions.

They would of course be no less interested in the two points just noted. Let’s assume Benetas has attended to its own organisational life so as to realise (1) and have some good examples of (2), which have been identified as the internal conditions for effectively influencing other organisations. How then might Benetas exercise such influence?

A form of influencing others is to draw them into a mutually beneficial conversation about the value of having a ‘philosophy of ageing’ equivalent to Benetas’ theology of ageing, especially as this relates to the theme of people having a positive experience of ageing. Benetas having firsthand knowledge of the value due to (1) and (2) could enter a conversation with something to offer and always with an eye to what more can be learned.

As an initial step Benetas could check whether other aged care organisations have an overall philosophy like Benetas’ theology of ageing. Faith-based organisations presumably do. It would be interesting to know whether government departments also have a comparable ‘philosophy of ageing’. This is a research task Benetas could pursue.

5.2.2 Considering Cases

Case 1

Suppose it turns out that such organisational self-world understanding is ‘out there’. It may be that Benetas has a good connection with another aged care organisation, with which it could trial a conversation which if successful might be repeated and/or escalated to a wider circle of organisations having a philosophy or theology of ageing.

The conversation would be about their respective ‘philosophies’ or ‘theologies’ of ageing: what led to these being developed and the benefits and challenges that have flowed from them. Of special importance would be how all this translates into what counts as a positive experience of ageing and how that has been promoted. No less interesting would be the differences that come to light and what could be learned from them. Benefits all around! This is a fine form of influencing.
Do the orientations among aged care organisations at the level of theology/philosophy of ageing have some new light to cast on the matters noted in section five:

- The needs of homeless aged people.
- The needs of older indigenous people.
- The stand with respect to
  - the loss of personhood with ageing;
  - the possibility of continuing to grow as a person.
- Garnering what the organisation is learning from the life histories of its older people for whom it cares (residential and non-residential), including testing possible policy proposals that affect them.
- Revaluing the wisdom of age by developing a cadre of articulate older people to voice their insights into Australian society and culture from the vantage point of having lived a long life and having continued to reclaim their lives towards becoming a whole person as they age.

**Case 2**

Suppose it turns out there were only a few organisations with this level of self-world understanding. A similar but smaller forum could be held along the lines just indicated. This could lead to a general invitation to other aged care organisations to be part of a forum considering the benefits of developing a philosophy of ageing as level of self-world understanding.

**Case 3**

Suppose it was found that government departments were among those organisations that had no ‘philosophy of ageing’, no equivalent to Benetas’ theology of ageing. For example, having perused the website for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing many interesting outcomes are defined with associated measures and budget provisions, yet the author hasn’t found anything like a ‘philosophy of ageing’. What opportunities for influencing might this offer?

If the forums just indicated took place then part of the agenda might be to explore what insight it opens into what opportunities engage the Commonwealth Department. Do the orientations among aged care organisations at the level of theology/philosophy of ageing have some things that are well covered by the department and some things that are not?

**Case 4**

As a ministry in the Christian faith tradition Benetas has an interest in using its theology of ageing to influence (Anglican) churches to promote a positive experience of ageing both for their own members and the wider community. One way to pursue this is the strategy presented at the recent Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne to promote the Prevention of Violence to Women.

This has the support of the Synod, Archbishop in Council, and the Social Responsibilities Committee of the Diocese. The emphasis is on education and prevention. It will be rolled out across the diocese and will include clergy training and the training of lay people. In the case of ‘ageing well’ this approach could create a significant opportunity for a theologically informed education for ‘ageing well’ to be provided. This could lead to the prevention of negative stereotypes and discrimination of older people within the Anglican community.

Another form of influence that Benetas could pursue is the recognition of the work of many parishes ministering to ageing worshippers and to people in aged care facilities. My sense is that there is an opportunity for Benetas to influence the churches by helping them digest more fully their learnings from their various engagements with older people.
**Case 5**

Benetas is a substantial business. The author wonders what opportunities it might have to raise the issue of what ‘ageing well’ might mean for employment opportunities for older people. Of relevance, the Business Council of Australia has a *Developing a Sustainable Population Strategy* (February 2011) which is about “Improving the quality of life for all Australians within prosperous, secure and liveable communities...” This is inclusive and so includes older Australians.

**Case 6**

The author has had discussions with Dr. Ray Cleary at the Trinity College Theological School about the possibility of coordinating a day conference relating to this Theology of Ageing. The Theological School could host this event on behalf of the MCD University of Divinity and The University of Melbourne as well as other aged care agencies.

### 5.3 Recommendations

This paper presents new approaches to the care of our older people. The theology of ageing aims to draw on the Christian tradition in order to age well and with a sense of fulfilment. The following recommendations — for improved short and long-term outcomes — are for the consideration of all Benetas stakeholders and other organisations.

Time frames (short, medium and long term) for the various proposed actions have been recommended. A distinction between ‘short’, ‘medium’ and ‘long’ term has been made, with these terms translated into:

- **‘short’** = first year = Y1
- **‘medium’** = second year = Y2
- **‘long’** = third year = Y3

Of course items to be completed say in Y3 may well have to begin earlier.

Readers should bear in mind that the author’s limited knowledge of the practical operation of Benetas may limit the value of some of these time frames. Also note that identifying what the tasks and time frame are doesn’t address how these tasks will be achieved.

The tasks and times proposed in the following table are provided in order of their appearance in this paper to keep a sense of their context for ready reference. They have then been placed in the order of the three time frames, Y1, Y2, Y3 and some that could stretch across Y1-Y2-Y3.
Table 1 — Proposed tasks/timelines in order of presentation in paper

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<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Board Leadership</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Deepening the level of corporate self awareness</td>
<td>Y 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>21, 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identifying the resonances/dissonances between the way Benetas construes reality and the dominant construals in our society and navigating the way forward that values the resonances and confronts the dissonances</td>
<td>Y 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The sociological and theological realities of people's spiritual needs</strong></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Pastoral staff document expressions of spiritual needs by clients and the diversity of ways these needs are met. Include how these are understood from the theology of ageing perspective.</td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Orientation process for all staff on spiritual needs of older people and help to become aware of this dimension in their own lives – without imposing any one way these needs could be met.</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Benetas to promote forums for other organisations about spiritual needs — the importance shown (p16) in the example from the Later Life Learning forum</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Personhood</strong></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Benetas keeping up-to-date with the full range of the debate on personhood and ageing.</td>
<td>Y 1, 2, 3</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Benetas could incorporate into its own understanding of ‘person’ a brief sketch of the historically original Christian contribution to the understanding of the term ‘person’.</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Promote ‘The Great Personhood Debate’.</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Workshop on becoming a whole person.</td>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Benetas keeping some track of how themes on becoming a whole person are being worked out in the lives of clients; e.g.: • remembering one’s life story • being a person in community • continuing self respect and dignity as ambiguity of ageing deepens • adjusting to becoming (more) dependent and vulnerable</td>
<td>Y 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Assessing the follow up on Benetas’ excellent research into the different meanings of ‘respect’.</td>
<td>Y1</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Theological reflections on the research Benetas’ own research — (e.g. on ‘respect’) from the standpoint of ‘A Theology of Ageing’.</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Checking whether working for Benetas strengthens employees on at least some of the following: • sense of dignity/worth • lower staff turn over rate • face-to-face communications • in becoming whole persons • trust • handling conflicts well.</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>24-25</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Forming a cadre of articulate older people and publish their reflections on society, culture from their standpoint.</td>
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<td>Task</td>
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<td><strong>Advocacy</strong>&lt;br&gt;15 A</td>
<td>Advocacy for overcoming the factors that lower life expectancy of Indigenous Australians</td>
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<td>15 B</td>
<td>Stable economic order</td>
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<td>15 C</td>
<td>Regarding impact of climate change on frail aged</td>
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<td>Extracting learnings from Benetas’ history of advocacy.</td>
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<td><strong>Accountability</strong>&lt;br&gt;17</td>
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<td><strong>Corporate Spirituality</strong>&lt;br&gt;18 A</td>
<td>As for #4.</td>
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<td>18 B</td>
<td>Retreat for senior leadership</td>
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<td>18 C</td>
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<td>18 D</td>
<td>Compiling a book of relevant scriptures and other readings</td>
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<td>18 E</td>
<td>Beginning board meetings with Benetas prayer.</td>
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<td><strong>Benetas Mission, Vision and Values</strong>&lt;br&gt;19</td>
<td>Include ‘identity’ statement in Benetas Mission, Vision and Values</td>
<td>Y1</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Developing a framework for ethical decision making.</td>
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<td><strong>Influencing other Organisations and Governments</strong>&lt;br&gt;21</td>
<td>Checking the assumed internal conditions for Benetas effectively influencing governments and other organisations.</td>
<td>Y2</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Benetas checks what other relevant government departments/organisations and other aged care organisations have an explicit philosophy/theology of ageing.</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Case 1: conversation with another aged care provider about their respective philosophy or theology of ageing.</td>
<td>Y1</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Influencing churches to promote a positive experience of ageing: • develop strategies along the lines proposed; • implementation.</td>
<td>Y2,3</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Conference on ‘A Theology of Ageing’ at Trinity College Theological School.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>In the light of #24, #25, develop influencing strategy for opportunities identified in Cases 2, 3 and 5.</td>
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<td><strong>Conclusion</strong>&lt;br&gt;27</td>
<td>The Board using ‘A Theology of Ageing’ in making decisions.</td>
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Table 2 — Proposed tasks and timelines in order of time frames Y1, Y2, Y3

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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Benetas to promote forums for other organisations about spiritual needs — the importance shown (p16) in the example from the Later Life Learning forum</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Benetas could incorporate into its own understanding of ‘person’ a brief sketch of the historically original Christian contribution to the understanding of the term ‘person’.</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Promote ‘The Great Personhood Debate’.</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Checking whether working for Benetas strengthens employees on at least some of the following:</td>
<td>24-25</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sense of dignity/worth</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• lower staff turn over rate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• face-to-face communications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• in becoming whole persons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• trust</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• handling conflicts well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 A</td>
<td>Advocacy for overcoming the factors that lower life expectancy of Indigenous Australians</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 B</td>
<td>Stable economic order</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 C</td>
<td>Regarding impact of climate change on frail aged</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 A</td>
<td>As for #4.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 B</td>
<td>Retreat for senior leadership</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 C</td>
<td>Annual service for whole organisation celebrating and giving thanks for Benetas.</td>
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<th>Main theme</th>
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<td>Developing a framework for ethical decision making.</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Checking the assumed internal conditions for Benetas effectively influencing governments and other organisations.</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Conference on 'A Theology of Ageing' at Trinity College Theological School.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>In the light of #24, #25, develop influencing strategy for opportunities identified in Cases 2, 3 and 5.</td>
<td>31-32</td>
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<td>Y3</td>
<td>Workshop on becoming a whole person.</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Forming a cadre of articulate older people and publish their reflections on society, culture from their standpoint.</td>
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<td>Y1 – Y2 – Y3</td>
<td>Deepening the level of corporate self awareness</td>
<td>21, 37</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Identifying the resonances/dissonances between the way Benetas construes reality and the dominant construals in our society and navigating the way forward that values the resonances and confronts the dissonances</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Benetas keeping up-to-date with the full range of the debate on personhood and ageing.</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Benetas keeping some track of how themes on becoming a whole person are being worked out in the lives of clients; e.g.: • remembering one’s life story • being a person in community • continuing self respect and dignity as ambiguity of ageing deepens • adjusting to becoming (more) dependent and vulnerable</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Influencing churches to promote a positive experience of ageing: • develop strategies along the lines proposed; • implementation.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>The Board using ‘A Theology of Ageing’ in making decisions.</td>
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6. Conclusion

In seeking a theology of ageing the senior leadership of Benetas has taken an ambitious step towards a new level of corporate self-understanding. This will be ‘new territory’ for them.

A temptation may be to keep the theology of ageing in the bottom drawer, like an ineffective mission statement. When the Board must deliberate on new issues or situations, they may benefit from entering this ‘new territory’ and asking, ‘what light does our theology of ageing cast on this matter for decision?’ This could include using the framework for ethical decision making mentioned earlier. In due course I would count it a privilege to hear what you have found by crossing the threshold.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Benetas for inviting me to prepare ‘A Theology of Ageing’. Also I would like to acknowledge Mr Alan Gruner, Manager of Research & Development, and Mr Paul Zammit, Pastoral Care Coordinator, for the engaging and helpful conversations during the course of this work. All deficiencies in this work are entirely my responsibility.

Rev. Canon Dr Stephen Ames
4 April 2012
1. Benetas has commissioned me to prepare this statement requesting a theology of ageing rather than a theology of aged care. Due to space limits a number of important themes have not been discussed. For example there is no discussion of ageing and death in the Bible, or of the significance of the human body, or a Christian spirituality of ageing. These and other themes will be included in the book-length version of ‘A Theology of Ageing’. Please note that all references to particular Bible texts are recorded in the end notes.


4. Ibid. p. 15.


6. ABS 2007 cat. no. 3302.0


8. Submission to Family and Community Development Committee – Inquiry into Opportunities for Participation of Senior Victorians, 2 September 2011, prepared by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.


11. Ibid. p. 130.


13. Ibid. p. 84.


17. I am drawing on scripture, on Christian tradition, reason and experience, for my understanding of the God revealed in Christ. This is a brief account of that understanding of God.


20. Another indicator is that I have been the main lecturer for 10 years in ‘God and the Natural Sciences’ a second and third-year subject at the University of Melbourne. My colleague, Dr N. Thomason, is a lifelong atheist. We designed this subject in order that there could be an intelligent, respectful public conversation about science and religion. Over a hundred students from all over the university enrol each year.

21. The relations between science and religion are quite different from the media headlines from fundamentalists on all sides, from religion, atheism or scientism. This assessment is based on historical research into those cases that allegedly provide the basis for the ‘warfare’ claim such as the ‘Galileo Affair’. See, for example, Brooke, J.H., Science and Religion, Some Historical Perspectives, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. These matters are carefully examined in my lecturing in ‘God and the Natural Sciences’.

22. The intimations of God in everyday life mentioned here is a form of natural theology and natural spirituality. Noticing these intimations provides one kind of ‘earthing’ for our talk about God. It helps open our story to God’s story, which is opened even further (and even rephrased) when we come to recognise that the God who has been intimated is the God revealed in Christ. This approach is a paraphrase of the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews, ‘God has
spoken by many and various means in the past but has now spoken by His Son’. There is only room to mention all this here, and it reappears briefly in the later discussion of spirituality in old age.

23. For someone not familiar with this story a good place to start is with the Gospel according to Luke in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.


27. One of the fruits of the historical critical approach to the Gospels is unanimous agreement that the distinctive thing about Jesus’ ministry is his announcing the ‘reign of God’ both as a present reality (e.g. Luke 11:20) and as a future reality cited in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:10). An earlier generation of scholars emphasised one or other of these aspects of Jesus’ teaching. Now we realise that the two have to hold together — Jesus announces the coming of the ‘reign of God’, now in anticipation, finally in glory.

28. You may remember the story in the Gospel of Mark of the woman who breaks a flask of pure nard to wash Jesus’ feet before he dies. The whole house was filled with the perfume from the broken flask. For Christians it is a sign of what is to come.


33. Thanks to the work of the team led by Australian Nobel laureate in physics, Dr Brian Schmidt, of the Australian National University.

34. For an excellent discussion of these matters see Spitzer, R.J., New Proofs for the Existence of God, Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2010, Chp. 1.

35. The powers given to humankind include the sciences and technologies that have contributed to the extended longevity so evident in developed nations. This is theologically appropriate, even if the mal distribution of such goods within and between nations is not. Who can say where this will lead? One possibility is the transhuman/posthuman trajectory. This includes the vision of (a) technologically extending human capacities; (b) the combination of computing power, robotics, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology overtaking human capacities — this point is known as the ‘singularity’ — leading to the ‘post-human’ condition; (c) the hope to upload human consciousness into a better material base. Now (a) is already very well developed with many benefits. In principle this is not theologically problematic, though any given example (e.g. nuclear power) may raise issues. Theologically (b) would be a negation of the ‘dominion’ given by God to humankind. It could be understood in terms of the ‘principalities and powers’ from which we have been liberated by Christ. It should be opposed. Theologically (c) is a profoundly negative view of human bodies and presupposes consciousness can ‘separated’ from our bodies as patterns of information can be separated from hardware in computers. Theologically this is an antihuman move and should not be pursued. It has a decidedly ‘gnostic’ ring. ‘Gnosticism’ was an ancient heresy rejected by the Church. Option (a) will have consequences for further extending longevity. A deeper issue is whether it is a way of avoiding limits and discounting ageing. So motivated it would be a mistake. Another issue is what priority it should have compared to other research agendas and other use of financial resources and human capacities compared to more pressing matters to do with the climate, availability of food and water and a just economic order. The theologically positive and counter cultural stance towards ageing is still represented by our title, ‘Finding the Way’. Among many references on these matters see M. Zimmeran, ‘The Singularity, A crucial phase in Divine Self Actualisation?’, in Cosmos and History, The Journal of Nature and Social Philosophy, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 and 2, 2008, 347-370; D.Alexander, ‘Enhancing humans or new creation?’, Jubilee Centre, Cambridge Papers, Volume 18, No.2, 2009; http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=320. See also ‘A ‘A Conversation with Transhumanism’ — go to St.Paul's Cathedral Website, Science Week@The Cathedral 2012.

37. This is a summary statement of ‘wellbeing’ from a theological standpoint. It would be good to examine the research into various kinds of ‘wellbeing’ to see what is said about ‘wellbeing’ in old age and to learn from the ‘resonances’ and ‘dissonances’ with the views presented here. This is a wide field ranging from the OECD, the State of Bhutan, the United Nations and the influential work of Prof. Martin Selligman.


39. Ibid. p. 223.

40. Others report similar findings. See Bloemhard, _A. Spiritual Care for Self and Others_, 2008, p. 18. Palliative Care Victoria reports that older people may want to explore: Does my life have meaning? Why is this happening to me? Why am I suffering? Who am I? What does it mean to die? Where do we go when we die? Will I be reunited with my loved ones after death? Is there a God? See Palliative Care Victoria: ‘Pastoral Carers in Palliative Care’, June 2008. Cited in P. Zammit’s ‘Heart Speaks to Heart’ presentation at Benetas AGM 2010.


42. Ibid. p. 165.


44. In this paragraph I have been drawing on Maitland (1991).


46. This embodiment is different from the idea of the person as an immortal soul imprisoned in the body; also from any idea of the body as secondary to the person; and from the idea of the person being reduced to being wholly a function of the body. Some useful discussions of these matters are: Purcell, B., _From Big Bang to Big Mystery_, _Human Origins in the Light of Creation and Evolution_, Veritas, Dublin, 2011; Holmes, R. III, _The Three Big Bangs, Energy-Matter, Life, Mind_, Columbia University, New York, 2010; Green, J.B. & Palmer, S.L., _In Search of the Soul, Four Views of the Mind Body Problem_, Intervarsity Press, Illinois, 2005; and Murphy, N., _Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies?_, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006; Rahner, K., _Foundations of Christian Faith_, Dartman, Longman and Todd, London, 1978, pp. 178–187.

47. Ephesians 1:10, 3:9–11.

48. Among many books I mention Rolnick, P.A., _Person, Grace and God_, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007; Zizioulas, J., _Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church_, P. McPartlan (ed.), T&T Clark, New York, 2006; Torrance, A., _Persons in Communion: an essay in Trinitarian description and human participation_, with special reference to volume one of Karl Barth’s Church dogmatics, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996; and Gunton, C., _The One the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity_, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993. Another important distinction made by Gabriel Marcel, is between problems and mysteries. The former have exact solutions. A mystery is a reality you can meet and enter, which you can describe by ever better analogies, but never fully grasp or define. A meal can be turned into a series of problems or the meeting of persons can open up an ever more engaging reality that seems inexhaustible, i.e. a ‘mystery’. Marcel, G., _Being and Having_, Dacre Press, Westminster, 1949.

49. Ibid. p. 54.


51. Maitland, 1991. In the following section I am much indebted to Maitland.

52. All these are included in the Biblical theme of the ‘secrets of the heart’ that are all known to God. The theme is part of the opening prayer of all Anglican Eucharistic liturgies across the whole Anglican Church, going back to the Holy Communion service of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. One spiritual practice based on this theme is the continuing growth through being open to God bringing to awareness these secrets as we can bear them. Maitland rightly includes the ‘nudges’ from daily life as one of the ways God brings the ‘secrets of our hearts’ to light.

53. Ibid. p. 55.
54. This theme of God being ‘incognito’, not being recognised, is found for example in Genesis 28:16, where Jacob realises, thanks to a dream, that ‘God is in this place and I did not know it’. Another example is King Cyrus who, according to Isaiah 45:4 did not know that he was the Lord’s anointed to defeat the might of Babylon and to liberate the Jews in exile.


56. Michelle Griffin, ‘We’re happy and we know it’, The Age, October 1, 2011, p. 3.


61. Various theories at the intersection of theology, philosophy and science provide different accounts of how persons are embodied, how this is consistent with such personal transcendence of the body. However, the above affirmations are made on the basis of theology and of course are open to testing from a number of standpoints. There is no space here to discuss these matters.


68. David Keck’s question was noted above, ‘Is there a metaphysical basis for the human person, which this disease does not destroy?’. I have deliberately not pursued a detailed answer here, preferring to maintain the theological theme of being created in the image of God as the unrevoked gift of God.

69. Post-modern strains of thought especially critique the terms, ‘truth’ and ‘author’. This does nothing to remove questions as to whether these critiques are worthwhile, who is promoting them and with what interests.


74. Alas, I cannot recall the name of the CEO or of the hospital.


76. The note I think is important is given by St Paul’s advice to the ‘faith-based community’ at Philippi — ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work in you — to work and to will His good pleasure.’ Phil.2:12–13.

77. A quote from Mr Alan Gruner happily recalled from our first meeting.

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