

Director's Report

Annual General Meeting – 9 December 2017

It is a joy to be with you at the end of another year at Benedictus, to reflect on what's happened among us and take stock of where we find ourselves. As I think back over the past year, I'm struck by the number of new things that have emerged and the way that leadership is being exercised within our community by a much wider group. I'm struck by how we're continuing to offer and deepen a contemplative contribution in the wider world. And, I'm struck by my sense that more and more we are sharing a common life, caring for one another and growing together.

Worship and Life Together

The heart of Benedictus continues to be our weekly worship service on Saturday nights, and this year we enjoyed a number of additions to our liturgical calendar. We celebrated our first Christmas Vespers at the end of last year, and during our summer recess we held a series of January Gatherings. These were led by members of the community, and enabled those who were in Canberra over the summer as well as some visitors to meet, meditate and reflect together on Saturday evenings. We celebrated our Harvest Festival in March, and then enjoyed Easter at the island in Lake Ginninderra for the second year. Since Easter fell later this year, after the end of daylight savings, our Maundy Thursday liturgy in the garden began just as the light faded completely and our gathering by lantern light to begin the Easter journey was very beautiful.

We had a few different preaching series during the year – Poetica Divina and the Season of Creation resonated particularly for many people, as did our Call and Response series where several members of the congregation reflected on the dynamic of call and response in their own lives. We were richly blessed by these offerings and we intend another such series in the coming year. Another way we heard more of each other's stories was through our occasional Benediction segments towards the end of the service. These were led mostly by Neil, who 'interviewed' various members of the congregation and helped us see one another more deeply. Many of you have commented how you valued those sharings and how it's helped you to feel more connected.

Apart from our services, there are many other ways we have gathered in a regular way over the year – our Spiritual Practice and L’Chaim groups continued and we’ll hear more of these shortly. The Benedictus Council met monthly and together we looked after the administrative and organisational dimensions of our life, as well as seeking to discern what’s unfolding and how we might support it. This year also saw the emergence of a number of new groups and one of the things that particularly excites me is the extent to which these are led by members of the community. Our Theology Reading Group was led largely by Heather Thomson with me in an assisting role; the Southside meditation group is hosted by Peter and Elizabeth Yuile; and the recently convened Men’s Circle is led by Ken Vesperman. We’ve also launched two liturgy groups where those who are interested in contributing to the liturgies we use on Saturday nights can share ideas and support each other in learning this craft.

It’s so encouraging to see this life emerging, and for all the ways this supports deepened connection and friendship in our community. I hear of people visiting others in hospital, people catching up for a cuppa or a meal or a walk, and I love the sense of this gentle, unselfconscious care and awareness being exercised by so many.

Contemplative Contribution

What is the distinctive vocation of a contemplative church? This is a question that’s been important to me from the beginning of Benedictus. Part of our response to this question is Kaleidoscope – our contemplative gatherings for primary school aged children, and Kalchaino – our young adults’ group. In a moment, Karina Harris who leads these ministries will offer a separate report, but here I want to bring out what I think is so significant about them. I don’t want you to think that these are just our ‘kid’s ministry’ or our ‘youth group’. These offerings are about making a contemplative perspective and way of being available to children and young people in their everyday lives at school, in their families, at Uni, at work – and this perspective and way of being is for the most part not otherwise readily available to them.

Take Kaleidoscope: by having a chance to experience being gathered quietly in a circle and settled in body and mind, by being invited to share reflections and listen attentively to others, by exploring themes such as presence, attention, forgiveness and kindness in story and art, our Kaleidoscope children are being introduced to ways of being that can nourish and sustain them throughout their lives. Similarly, at Kalchaino, being introduced to meditation and given opportunities for self-reflection and growth in self-knowledge helps young people on the cusp of adult life to

approach their choices mindfully and with awareness, and that makes a real difference to what unfolds next for them. I'm so grateful to Karina for all she does to enable our offering of these gifts, and so glad and proud that this is part of what Benedictus is bringing into our world.

This year has also seen our first Benedictus Seminar, on the theme of Contemplating Consumption. For me, this was a significant event, because it begins to realise our commitment to contribute to questions that matter to the whole community and to foster open-hearted conversation and the possibility of transformation beyond the church door. The seminar was attended by many people who are not regular members of Benedictus and in the lead up I was interviewed on ABC local radio. I'm very grateful to our guest speakers, Reverend Linda Chapman and Peter Martin, and to all those who contributed to the day. We've learnt valuable lessons from the doing of this, and we will be considering the possibility of further seminars – perhaps building on the same theme or exploring others – Contemplation and Social Media, is one possibility.

And there were other events too. Early in the year we held a Benedictus community day, called The Passion for Justice where our themes included ethical consumption (in which we were led by Yvonne Wisbey, and Mary and Bronnie Sargeson), social justice led by Annie Patterson, and justice and politics in conversation with ACT Attorney-General, Gordon Ramsay. Following on from this day, we hosted a conversation called Soul in the System, which focused on questions of justice and vocational integrity in the workplace. This conversation generated a lot of energy and called for further exploration; we intend in the coming year to offer opportunities to engage these issues more fully, most likely through a Circle of Trust style retreat day or days, and this too is something we intend to open up to the wider community's participation.

In all this, I continue to be convicted that a contemplative worshipping community has a perspective and way of being that can contribute in significant and life-giving ways to contemporary needs and questions, and I am excited that we are beginning to discover how we might do that.

Wider Ministry

There's are yet wider aspects to our ministry too. Partly, of course, this is your ministry – your work in the world, your transforming presence in your families and communities. For me, this wider aspect also includes having participated in a number of events outside Canberra. I'm very grateful to you for encouraging this work and to the Benedictus Council for enabling it so generously and supportively.

In January 2017, I led the National Retreat for the New Zealand Christian Meditation Community; I gave three addresses at the clergy school for the Perth Anglican diocese in June, spoke at the Abundant Justice conference in the Brisbane diocese in September, and recently gave a public lecture in Chicago at the Garrett-Evangelical Theological Union. Further highlights this year included facilitating the conversation between Laurence Freeman and Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr on the theme of *dadirri* and Christian meditation in Sydney, and participating in the New Contemplative Exchange with Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, Laurence Freeman and Tilden Edwards at Snowmass, Colorado.

On all these occasions, people asked about Benedictus – they want to know what we do when we gather, how we’re organised, how we’re related to the denominational churches and what we are learning about being a contemplative church. We are pioneering something that is a model for many, part of an emerging Contemplative Christianity, and I am so grateful to share in this adventure with you.

Pastoral

I want to finish my report this year by acknowledging that as well as the excitement we rightly feel about what continues to emerge among us, I am conscious that some members of our community are suffering deeply as they or their loved ones face serious illness, incapacity and death. ‘In the midst of life we are in death’, says the prayer of committal in the funeral rite, and when we share life together we feel each other’s sorrow and struggle acutely.

Again, I want to thank you for the many ways you are being with each other, and I want to acknowledge the blessing and power for good this is. It’s a radical witness to our faith that ‘If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s’.

Our faith is that we are one in Christ, in life and death, and it rejoices my heart to see that slowly, humbly and gently this life of Christ is being wrought in us. Thanks be to God.

Sarah Bachelard
Director
Benedictus Contemplative Church