



## Director's Report Annual General Meeting – 10 December 2016

*Jesus said: 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches'. (Luke 13.18-19)*

I quoted this passage in the first pastoral letter I ever wrote to our community, and I found myself returning to it this week as I prepared my Director's report for this year. It's a passage that evokes our Benedictus symbol – the tree of life – and I want to share with you something of how I think the 'tree' of our community is growing!

For some time now, we've been putting down roots, discovering that there is indeed fertile ground in which a contemplative community can grow and begin to express its form. This year, it seems to me, we've seen significant thickening in our 'trunk'. Our early growth has consolidated and strengthened, and we're becoming capable of supporting more and larger branches. So let me say something, first, about this 'thickening' of our trunk which is showing itself in a number of ways.

### *Strengthening ministries*

Over the course of this year, our Benedictus services and activities have continued to develop and flourish. For the first time, we celebrated Easter together as a community. I found this a deeply moving experience. Our services on the island in Lake Ginninderra on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day together with our usual Holy Saturday service here in the church drew us powerfully through the paschal mystery and a number of people commented to me that they'd never before been so conscious of the *journey* of Easter. The very fact that we felt the need to celebrate the whole of Easter together was itself, I thought, a sign of our community's deepening sense of itself *as* a community and, in turn, contributed to it. The forthcoming Christmas Vespers is another such sign, and I am looking forward to this service very much! Our regular weekly services are always for me, and I hope for others, an encouragement and inspiration, and during the year we also enjoyed other significant occasions – our

contemplative community day in March, Dark Night of the Season, Music of the Spheres and Laurence Freeman's visit a couple of weeks ago.

Our two L'Chaim reflective practice groups and our monthly Spiritual Practice Group continued to meet, fostering the personal growth of participants as well as enabling the forging and deepening of friendships within the community. We hosted Kaleidoscope, our contemplative children's afternoons led by Karina, regularly throughout the year. After tomorrow afternoon, we'll have had 15 gatherings this year, attended by around 15-20 children each time (about 35 children attend on a regular or semi-regular basis). This is a profound ministry to a growing number of families and children, many of whom have no other affiliation with a Christian community.

A couple of weeks ago, Karina and I met with the director of the Catholic Education Office in Townsville, who came to Canberra specifically to attend Benedictus and hear about Kaleidoscope, since they are in the process of establishing a contemplative school. We have been asked to be 'critical friends' of this project, and it is encouraging to learn that what we are doing here is in some sense an inspiration for developments elsewhere. Kalchaino, our discernment group for young adults, met four times, with 12 young people participating over the course of the year. We are hoping to offer a Kalchaino retreat in late February next year to introduce in a more focused way the practice of meditation, and our young adults are really keen to participate in this.

In all this, it seems to me that ministries we've begun over the last few years have consolidated, and proven themselves both durable and a real contribution.

### *Benedictus Council*

Another source of the strengthening of our 'trunk' has been the increasing involvement of the Benedictus Council in shaping and supporting our common life. In a moment, Peter and Elizabeth will share something of their experience of being on the Council, but I want to acknowledge now how grateful I am to all our Council members for their commitment, generosity of vision, wisdom and hard work.

There were some significant administrative things to sort out this year – including formalising stipendiary payments for me, and managing our reporting obligations – including our copyright reporting. So there's been some major grunt work to do, and that our Council has done this for us has significantly deepened our integrity and provided a trustworthy foundation for future growth. What I am particularly grateful for about our Council meetings is the spirit of discernment that pervades them. As well as attending to the necessary business of the community, we seek to practise a shared

listening for what are the concerns and hopes of Benedictus, and what we are being called to in service of the wider community. We feel our way – and it's suggestions from and conversation with Council members that has shaped much of what has happened this year.

### *Participation*

Finally, in relation to the 'trunk thickening' metaphor, I want to highlight the significance of the growth in the number of people participating in leadership of Benedictus in a whole range of ways.

In our weekly Saturday service, and particularly while Neil and I were away on pilgrimage, we've been blessed by the contribution and leadership of many. Heather, supported by the Council, took a prime role here but members of the community accepted my invitations to lead the liturgy and offer reflections, manage the logistics and lead music, while others took initiative in hospitality and pastoral care. Benedictus not only survived, but thrived in our absence and this is a really encouraging sign of our maturing. I would like to build on this sharing of leadership in the coming year. I encourage anyone who has an interest in participating in the liturgy, readings, reflections or prayers to speak to me, and in the new year, we'll begin to explore how that wider involvement might unfold. Another sign of increasing participation in leadership is the initiative of January gatherings while Benedictus is formally in recess, as is the emergence of the first of what I hope may be several mid-week meditation gatherings in community members' homes. I love the thought that people are feeling empowered to offer what they wish to offer, and I encourage anyone who is bubbling away with an idea to let it out – at least for a conversation!!

I am also heartened to hear stories of people contributing to each other's life and work in the world. As one example of this, one of our community members told me that as a result of a conversation over supper, she'd invited another member to speak to her indigenous students – sharing work that he was involved with relevant to their learning. We've always said that Benedictus is committed to empowering people for their vocations in the world, and it's wonderful that we're discovering ways of doing this.

### *New Branches*

So what might our thickening trunk be enabling us for? What new branches might be evident or budding up?

I've spoken several times in the past year about my vision for a Benedictus Centre. This vision has two major (potentially separable) facets. It's partly about new groups, retreats, seminars. I imagine us, over time, offering further opportunities for spiritual formation and inquiry, as well as seminars and retreats engaging the issues of our day from a contemplative perspective. I am hoping to develop a retreat program, for example, called 'Soul in the System' which would focus on how to live and work truthfully and well in systems that often feel compromised and compromising. I think there's also scope for offerings on themes like the vocation of ageing, and deep listening to the spirit of place, as well as things that might emerge from the passions and expertise of others in our community. All this is connected, as I see it, to the vocation of a contemplative community to engage seriously with the needs of our world, the ministry of reconciliation. So my vision of a Benedictus Centre is partly about this kind of activity.

It's also partly about the possibility of a place, a home, for our community. I've never intended that a Benedictus Centre would be a space for our weekly worship service – we hope to continue renting Holy Covenant for the foreseeable future. But it would be a space where we could gather during the week and from which we might offer hospitality to others. Kaleidoscope and Kalchaino would meet there, and some of our other groups. There might be daily meditation, perhaps an inter-faith meditation group, as well as a kind of urban sanctuary where members of our community could spend time, meet for conversation, or help create a community garden. It might also ultimately provide me with an office space.

As I've put forward the two facets of this vision, my sense is that some members of our community are excited by and drawn to the prospect of a physical space or home for Benedictus, and we've had offers of substantial financial contributions to help make this possible. Others are excited by the offerings, the conversations and seminars that might come under the auspices of a Benedictus Centre, but they are less convinced of the desirability of our own 'place' as part of that vision. There's a sense here of the value of 'travelling light' and of making use of existing facilities. During this year, the Council has been actively seeking to clarify the different facets of this vision, and to discern our next steps.

As part of this process of exploration and discernment, we've submitted an application with the ACT Government Property Group registering our potential interest in renting a suitable community use property, but so far nothing has emerged from that quarter. We've also considered whether Benedictus could purchase a house that might

be turned into a Centre, and have concluded that we are not in a position to undertake such a commitment. We've been keeping our eyes and ears open, but so far nothing has presented itself. And, as a Council, we're still feeling our way towards a common mind about what is being called forth from us – both in relation to the property question and the offerings we might develop. We would very much value your reflections and responses to these matters.

### *Concluding remarks*

When we come back next year, Benedictus will be five years old. Over that time, so much has grown. We have received from God and from one another grace upon grace. As we prepare to embark on our next five years, my prayer is that we continue to grow together, faithfully seeking to incarnate Christ's way of being in the world and so maturing into the fullness of our vocations – both personally and as a community.

Thank you for your love and encouragement, your trust and generous commitment. It is for me as ever a joy and privilege to share this ministry with you, as we seek to be and to become a community, a flourishing tree, for the flourishing of our world.

Sarah Bachelard  
Director  
Benedictus Contemplative Church