



## Director's Report Annual General Meeting – 8 December 2018

When I was in fourth class at Cook Primary School (circa 1976), the school put on a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. None of us were up to solo roles, so all the major characters were played by phalanxes of small children. I was in the ensemble playing 'Pharoah'. It was an unforgettable introduction to the biblical significance of the number seven, as we learned to sing of Pharoah's dream of the seven fat and seven skinny cows, the seven healthy and seven bad ears of corn.

*Well I was wandering along by the banks of the river  
When seven fat cows came up out of the Nile, uh-huh  
And right behind these fine healthy animals came  
Seven other cows, skinny and vile, uh-huh ... etc!*

We've just completed the first seven years of Benedictus' life – and that seems somehow significant. Seven is the number of completion, wholeness – and it's got me wondering about our stage of life as a community – whether we're drawing to the end of a certain phase, and may be on the cusp of another. In the first part of my report, I want to celebrate what is; in the second part, I want to share with you some conversations for possibility.

### **Celebrating What Is**

There is so much to celebrate about the life we share. There are our weekly services on Saturdays which provide ongoing nourishment and companionship on the way; there are the various 'special' services during the year which enable us to celebrate the liturgical seasons (Easter on the island, Christmas Vespers) and also the seasons of the year (Harvest Festival, Dark Night, Viriditas, Set Pools of Silence). We repeated some of our popular reflection series this year: Call and Response involved some wonderful offerings from members of the community, as well as Poetica Divina and the Season of Creation. This year also saw us spending time with the Book of Ruth and exploring (in Lent) the deeper dynamics of prayer. For me, it's such a joy to be with people who want to grapple deeply with the gifts and challenges of our faith

tradition, in conversation with the reality of lived experience in the world today. Thank you for being that kind of community!

Our various groups continued to meet and enable increasing numbers of us to gather for different kinds of fellowship – there's our Spiritual Practice Group and Men's Circle of which we'll hear more in a few minutes; there's our L'Chaim reflective practice group, the Theology Reading Group and Southside Meditation Group. These are the 'regularised' gatherings of the community, but there are others as well. For example, various groupings of musicians get together to prepare for our services, and the musicians all together have enjoyed a couple of Saturday breakfasts; people team up to offer supper after our services, and others get together for coffee and meals. Last year, I mentioned my sense of the life of our community strengthening and I'm delighted this continues to happen as friendships form and we share each other's journeys.

Our Kalchaino group for young adults also continued for its third year. We've had four meetings over the course of the year at which up to ten 17 to 23 year olds gather for times of reflection and contemplation. Themes we explored included the relationship between ambition and call or charisma, the question of 'gathering' (what does it mean to be 'gathered' in yourself, and how do millennials 'gather' or want to gather with others), the relationship between our inner and outer worlds, and the experience of 'welcoming as guests' or offering hospitality to those parts of ourselves, those thoughts and feelings we find difficult. Each time Karina, Neil and I prepare for Kalchaino we wonder if our young participants will find it a helpful space, and each time we're surprised and encouraged by the enthusiasm of their response. Kaleidoscope, our contemplative afternoon for primary school children, also goes from strength to strength under Karina's dedicated and creative leadership, and we'll hear more of this too in a moment.

Another facet of our life that's particularly touched me this year, is the sense that many of our community are looking to go deeper in the practice of meditation and their personal spiritual formation. There was considerable interest in the possibility of a Benedictus silent retreat, which is scheduled for the last weekend in January with good numbers already booked in. Many members of Benedictus have also participated in Quiet Days organised through the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction, and others are undertaking the Soul Space retreat leaders' formation program that Sue Dunbar, through Barnabas Ministries, together with Neil and me, is offering. All these are signs of a broadening and deepening of our capacity

as a community to be a catalyst for contemplative engagement with the world around us.

I am particularly grateful also for the work of the Benedictus Council this year, for its wisdom and generous encouragement of me and our common life. We meet every month and, as well as keeping in touch with the flow of things and helping discern our energies and needs, the Council has worked particularly on monitoring our finances and sustainability, and on responding to the ACT government's new reportable conduct scheme for religious organisations. The Council has also been discussing the question of Benedictus' capacity to conduct pastoral services – such as baptism and marriage. To date, the (small number of) baptisms and weddings we've had at Benedictus, I've conducted in my capacity as a priest licensed by the Anglican church. The question that is beginning to arise, particularly in the context of the legalisation of same-sex marriage, is whether this is a satisfactory approach for our community. The Anglican church looks unlikely to allow same-sex marriage for the foreseeable future, but I would wish we could offer this service when asked. This question of authority to conduct pastoral services is complex. It involves not just the issue of my personal licensing as a priest, but a larger issue of Benedictus's ecclesiology and our relationship to denominational authorities. These are questions the Council is beginning to explore – and if any of you would like to hear more, I or members of the Council are happy to elaborate!

### **Conversations for Possibility**

I began this report by mentioning the number 'seven' and how it had got me wondering about our stage of life as a community – whether we're drawing to the end of a certain phase, and may be on the cusp of another.

Two years ago, I spoke about the possibility of a Benedictus Centre for the continuation of our work and mission. With the Council, I was wondering whether we needed to be thinking about a home of our own where we might develop something like a centre for contemplative spirituality – a place from which to offer day retreats and seminars engaging the issues of our day from a contemplative perspective, and where regular daily meditation and our other groups could be offered. In 2016, we spent time exploring that vision, but it seemed that the time wasn't right and no viable option emerged.

In retrospect, that seems right – we weren't ready. More recently, however, the question has opened up again. There are two factors here. First, twelve months ago we had an approach from a Uniting Church presbytery leader and St Ninian's

Lyneham about the possibility of collaboration between our communities. St Ninian's is an ageing congregation with declining energies for new projects, but with facilities and a site that would particularly lend itself to the vision I outlined above – a centre for spiritual formation and public engagement. The idea of such a well-located site where all our current activities could occur, and new things be unfolded, is really exciting.

The second factor is that we as a Council were sensing we were bumping up against the limits of what we might do under our current arrangements. Holy Covenant have been generous hosts to us over these seven years, and continue to offer us a place to gather on Saturdays and for some of our other groups. We are and will ever be deeply grateful for this hospitality. There is, however, a growing pressure on their facilities from their own community which in turn limits what might be and become possible for us. And there's something about having a place where people can gather incidentally, and also regularly for things like mid-week meditation, rather than only ever for designated meetings which have to be arranged in advance. In fact, this, I believe, will be key in the next phase of our life and if we're to contribute to the wider community in the way I think we're called to.

So – where are we up to? The Benedictus and St Ninian's Councils have had a number of conversations to explore where there really are possibilities that can be pursued here. There is no question here of a merger – each community would retain its own integrity and form of life. Yet, there are possibilities for synergy and mutual enrichment. Each Council has agreed that it wishes to pursue this conversation, including at the nitty-gritty level and to draw in their wider membership. This will happen in the new year. There would obviously be financial implications for Benedictus if this were to go ahead, but it would be a manageable way of us gaining access to conducive facilities in a wonderful setting – not simply as tenants, but as collaborators in a vision to utilise this site to fulfil our vocation as Christian communities. To be clear, we would not be buying into the property so there is not the outlay that people were concerned about last time. Having said that, since our discussion two years ago, there have been a number of generous offers for financial support to enable the mission of Benedictus, if and when the time was right. In the meantime, as you know, Neil has been appointed as minister at St Ninian's and this too augurs well for the possibility of a fruitful cooperation, if as individual communities and together we discern this is the way ahead.

## **A Contemplative Christianity**

From time to time I've mentioned the interest of the wider Christian church in what we're doing here at Benedictus. This continues to be the case. As an expression of this, I've been invited by the World Community for Christian Meditation to deliver the John Main Seminar lectures next year in Canada, on the theme of 'A Contemplative Christianity for Our Time'. It's a joy to be discovering with you what that can look like and that indeed it is something for the wider church and world.

So I give thanks for our first seven years, for each of you and for your involvement in so many different ways. I give thanks to God for seeding and sustaining us. My own sense of delight in and commitment to this community and our calling remains a source of life for me. It's been a wild ride – in a contemplative kind of way – an adventure! Adventure is one of the marks of Benedictus, and it's my trust and prayer that the adventure continues for the blessing of all.

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