

Director's Report

Annual General Meeting – 8 December 2019

It feels a real milestone to be holding our first AGM here in our new worship space, having formally commenced our cooperative arrangement with the congregation of St Ninian's Uniting Church in October. This time last year, I was reporting on the conversation that had begun between our two communities, sharing my and the Benedictus Council's sense of being called to discern this co-operation as a live possibility. And now – here we are, our move accomplished and all of us starting to live into what may be in store for us in coming years.

Benedictus @ St Ninian's

Much has already happened to encourage us in our decision to relocate our activities and enter into this cooperative arrangement.

Our final service at Holy Covenant was held on Saturday October 12, and this was a lovely occasion – an honouring of our almost 8 years in that space and a fitting farewell to the Holy Covenant community whose hospitality and generosity had nurtured our early growth. Several members of the parish attended that service, including the current rector, and it felt as though we ended our time there with affection, gratitude and respect on both sides. Members of Benedictus, at the initiative and leadership of Yvonne Wisbey, had created a banner representing the Benedictus tree in the form of a visual labyrinth as our parting gift for Holy Covenant. This was very warmly received, as was their gift to us of a flowering leptospermum which is to be planted in the gardens here. I am very grateful to all who were involved in creating the banner for enabling us to present this very meaningful gift.

Then, on Saturday 19 October, over 80 people gathered for our inaugural service in this place, including about 12 members of the St Ninian's congregation. We were warmly welcomed by Jane Allen, chair of St Ninian's Council, and we confirmed to our delight that our new space is going to 'work' for us. Many members of Benedictus have commented how warm and enfolding they find it, how well we sing here, and what a great flow on to supper! I want particularly to pay tribute to Neil for his wonderful ideas for how to create the space with the use of banners, hangings, rugs and a feature wall, and his hard work in practically accomplishing these things.

Others also contributed, and I particularly thank Paul Yeoh for his expertise in selecting the keyboard and sound system and his help with installing them, Glenn Welby for securing quotes for our street signage, Karina Harris for her sourcing and purchase of glasses and trays for our suppers and for large doses of moral support, Frances Marston for her help with thinking through drapery and acoustics, Sally Bachelard for purchasing our table cloths and fabrics for liturgical hangings, and all the members of Council for their constant encouragement, wisdom and commitment to our making the transition well. As we'll hear in our Treasurer's Report, we have also been gifted with a number of very generous donations from Benedictus members to fund the expenses associated with creating the space, and we are deeply grateful for their support and belief.

Since that first service, it feels to me as though we've made a remarkably graceful transition, and excitingly our new location and street signage is enabling significant numbers of new people to discover our existence and attend our gatherings. Since early November we have also been offering daily meditation every weekday in the church, and this too has attracted a surprising number and range of people – members of our community, St Ninian's, and the wider Christian meditation community, as well as those from the neighbourhood who have seen the signs and joined in. It is no small thing to host a still space each day in the midst of life's busyness, and the early indications are that these daily meditations offer something that passers-by and people in the area want to tap into.

The co-operative arrangement with St Ninian's has also begun extremely well. There is enthusiastic good will from members of St Ninian's about our arrival, and the first meeting of our Co-operating Committee is scheduled for this coming week. Already, our two Councils have agreed to work together to develop a plan for the garden spaces with a view to further developing the site as a 'sanctuary' or 'water-hole' in the city. If any members of Benedictus are interested in being involved in an initial discussion about this work, then please be in touch with me.

I am also delighted that ideas are bubbling around for members of our community about possible new offerings and activities. The Christmas lunch initiative and ideas for retreat days are early examples, and I warmly encourage each of you to attend to your sense of what we might be called to here and to communicate your hopes, desires and needs.

Rhythm of Life

As all this has been unfolding during the past year, our established rhythm of life has continued to nourish and sustain us. Our weekly services have been well attended, and richly participated in by our musicians, supper bringers, chair movers and all of us by way of our presence and prayer. Reflection series this year have included members of the community sharing stories of Call and Response and another round of Poetica Divina, while in the Season of Creation, our theme was 'Towards Ecological Conversion'. During Lent, we focused on 'Being Reconciled' and we celebrated another beautiful Easter on the island. For me, the opportunity to explore and share these rich scriptural, theological and experiential themes is a wonderful privilege and I am deeply grateful for our community's generous listening and authentic grappling with the connections between life and faith.

Our various groups continued to meet and connect us more deeply with one another. Our L'Chaim reflective practice group (co-led by Neil and me) welcomed a number of new members this year and continues strongly, as does our Theology Reading Group which Heather and I lead together. Our Men's Circle looks likely to change shape in the coming year. Ken Vesperman, who initiated the group, has just stepped down from the role of co-ordinator and those who are continuing plan to meet following one of the weekday meditations. I thank Ken very much for his inspiration for this group, his leadership over the past two years, and for all that has been offered in this space. Southside Meditation Group, led by Peter and Elizabeth Yuile, and Spiritual Practice Group also continue strongly and we'll hear a little more about each of these shortly.

Kaleidoscope, our contemplative afternoon for primary school children, was the first of our Benedictus activities to relocate to St Ninian's and has been meeting here since early in the year. The children and their families adjusted immediately and warmly to the new space, and Karina will share more of this in a moment. One of the advantages of our move is that, at long, long last, Karina will be able to store the Kaleidoscope materials here rather than in her garage at home. Kaleidoscope has been running now for five full years, meeting every three weeks to a month. Every single time, Karina has loaded her car with up to 25 carpet squares for the children to sit on, baskets full of pebbles, marbles, candles, cloth, feathers and seed cases for creating candle mats for meditation, whole crates full of craft equipment, rugs and pillows to sit on during story time, books, music and a gong. Once she arrives, it's all unloaded, and at the end of the afternoon reloaded into the car and unloaded again at home in the garage, which freezing in winter and sweltering in summer.

This is an astonishing commitment and dedication, and it's quite apart from the inspiration and work involved in thinking of themes for each gathering, preparing relevant activities, ensuring there are enough volunteers, communicating with the Kaleidoscope families and supporting the children out of session. What goes into Kaleidoscope is simply extraordinary – it's a huge ministry, largely hidden from the rest of our Benedictus community and yet a vital part of what others value about us – and Karina, I want publicly to acknowledge and honour all that you do and are in this space.

Kalchaino, our group for young adults continued for its fourth year, also spear-headed by Karina. We've had some wonderful sessions, though the group has been a little challenged with the moving away from Canberra of one of its key members. Karina will share a little more about how we see the future of this offering in her report.

Finally, I want to mention three other events which were significant this year. I led a retreat at Galong in January, focused on the deepening of meditation practice which was attended by members of Benedictus and also drew participants from beyond. The retreat was warmly received (warm being the operative word, given the temperatures over the weekend!), and we are planning a retreat this coming January which is already well-subscribed.

For nine weeks, before and during Lent, Neil and I led the study by Celia Kemp, 'A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart'. We ran two groups, with participants from both Benedictus and St Ninian's congregations, and the opportunity to engage deeply with the 2017 Statement from the Heart by Australia's indigenous peoples (also known as 'the Uluru statement') was important and transformative.

We also had the privilege at our Palm Saturday service of launching a book by Graeme Garrett and Jan Morgan, *On the Edge: A-Way with the Ocean*, and then hosting their workshop entitled '*... and behold it was very good*': *Praying in Creation*. As issues of care for creation become ever more urgent, it was good to be able to share this profound time with them.

Benedictus @ Large

I'll conclude my report this year with a brief account of my involvement in the wider Christian Meditation Community. In August this year, I gave the John Main Seminar in Squamish, near Vancouver, on the theme of 'A Contemplative Christianity for Our Time'. The John Main Seminar is the annual international gathering of the World

Community for Christian Meditation, and it was a significant honour to be invited to give these talks. Neil and I shared the experience together which was wonderful and the talks themselves seemed to resonate strongly for participants. They are to be published as a book by Medio Media, the publishing arm of the WCCM, and should be available in the first half of next year.

I've also been asked by Father Laurence, Director of the WCCM, to work with him as a mentor in a new formation program for senior teachers in the World Community and to write the story of Benedictus for the WCCM's new online journal. We discovered in Canada that there continues to be interest from around the world in what we are doing and discovering as an ecumenical, contemplative community, and it's exciting to be able to share our work.

I've also had chapters published in two books this year. The first book, called *Contemplation and Community: A Gathering of Fresh Voices for a Living Tradition*, has drawn on contributions from those who gathered at Snowmass a couple of years ago – my chapter is called 'The Value of Learning Contemplation in Community'. The second book, a festschrift for philosopher Cora Diamond, is called *Morality in a Realistic Spirit*, and my chapter is called 'The Importance of Being Fully Human: Transformation, Contemplation and Ethics'. It feels good to keep connected to these wider conversations, and to contribute what we can from our own experience.

Along with many of you, I am increasingly aware of the critical nature of our times. As the ecological crisis deepens and as threats to democratic governance and the common weal intensify, so the necessity for responses grounded in contemplative consciousness also deepens. We seek to practice stillness and silence not so as to escape from the problems of the world, but so as to tap in again and again to the deep source of our life, which Jesus called living water. In this way, we are steadied and empowered to go into our particular vocations and life circumstances in a spirit of simplicity, truth-telling and non-anxious presence. My hope is that this is the spirit that continues to infuse our life here, for the blessing of many.

Sarah Bachelard
Director
Benedictus Contemplative Church
7 December 2019