

Director's Report

Annual General Meeting – 12 December 2020

God give us rain when we expect sun.
Give us music when we expect trouble.
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
God play with us, turn us sideways and around. Amen

Michael Leunig's whimsical prayer seems particularly apt for the year we've just shared. Here at Benedictus, we expected to enjoy more fully inhabiting our new location here in Lyneham. What we were given was months of virtual church, gathering via Zoom to form a vastly expanded non-local community. We expected to be able to offer groups and retreats based in this place, and to meditate twice daily in the church. What we were given was a totally new form of offering – a daily meditation online at 5.30pm, regularly attended by over 40 people. Along with the rest of the world, here at Benedictus we have been turned sideways and around, and we are still coming to grips with the significance of what has happened, discovering and engaging its gifts.

A Brief Review

If I look back 12 months, we were just beginning to settle into our new relationship with the congregation of St Ninian's. We had begun our Saturday services here in the hall, Kaleidoscope afternoons for children and Kalchaino gatherings for young adults had been held here for some time, and new offerings such as the midday meditation and SpiritArt exploring the connection between spirituality and creativity had begun.

Then, in January, came the fires – and as Canberra was blanketed by smoke and oppressive heat, our summer gatherings provided a place where people came to pray and share their grief as disaster unfolded around our country. Thanks to a member of our community involved in disaster response and the bushfire recovery, we were able to contribute directly to the relief effort – and many of you donated vast numbers of rakes and shovels, emergency lights, buckets and wheelbarrows which were driven down to the community of Quaama on the south coast to help equip that village for clearing the rubble in the aftermath.

By February, the smoke had cleared and it seemed as though things were back on a slightly more even keel (the massive hail storm notwithstanding!). There'd been rain and the relief of the drought breaking. Then word of a new virus in China began to filter through. At our Benedictus Council meeting at the beginning of March, a question was raised about its possible implications for us and for our way of gathering. I confess to thinking this seemed a bit over the top – surely it wouldn't come to that?! But within three weeks, our Saturday service and almost everything else had moved to Zoom and there we remained, all over Easter and for the next seven months. Yet, the extraordinary thing is that rather than diminish or stifle the life of our community, those months have opened up for us a whole new range of possibilities – new members joining us from most states in Australia, and from around the world – South Africa, England, Ireland, New Zealand. So much so, that once it became possible to resume our in-person gatherings in October it was clear that the Zoom service had become permanent feature of Benedictus.

So – where are we now?

Despite the challenges of the year, most of our existing groups found ways to adapt and continue, being sources of growth and connection for participants. Our L'Chaim reflective practice group (co-led by Neil and me) suspended during the Covid shut-down, but resumed physical meetings in July. Members of the group continue to value the opportunity to reflect more deeply on aspects of their experience so as to engage life's challenges in more fruitful and liberating ways. Spiritual Practice Group met through the middle of the year on Zoom and was an important source of connection and solace for members. We resumed physical meetings in October, with the final meeting of this year planned for Saturday. Theology Reading Group (co-led by Heather Thomson and me) met took relatively seamlessly to the Zoom format and may continue using that platform at least some of the time next year. Southside Meditation Group, led by Peter and Elizabeth Yuile, continued to meet through the year, via Zoom. The Group enjoyed the fortnightly opportunity to meditate and to connect with one another. Bill Huff-Johnston was a founding member of what he used to call euphemistically, 'Southside Benedictus', and the Group miss deeply his enthusiastic and encouraging presence. In November, the Group decided to take a recess, and will look to resume in the new year.

Kaleidoscope, our contemplative afternoon for primary school children led by Karina Harris, suspended during the Covid shutdown – holding a beautiful gathering under the oak tree at St Ninian's just before Easter to prepare the children for the time apart. We resumed physical gatherings in the October school holidays, and in the months between, Karina maintained the Kaleidoscope blog with suggestions for

the children about ways of being ‘together at a distance’ and of maintaining spirits in difficult times. Karina will share more of this in a moment. Kalchaino, our group for young adults, met once before the shut down and then once on Zoom. The Zoom platform was not really conducive for this group, and some of its members are also moving into a different stage of their lives. It seemed right to suspend this offering, at least for now, but there is the possibility of regathering if that seems appropriate at any point.

I mentioned already SpiritArt – a gathering led by Helen Druett to explore the connection between spirituality and creativity. This is a group requiring hands on participation and so has not met since the shutdown, but I hope it may resume in the coming year! And finally, two new ways of gathering have begun since November. A Benedictus Walking Group led by Annie Patterson and Rebecca Perry – to enthusiastic acclaim by those who have so far enjoyed two contemplative walks in beautiful settings around Canberra. And a Liturgy Group led by Heather Thomson which has been writing wonderfully creative and innovative liturgies for our Advent services.

In the context of our groups, I want finally to mention our musicians, who have worked so hard over the year to contribute music in our new environment. Zoom does not combine well with live music, though things are improving on the platform. Frances and Russell Marston, Paul Yeoh, Glenn Welby, Richard Wigley and Neil all spent many hours trying to find ways of enabling us to offer music live again with so far not a result that we are comfortable with. In the meantime, they have also pre-recorded music (as have Walsa Fox and Karina Harris), and it has been wonderful to continue even to a limited extent our tradition of congregational music. I know that many of you have also appreciated the amazing work Neil has done to select a range of music for our Zoom services such that our repertoire has been considerably expanded! I want also to thank especially Glenn for the huge amount of work he did at the beginning of our Zoom adventure to set us up and help me learn the ropes, as well as Callum Dawson and Helen Travers who managed the hosting of the Zoom only services. And a huge gratitude to Paul who has managed the sound and transmission every week for our hybrid gatherings.

The View from Here

In a reflection three weeks ago,¹ I said that when Benedictus moved to St Ninian’s last year, the image that animated our vision was of an outback waterhole. We spoke of our desire to become a place of refreshment and replenishment, an open

¹ ‘One Love: Practising Five Marks’.

sanctuary in the midst of our city. This year has shown us that the ‘waterhole’ may offer refreshment more widely afield than that – and that what flows from here may make a contribution to communities around our country and even around the world.

As we emerge from being consumed by Covid, as we contemplate what might be possible in the coming year, this promise of the waterhole still resonates deeply and I think can help orient us to our calling and joy. One physical expression of this waterhole vision is beginning to be realised – the garden project we are undertaking with the congregation of St Ninian’s is well underway. We have received the final plans from our Landscape Architect, and last Monday we began planting the biodiversity corridor that runs along the border of the property. In coming weeks, we hope to secure quotations for further work in the garden facing the hall. This will involve the installation of paths, a (small) waterhole (or water feature) and benches where people can sit and rest. If anyone would like to get involved in this project, please let me know!

Other expressions of the waterhole are emerging or perhaps still forming in the wings ... both in Canberra and elsewhere, in your dreams and mine, in your noticings about the needs of the people or the communities around you and your desire to offer something of the gift and fruit of our contemplative practice. What excites me is the thought that wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, we are invited to be channels of living water and that as we join together we can help each other discern what is ours to be and to offer for the life of the world. It is for me an extraordinary privilege to be part of this adventure with you – as we seek to be ever responsive to God ‘playing with us, turning us sideways and around’.

Sarah Bachelard

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Benedictus Contemplative Church

12 December 2020