



Director's Report Annual General Meeting – 11 December 2021

Recently I was privileged to be part of the dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Father Laurence Freeman on the theme, 'Unified Consciousness: One Mind One Heart'. In this dialogue, the Dalai Lama returned many times to the theme of 'warm-heartedness'. The modern world, he said, has lost touch with the 'heart', the deep centre of human being. We've privileged a partial, purely cognitive, way of knowing and created a busy and competitive culture that's inhospitable to the heart's gentle spaciousness. What's urgently needed, therefore, is a universal, non-sectarian education of the 'heart'. This is a deeper contemplative way of knowing and being that leads to compassion, connection and communion with the whole.

In the light of this vision, I've been reflecting on our Benedictus community, and on the ways I believe we're called to be and become 'a community of the heart'. A community where each of us is encouraged to awaken and connect to our own depths and so to encounter the heart of God; a community which creates space to recognise and nurture the heart of others; a community from which the heart's love and wisdom might flow as gift to the world around. In my report this year, I want to highlight how I see this happening in our life together and invite you to reflect on your part in it.

A Community of the Heart

It's an extraordinary feature of the past two years that, rather than contracting or diminishing because of extended Covid lockdowns, Benedictus has expanded – not only in terms of the size of our community, but also in terms of the richness and variety of the ways we gather and create spaces of meeting.

Our weekly Saturday service, weekday lunch time meditation on the ground and daily evening meditation on Zoom are all contexts we're encouraged to deepen our contemplative journey to the heart. It's wonderful to see so many participating in these offerings and sharing in leadership to enable them. I want particularly to acknowledge our many meditation leaders, our wonderful musicians – with special thanks to Richard for coordinating the music roster, and our gifted Liturgy group (who include Sarah writing prayers for us from London, as well as Jenny, Heather and Meryl in Canberra). I am grateful beyond words for Paul and Neil who almost every week manage the sound and technical production of our hybrid Saturday services,

and I also want especially to thank Jill and Kelli for their coordination of supper after these gatherings. Prior to this year our supper arrangements had been reasonably ad hoc, and relied on a small-ish group (and often my Mum) to organise and bring supper on a regular basis. This has been a wonderful ministry over many years for which I am deeply grateful, but given the growth in the community, the time had come for a bit more of a system as well as financial support. Jill was our inaugural supper coordinator and Kelli is now continuing in that role, and we are blessed by their generosity and hospitality, and for all that our suppers enable by way of conversation, welcome and friendship in our community.

As well as these gatherings for worship, we share our journeys to the heart in a variety of smaller groups. This year, our long-standing ***Spiritual Practice Group***, ***Theology Reading Group***, ***Benedictus Walking Group*** and ***L'Chaim reflective practice groups*** all continued, though some were more affected than others by the Canberra lockdown. These groups offer opportunities for members to befriend and share with each other, to reflect on and explore experience and (in the words of poet John O'Donohue) to help us discover 'more of our hidden life and the urgencies that deserve to claim us'.

Several newer groups initiated by members of the community have also emerged in the past 12 months. Valerie coordinates ***Fellowship Through Books*** which meets every two months with participants attending both on the ground and on Zoom to discuss books from a range of writers and spiritual traditions; Valerie also began hosting the ***Zoom Sandwich*** on Wednesday and Friday lunchtimes during lockdown. This gentle gathering was very much appreciated by those who attended, and though we've emerged from lockdown, Zoom Sandwich continues to meet on Fridays by popular demand. Anyone is welcome to pop in, and I thank Valerie for all she's brought to us by initiating these groups.

Our Zoom community has also been exploring a range of new ways to connect. As well as the encouragement and friendship being shared between individual members, there are the 'after parties' on Friday and Saturday evenings, an international ***Zoom home group*** and a fortnightly Zoom group sharing ***Music and Poetry***. In all these initiatives, we've been hugely blessed by the leadership of Heather Olley who's taken a key role in coordinating and enabling the Zoom community, including training many of our online meditation leaders. Heather will share something of these gatherings in a moment, but here let me thank her for her huge contribution to this aspect of our life together. Another emergence from our Zoom community is what we're calling ***The Melbourne Chapter*** which gathers monthly to share lunch and conversation as an 'on the ground' Benedictus group in

Melbourne, and which may form a model for 'chapters' in other places in due course!

And as well as these regular groups, there have been other offerings to nourish the heart during this year. Neil and I facilitated a series of four Spirit of the Seasons Circle of Trust® retreats, which were attended by people from Benedictus, St Ninian's and the wider community; Deb facilitated a wonderful and illuminating workshop, 'Recognising Bias', which likewise attracted a range of participants. Sue coordinated an afternoon of making desert peas cut from red felt, to support Hazel Davies' work facilitating remembrance of Australia's frontier conflicts, and sharing stories between First Nations and other Australians. Sue is also coordinating the community Christmas lunch again this year. These events model what I hope (post-Covid) might grow into a larger program of retreats, community days and workshops.

I've said that a community of the heart involves practices and relationships that encourage each of us to awaken and be more deeply reconciled. It's also a community from which the heart's love and wisdom might flow to the world around, opening a sense of spaciousness and possibility for others. For many years, a primary expression of this outflow from Benedictus has been ***Kaleidoscope – quiet afternoons for primary aged children***. Created and led by Karina, Kaleidoscope continued its extraordinary ministry this year to around 35 families (with up to 25 children attending on any given afternoon). Although we were unable to gather during lockdown, Karina continued to be in contact with children and their families over this time, holding online sessions during the school holidays, and delivering craft packs as well as groceries to give families a helping hand and a sense of being cared for. Karina will share more of Kaleidoscope in a moment, but I want to thank her once again for this amazing expression of the contemplative heart of love for the world.

Two other small 'outflows' have begun this year. Chris, Mary and Stefan began offering an ***11th Step Meditation Group***. Meditation is the 11th step of 12-step programs (such as Al Anon and AA), but often there's little context for participants in these programs to learn and practice meditation with others. Though this group is not limited to 12-step participants, it was offered intentionally with the needs of this cohort in mind. Lockdown and other circumstances made it difficult to continue the group through the middle of the year and it is suspended at present; we will explore whether it can be re-commenced next year. And finally, Deb, Peter and I have begun what we're calling ***Waterhole – a reflective pause for senior leaders***, which invites those in senior leadership roles in the public service, university and non-profit organisations, to gather with peers for reflection, conversation and meditation. There is great need for those in such roles to reconnect body, mind and spirit, and

we hope these gatherings may offer refreshment and an invitation to care for and bring the heart into difficult contexts.

Tending the Heart

So – such a rich and energising sense of unfolding, blossoming! When we resume gathering in February next year, Benedictus will celebrate its 10th anniversary. As you know, we are embarking on an exciting new chapter with two part-time additions to our paid ministry team. Reverend Susanna Pain will join us as Senior Associate – Community, Spiritual Care and the Arts, and Melissa Hando will be working as administrative assistant. I am delighted at the prospect of working with Susanna and Melissa, and at how their gifts will expand the possibilities of our life together and our contribution more broadly. We will be commissioning Susanna and Melissa at our Set Pools of Silence service, and I very much look forward to celebrating this milestone in our common life with you.

For now, let me conclude by inviting each of you to reflect on your part in the life of Benedictus. When St Paul wrote to the young Christian community at Corinth, he drew on the metaphor of the body to speak of the relationship of individual members to the whole. There is one body, he said, made up of many members. Each member has their own distinctive gifts, commitments and sense of call. My deepest hope is that belonging to this community enables each of us to express and live out our individual callings, struggles and joys in fuller and deeper ways. At the same time, we are more than a conglomeration of individuals. Together we form a distinct sociality, an identifiable community – ‘the body of Christ’ Paul called it. We not only have our vocations, responsibilities and hopes as individuals, but we share a vocation with each other to create space for the heart. To welcome the heart, nourish the heart, let the heart ‘create for us’ (as Leunig says).

As we accept this vocation, some of us are drawn to offer gifts that come explicitly from this community in service of others – Kaleidoscope, Waterhole, meditation gatherings and the like. Others of us will offer gifts from this space of the heart in ways less visibly associated with Benedictus – in our families, workplaces, volunteering, friendships. But whatever gifts are ours to offer for the life of the world, I would love to see a deepening of our imaginative sense that we are doing this together, that it’s ‘us’ giving; I’d love us to remember that we are ‘members of one another’ and seek to support one another in living out this vocation. In practice, this means being mindful of those who are leading some of our groups and ‘outflows’ – showing interest, asking how it’s going, remembering to encourage because this is an offering from us all. It means getting to know each other better, listening, looking to support one another in bringing the heart’s energies into

everything we do. In the new year, we'll be creating opportunities to enable more sharing of stories so we do get to know each other better, and discover more of who we are. And I hope these are opportunities you will take up and value.

Two final thank yous. Our Benedictus Council has been a source of support and wisdom for me this year, and has worked hard to take major decisions concerning our new appointments especially. I thank them all – Andrew, Annie, Glenn, Heather, Melissa, Paul and Pauline – and I am very happy to let you know that all current Council members will continue next year. I also want to thank Neil. You can imagine, I'm sure, how much Neil gives Benedictus – meeting people for conversation, co-leading L'Chaim and retreats, moving chairs and endlessly creating spaces, discovering music and other resources, supporting me in everything. But this year particularly, I want to acknowledge the significance of Neil's part in enabling our life in his capacity as minister of the St Ninian's congregation over the past 3 years.

So much of the goodness of the relationship between our two communities, the workability of our worship space and our sense of possibility here, is a function of Neil's vision and hard work, his fostering of St Ninian's sense of regard, connection and care for Benedictus. Much of this has not been visible to you, but he has been vital in helping us be at home here and in putting flesh on our commitment to a cooperative, mutually life-giving sharing of this site. Neil finishes up his ministry at St Ninian's in mid-January and so I wanted formally to acknowledge the gift he has been to me and to all of us in this, and to give you the opportunity to acknowledge it too.

So, let us be encouraged by the life we share, let us commit anew to being 'members one of another', and to offering the gift of warm-heartedness, the heart of God, in our world.

With my love and blessing,
Sarah