

Director's Report

Annual General Meeting – 10 December 2022

For some years now, we have been drawing on the image of the waterhole to help us imagine the vocation of the Benedictus community and the nature of our relationships with each other and the wider world. We've spoken of the 'waterhole' as a place of refreshment and replenishment; of the way the water in centre connects to the life around – streams flowing in and flowing out. This year, it seems to me, we've continued to realise this vision, discovering more fully the resource we are and are called to be.

At the Waterhole

Partly, this has involved attending to what's already here. Our Lenten reflection series, called 'At the Waterhole', gave us the opportunity to hear stories of those with whom we share this community, this life. We had the great privilege of hearing from Ros from Melbourne, Sarah from London, and Glenn and Will from Canberra, about their life journeys and how their connections to Benedictus have nourished them. These reflections were extraordinarily rich and inspiring, and helped us become present to the mystery of every person here.

We then gathered for two **Community Days** – one on site and one on Zoom – generously facilitated by Deb May and Susanna Pain. We shared more of our stories and how we each saw ourselves in relation to this ecosystem – some saw themselves as migratory birds flying in and out, someone else was a well-camouflaged lizard, others were trees rooted at waters' edge. We sought to listen to what was emerging as we became present to the possibilities of our belonging here together. At both community days, we only scratched the surface – there was so much more we could have shared – but the level of participation in these offerings was deeply encouraging, and there was clear energy for more opportunities to get to know each other.

One response that unfolded directly from these Community Days was a regular gathering for soup after meditation on Tuesday lunch times. **Tuesday Soup** was originally intended as a Winter offering but, due to popular demand, we are still going – we'll share our last lunch for the year this coming week! This has been a lovely conversational time, with attendance varying between about 8 and 16 people – with a mixture of Benedictus and St Ninian's folk attending. A second response has

been to explore the possibilities of a social media platform which would enable Benedictus members to communicate directly with each other, share reflections, stories and activities – and I'll say more of this a little later!

Throughout this year, we have continued to gather in a whole range of ways and welcomed many to join our common life. Our weekly **Saturday service** continues in hybrid form – with the addition of a permanent screen in the hall helping us to experience the connection between our vibrant, committed Zoom community and those who attend on the ground in Canberra. Paul Yeoh was an invaluable source of advice for this purchase, and has also supplied as a gift much of the equipment we now use each week – camera, computer and cables. **Online evening meditation** continues to thrive with regular daily attendance of between 60 and 70 people, who are located all around Australia and beyond. **Online morning meditation**, brought to us by Susanna, is also drawing increasing numbers. Thanks largely to Heather Olley who instigated and usually hosts the regular Zoom after party on Saturday nights and virtual 'Friday drinks' after meditation, there has emerged a profound sense of community among the 'Zoomers' which is reflected in such things as very natural expressions of pastoral care, the strengthening of the **Melbourne chapter**, the **international Zoom home group** and the **Zoom Music & Poetry sessions**.

As ever, I am deeply grateful to all who enable these gatherings for worship, prayer and reflection: our many meditation leaders, our wonderful musicians – with special thanks to Richard Wigley for coordinating the music roster, and our Liturgy group – Jenny Stewart, Heather Thomson, Meryl Turner and Sarah Legrand. Paul Yeoh, Neil and Alex Millar and (now) Heather Olley do us an extraordinary service by looking after the sound and technical production of our hybrid Saturday services each week, while Kelli Hughes and all who volunteer to help with supper offer the kind of gracious hospitality that nurtures connection and conversation. Thank you all.

I also want to acknowledge those who coordinate and participate in the long-standing groups that give colour, texture and points of access to the Benedictus waterhole – **Spiritual Practice Group, Fellowship Through Books, Theology Reading Group, Benedictus Walking Group** and **L'Chaim reflective practice groups**. There are people for whom these smaller groups are their experience of Benedictus – we have members of Theology Reading Group and L'Chaim, for example, who don't participate in anything else, but for whom these groups are important sources of nourishment in their lives. It's the same with our Kaleidoscope families.

Kaleidoscope is our offering of quiet afternoons for primary-aged children. Created and led by Karina Harris, Kaleidoscope is nearly 8 years old and is offered every three to four weeks on Sunday afternoons. This year, we rarely had fewer than 20 children at any one time and, during the course of the year, 12 new children

participated. In fact, one week there were 7 new children in attendance. As well as their hands being traced on the Kaleidoscope mat, each new attendee was given a little bag to take home with a tea light and candle mat, and some meditation pebbles. 'I can't wait to go home to meditate', was the response of one eight year-old after her first experience – which I know is what all of you say too!! One of the very special features of Kaleidoscope is that it not only nourishes the children who come, but helps to create a little ease and space in the difficult circumstances that some of the families are facing: for example, parents in two different families having cancer treatment, who so appreciate that their children are being offered a non-anxious afternoon where they can feel their lives held in God's love. I am deeply grateful to Karina for her unwavering faithfulness to this ministry to children and families – and to her regular and occasional helpers. It would be great to widen the pool of regular support on Kaleidoscope afternoons, so please let me know if you'd like to know more.

The major new feature of our life together this year has been the advent of Susanna in the role of Senior Associate: Spirituality, Community and the Arts. Susanna, together with Nikolai Blaskow, has initiated a range of wonderful offerings that have touched many different people. She will be sharing more of her experience among us in a moment, but I want to acknowledge how lovely it has been for me this year to share this ministry with Susanna and to work together in service of encouraging our community and deepening our prayer. Susanna has brought a whole new dimension to our life with offerings such as the ***Retreat in Daily Life, quiet afternoons and evenings with the labyrinth*** both on the ground and on Zoom, the ***Simply Alive series*** in Spring, a ***poetry workshop*** with John and Jane Foulcher and the ***retreat in Alice Springs***. Nikolai is in the process of leading a second Zoom ***discussion series based on the writing of James Alison***, and has also begun a ***philosophy discussion group*** with some of our younger Benedictus members.

Thanks to Susanna's initiative, we've also recently had an afternoon with the ***Southside members of Benedictus*** in Canberra, which next year will become a self-organising regular monthly gathering; and during the winter, we hosted a series of three ***Film and Spirituality nights*** showing the films of David Gulpilil and Rolf de Heer. While Neil and I were away in August/September, Susanna led and held the space for our regular gatherings while also enabling other members of the community to share their gifts in preaching and liturgy through a series of special reflections for Refugee Sunday and the Season of Creation. Susanna has been a great blessing to our community, and we thank you for all you are bringing!

Other expressions of the inflow and outflow from our waterhole this year have included a visit from Tasmanian musician and Benedictus member, John

Coleman, who gifted us with a wonderful concert and a separate time with the Benedictus musicians. We've hosted two book launches – Michael Wood's, *Practicing Peace*, and Noel Davis's posthumously published collection of poems, *The Joy of Living our Heart's Knowing and Imagining*. Susanna and I led a **Contemplative Walk on Country** along Sullivan's Creek as the culmination of my involvement with the Following Sullivan's: Learning Country project. This has drawn us into connection with a wider community conversation about Canberra's waterways and indigenous knowledges, which we hope continues next year.

I know it sounds like a lot of activity for a contemplative church – but each offering is an opening. Not everyone is involved in everything – but different offerings speak to different thirsts, and our hope is that at the waterhole everyone may find spaces to be and be replenished, so as to share what is theirs to give to the whole. At the heart of it all remains our regular rhythm of meditation – morning, lunch time and evening – and from this still centre, we pray that living water flows.

Resourcing Others

In the last part of my report, I want to share some of the ways that Benedictus is being looked to as a resource for other communities. Over the years, I've been approached by various people exploring the possibility of contemplative church in their contexts and interested to learn from our experience. We've shared our liturgy for use in contemplative services in Perth and Brisbane. Recently, these inquiries seem to be gathering pace. Just in the past few months, I've had conversations with two school chaplains – one from Canberra and one from Maui (Hawaii) – each asking to talk about the possibility of contemplative worship and formation in their school contexts. I've been contacted by a young Anglican ordinand in London and an Irish Catholic priest in Dublin each wanting to learn from Benedictus what a contemplative parish might look like, and by a Lutheran pastor in Pennsylvania who reads our reflections and is seeking a way through the religious polarisation in the United States.

There's a sense in which we seem to have a part to play in the emergence of new forms of contemplative Christianity and community. And, interestingly, I've just been invited by the ACT Council of Churches to be the preacher at the service for the Opening of the Commonwealth Parliament in February next year. I have also been invited by the Religion & Literature Department of Brigham Young University in Utah to spend a week with them in March next year – delivering a lecture and then leading a contemplative retreat for the dozen Latter-day Saint scholars who are participating in the 'Seek This Jesus' Christology Initiative!

As I've been discerning my own part in this, I am clear that Benedictus continues to be the heart of my vocation and I feel so privileged and happy to participate in this contemplative emergence here and with you. At the same time and as part of this ongoing commitment, I have a sense that after 11 years, I am in need of some sabbatical time. I'd like to share with others who are working in this space, to reflect and write, and to go deeper in prayer by undertaking a longer retreat. The Benedictus Council, Neil, Susanna and I have been discerning this for several months, and I wanted to let you know that Neil and I are planning a three-month sabbatical from the third week of March to about the third week of June next year. As part of the sabbatical, I have accepted the invitation to visit Brigham Young and to visit with the parish in Dublin; I've also been asked by Laurence Freeman to do a week's residency and lead a weekend retreat at Bonnevaux, and will follow this time with a personal 30-day silent retreat, also at Bonnevaux.

I am very grateful to the Council and to Neil, Susanna and Nikolai for their support in this undertaking, and over the next few months we'll be making arrangements and having conversations that I hope will build our community's holding of our shared life. I know I will miss you very much, but I also trust that as we seek to keep responding to the call on our lives – together and apart – we are faithfully becoming who we are to be for each other and for our world.

Conclusion

In my Easter reflection this year, I said that in certain indigenous languages, the word 'bay' (as in Bateman's Bay, the Bay of Biscay) is not a noun, as it is in English, but a verb. In English, we think of a bay as a thing, an observable entity – there it is, that's Bateman's Bay. But in a language where the word for 'bay' is a verb, then what's named is not so much a fixed geographical location, as a vast set of interrelated existences and actions that constitute the being of bay and give rise to its unfolding life.

After Easter, Frances Marston remarked that 'waterhole' can be understood in the same kind of way. A waterhole is a place, and here at St Ninian's our stunning new water-fall and stream, manifest our waterhole vision in the most beautiful way. For this, we owe a special debt of gratitude to the gardening group led by members of St Ninian's – Bill and Mary Bush, Marion McConnell and Beth Roberts – and the financial commitment of the St Ninian's congregation. A waterhole is a place – and we hope that this place invites people to come, linger, rest awhile. *And* a waterhole is a verb – it is the relationships and actions and forms of life that constitute its being. In the case of Benedictus, these relationships and forms of life cross continents and timezones – and emerge in surprising and even hidden ways into the

life of the world. What a joy it is to be planted in this ecology of prayer and loving service with you! May we continue to deepen our belonging and care for one another; and as we find ourselves replenished and renewed, may our capacity to love and serve be deepened and expanded. Out of the abundance of the heart, let life and goodness flow.

With my love and blessing,
Sarah