



Director's Report Annual General Meeting – 9 December 2023

One of Neil's and my favourite biblical passages is the creation story in Genesis 1. As well as the extraordinary beauty of its poetry, what we love about this text is the insight it offers into the creative process itself.

Creation is imagined to begin with God calling certain kinds of space to be. 'In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"'. In the story, the separation of light from dark, generates the spaces of Day and Night. On the next 'day', the separation of waters above and below the earth, generates the space of Sky; and the gathering of waters under the Sky, distinguishes dry land from sea. Reflecting on this story at our Benedictus Creative Arts retreat in October, Neil said that in mediaeval biblical commentary, these first three days of creation were known as the *opus distinctionis* – the work of distinguishing, separating and thus creating space.

The next three days were known as the *opus ornatus*. Once the earth, sky and sea spaces are generated, then God invites each one to put forth life – plants yielding their seed, living creatures of every kind, the lights in the sky, sea monsters and the fish with which the waters swarm. And what's striking about this *opus ornatus*, this the process of embellishing, decorating or filling the earth, is it's an emergent, self-generating dynamic. God isn't portrayed as creating each individual creature and then sticking them in the spaces – like a child playing with a dollhouse. Rather, the spaces themselves are given freedom to generate new life: 'let the earth bring forth vegetation ...', and so forth. And, we're told, God saw that it was good.

I find this story a profound and helpful way of conceiving my experience of Benedictus in recent years. We began twelve years ago by creating certain spaces, ways of gathering that caused us to be a distinctive form of community. First came the space of our weekly Saturday service with silent meditation at its heart; next came some of our earliest small groups and opportunities to meet and share. These were spaces whose character and possibilities were generated by our core commitment to contemplative presence and listening, and were further defined by

the five marks of Benedictus – hospitality, silence, discernment, reconciliation and adventure.

It wasn't too long before these spaces began to generate more spaces and more life. Within the first two or three years, there emerged Kaleidoscope – a regular quiet afternoon for primary aged children, as well as groups gathering to reflect on theology, spiritual practice and lived experience. Life begets life, and in recent years our Benedictus offerings have continued to multiply. They emerge from many different points in the community, initiated and led by you and I am astonished when I look now at the myriad expressions of our core commitments! There's daily online meditation morning and evening, an international Zoom home group, Zoom sandwich on Fridays and Zoom Music & Poetry sessions fortnightly on Thursdays. There are semi-regular face to face gatherings of Benedictus members in Victoria and emerging in Hobart; there's Fellowship through Books, the Benedictus Walking Group, a liturgy group, Tuesday lunch, regular gatherings of musicians preparing for our services, and the dedicated team that brings, serves and washes up after supper every week. There's a Benedictus contemplative photography group, a philosophy group for younger adults and two new continuing groups this year – Southside Benedictus and the Zoom women's 'Check-in' group, both of which we'll hear from in a moment.

And as well as these ongoing gatherings, we have enjoyed a blossoming of occasional offerings and short series. This year they have included a Chant workshop, Lent and Advent study series, opportunities to walk the labyrinth online and on the ground, two book launches, the Open Day and Blessing of the Gardens shared with St Ninian's, four 'Talking About the Voice' sessions to facilitate discussion of questions relating to this year's Referendum, and a discussion group 'Talking about God and Life'. We were nourished by guest preaching from Celia Kemp and members of our community, lectures by James Alison and Nikolai Blaskow; and many of you drew deep sustenance from Simply Alive in January, the Intensive Journal Workshop with Kate Scholl in March, the Retreat in Daily Life after Easter, the 12-week series exploring the Artists' Rule during winter, Susanna's 'Embodied Listening' retreat in Alice Springs, the Creative Arts Retreat in October with special guest John Coleman and most recently, the series 'This Mortal Frame: Sharing the Journey of Ageing'. Susanna will share more about some of these offerings in a moment. And there are always more ideas emerging – recently, I've heard from community members wondering about the possibility of a contemplative bible study, something on contemplative parenting and grand-parenting, something on soul in the workplace.

Reflecting on the extraordinary generativity of our Benedictus waterhole recently, the Benedictus Council noted a number of things. We affirmed that everything offered is an invitation to transforming encounter. Everything is in service of deepening our availability to receive and communicate the love of God in the midst of daily life. This transforming encounter happens as we pray together, as we engage with the truth of our own lives and the reality of our world, drawing on the riches of Scripture and tradition, and truly meeting each other, learning to be a community of presence and care. Our commitment is to create spaces and patterns of relationship that enable God's creative purposes to be more fully realised in us and for the world.

As part of this commitment, the Council affirmed three things in particular. First, although there's a sense in which Benedictus is getting 'busier' and offering more things, the heart of our vocation remains the same. We are a community of prayer, seeking to listen deeply and respond generously to the living God, grounding all that we do and are in this reality. For me, the gift of sabbatical time this year – especially the opportunity to walk pilgrimage and undertake a 30-day silent retreat – was an expression of our community's commitment to this vocation. I am so grateful to you, to our Council and Susanna and Nikolai for unhesitatingly supporting and enabling Neil and me to take this time apart, for your understanding that such times of retreat are integral to deepening faithfulness and availability.

In the coming year, as well as our regular times of meditation and worship, there will be a number of such retreat opportunities for members of Benedictus. We are planning a five-day silent retreat in Lent, the retreat in Alice Springs, the Creative Arts Retreat, and likely (in the second half of the year) another Retreat in Daily Life. These longer, focused times can be profoundly transformative, but they also cost money. As we want any member of Benedictus to be able to enjoy and be expanded by these opportunities, the Council is committing \$10, 000 in next year's budget for 'fee support' so that those with fewer financial means are not excluded. We are also continuing to create the physical space of prayer at our waterhole. This year, Susanna has led a dedicated group which has been working towards creating the labyrinth here in the grounds of St Ninian's. A design and location has been agreed, research into materials and involvement of (mainly volunteer) labour organised, and our plan is that the labyrinth will be built in March 2024 in time to be dedicated on the weekend of Palm Sunday. We will shortly be inviting financial contributions to this project to help cover the costs of digging equipment, materials and signage – and any help you can give will be gratefully received!

A last thing to say under this heading – staying true to the heart of our vocation – is that Council affirmed the significance of dedicating periods where there is ‘less’ on, times of Sabbath and slowing. In the coming year, we are proposing that January and July be months of ‘Sabbath’. In practice, this means that our Saturday services will be online only – which gives us the joy of being all together in one space, and also gives our musicians and sound technicians a break. It means that we will minimise other activities and offerings in those months – so that we can rest, slow, pray and listen together, allowing for perhaps other conversations to emerge. This feels to me like quite a radical thing to try – part of our commitment to ‘adventure’ – and it will be good to reflect together how we find this, and whether it is something we want to institute as part of our yearly rhythm.

Second, as our community grows and as leadership is exercised by a larger number of people, the Council is aware of the need to put sufficient scaffolding in place to ensure we remain a trustworthy and accountable space. We don’t want to become an ‘institution’ or overly bureaucratic, but as we invite people to participate in our many offerings, we are responsible for being trustworthy. In recent years, this strengthening of our ‘scaffolding’ has occurred in relation to our financial reporting and accounting – and I am grateful beyond measure to our Treasurer, Andrew Grimm, for his extraordinary dedication to this part of our life.

This year, thanks especially to Pauline Ridge and Heather Olley, we have revised and expanded the Reportable Conduct Policy and Procedure that has to do with child safety within organisations in the ACT, including religious organisations. It is part of our legal obligation to have such a policy. You will find a link to the policy on our website on the Children’s Page, and it is made available to parents whose children attend Kaleidoscope. In the coming year, thanks again to Pauline and a small team she is assembling, we will develop a more formalised Code of Conduct for leaders of our various groups. Again – this is not because we wish to be overly bureaucratic or prescriptive, but because it is important to articulate how the core commitments of Benedictus shape our ways of being and learning together. It will support our leaders, keep us responsible, and help to ensure that participants both in-person and online find their involvement in any Benedictus offering to be nurturing and life-giving.

Third and finally, with such a rich community life, some newer members have commented they find it hard to discover all that’s here, and others have said they’d like to learn more of what happens in the different spaces. Earlier this year, we hosted two Welcome to Newcomer sessions, online and in-person, which

participants enjoyed and found helpful. We plan to do this again a couple of times next year as a way of inviting people to explore how they might like to belong and contribute. We also want to make it easier to share in what's happening in the community. As you might remember, last year we were exploring the possibility of using the social media platform 'Slack' as a sharing space, but for a few reasons that did not seem the right approach for us. I'm delighted to let you know that we have instead developed our own interactive Members' Forum, built into the Benedictus website. It's only just been finalised, so there's not much here. But I wanted to give you a sneak preview of what it will look like, and to say that in the coming week (I hope) the Forum will go 'live' on the website and you will be able to sign up. [screen share]

Engaging with the Forum is entirely optional – if you don't want to add this to your repertoire, you will still receive the Benedictus News by email and the rest of the website will operate in the way it currently does. But for those who would like to join the Forum, it will be (I hope) an opportunity to see more of what is happening, for groups to share photographs and news of their activities, for conversation about the weekly reflection, sharing of readings by Theology Reading Group and so on. I imagine it will take us a while to get the hang of using this, so we'll take it gently and discover how it may serve us best!

To finish then. You may have noticed I have mentioned fewer people by name in this year's report – and this too reflects the growth in the sheer number of you involved in generating our life together. I am profoundly humbled by and grateful for all who offer leadership in our different spaces and create space for others to be heard and encouraged and to grow. I'm grateful for all of you who are co-creating Benedictus by participating in conversation and prayer, caring for one another and giving of your presence, energy, expertise and resources. I honour the many ways you offer yourselves to be changed and expanded so as to be in your families, your workplaces and community engagements in ways that bring life and healing, and I honour your courage and commitment to this sometimes painful journey of transformation. It is good to be among and with you, as together we continue faithful to the One who calls us to be.

With my love and blessing,
Sarah