

## **Director's Report**

### **Annual General Meeting – 7 December 2024**

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Simone Weil was a twentieth century French philosopher, school teacher, activist and writer. She was born a Jew and grew up agnostic but in adulthood she came to know Christ in a profound and personal way. Yet one of the distinctive aspects of her spiritual journey was her conviction that, despite her mystical and transforming encounters with the person of Christ, she should not be baptised nor become formally a member of the church. Her reasons for this conviction were complex, but they included a deeply felt sense of the danger of identifying with any collective human grouping. In the political climate unleashed by fascism and Nazism, she wrote of 'the natural tendency of every form of collectivism, without exception, to abuse power', to create categories of inside and outside, and so to create victims (80). And she had no trouble finding examples of this abusive collectivism in Christian history and in parts of the church in her own day.

Like Weil, we too are facing a rise of abusive collectivism in our politics and culture. Fuelled by authoritarian leaders, social media algorithms, and a widespread loss of orientation, some people are vulnerable to being drawn into nationalistic or partisan in-groups, while others are at risk of becoming their victims. And, like Weil, we too are aware that Christian collectivities can readily be co-opted by these same forces and share the same pathologies. Think of Christian so-called 'patriots' justifying violence against the enemy 'other', whether in Russia or the US; think of Christian moralists righteously denouncing those they define as 'ungodly' and refusing mercy and solidarity. Weil's concerns about the dangers of collectivities still resonate deeply and many are thus automatically suspicious of organised religion and of church, in particular.

And yet, having said this, in the Christian vision, the notion of collective or corporate belonging is intrinsic to the life of faith. We are called, says St Paul, to be members one of another, to become 'one body'. A Christian community is not just a group of individual seekers who gather to pursue a common interest in 'spirituality'; nor does it meet in the first instance to work on a shared project or achieve a pre-defined goal. Rather, in the words of Rowan Williams, Christian communities are called to participate in 'the constant maintenance of relation and growth as we give into each others' lives and receive from each other, so that we advance in trust and

confidence with one another and God'. The more we are committed to each other's flourishing, the more we grow together to be in the world as Christ was – not defining ourselves over and against the world, but participating in it for the sake of the life of the whole. This is how we become, as Paul puts it, the body of Christ. And in the end, I think, only something like this kind of body, this kind of community will lead us beyond our entrapment in fragmented, isolated individualism on the one hand, and coercive, destructive collectivity on the other.

This is a long preamble, but it sets a context for what I sense is emerging increasingly among us and what I'd to focus on in my report this year. For I believe we are maturing as a body. If thirteen years ago, we began to meet more as a group of individuals seeking our own growth, it seems to me that we are now truly a community. We are more and more realising our belonging to one another, and this means we're becoming more available for the emergence among us of a corporate sense of our vocation and gift. This maturing is sourced in our daily prayer, where we regularly have over 40 participants at morning meditation and 70 in the evenings, as well as our weekly worship service. It's sourced in the conversations, gatherings and retreats that happen online and in-person, in Canberra and beyond, where all kinds of friendships are growing among us, people supporting one another in illness, bereavement and other struggles; people sharing faith and doubt; people sharing experiences that are stretching and enlivening, and reflecting on their meaning for their lives. In a short while we'll hear more from Susanna and three members of our community about particular points of connection and conversation – but there are many, and it gladdens my heart!

### **The Gift and Call of Contemplative Church**

In previous director's reports, I've tended to at least mention most of the offerings and events we've shared in the past year. This year, however, I want use this time to reflect a little more on this growing sense of a corporate identity and vocation. What does this mean in practice? How does it affect us all?

#### *Pools of Grace*

In June this year, I was invited to speak at the National Conference of the World Community for Christian Meditation in the UK. The theme was 'Pools of Grace: The Gift and Call of Contemplative Church'. For the conference organisers, this theme connected to their awareness of the parlous state of our world and of the institutional church, as well as a yearning for forms of church that could nurture different possibilities for being and belonging.

The conference was oriented to practice. Those participating wanted to explore not just the idea of contemplative church, but the practicalities. For example, how do you keep faith with the strength and depth of the Christian tradition, while discerning where forms of liturgy or theological expression no longer serve to communicate its truth? How do you encourage the disciplined practice of silence in a community, while also allowing for a range of approaches to meditation and contemplation? How do you relate to the wider institution of the church and develop contemplatively informed governance? What forms of service or mission, what possibilities for spiritual formation might arise and become available?

Speaking at this conference made me realise the extent to which people are seeing Benedictus as a model and as something genuinely new. Together, we are creating something that is encouraging new things in other places. One of the participants at the conference was Father Jim Caffrey, whose Catholic parish in Dublin Neil and I visited last year. Father Jim is seeking to build a parish founded in contemplation and ecumenism, and is currently working with Rowan Williams and a number of Welsh priests to encourage similar initiatives in Wales. I recently participated by video with Father Jim, Rowan Williams and others in a seminar on this theme – again, there’s a sense that we’re able to share something from our own experience which speaks to the needs of our world.

Thanks to the initiative of Heather Thomson, who co-leads our Theology Reading Group and Liturgy Group, Benedictus now has a contract for a book series exploring the theology and practice of contemplative church with American publisher Wipf & Stock. The first book due next year is based on these conference talks, and we’ll also be sharing some of our original Benedictus liturgies as a resource for others. Heather and Jenny Stewart will be contributing authors.

### *Formation in Contemplative Action*

Another sign of what I sense is our emerging corporate vocation is our new year-long program, Formation in Contemplative Action, which will begin in January next year. Benedictus has never run a soup kitchen or church-based corporate ministry. For many years, our sense of our mission has been primarily connected to the commitment to create space for radical prayer, reflection and spiritual growth. As people are transformed through their participation in our community and its offerings, they enter into their existing commitments and callings with more freedom and awareness, and this makes a difference to their work and family life, and to how they live out their vocations in the world.

The Formation in Contemplative Action program builds on this understanding, but in a more intensive and intentional way. The program will be facilitated by me,

Neil and Deb May. A cohort of about 10 people will commit to a regular meditation practice and participate in two intensive weekends, as well as monthly gatherings for teaching, reflection and sharing, and one-one mentoring. This program has already drawn interest from beyond our existing Benedictus community, and our sense is that it could become an offering speaks to the needs of the wider world. And I wonder what more may emerge from the relationships that deepen in this process, as we learn more of each other's commitments and capacities?

As with our engagement and support for other contemplative communities, this program too has grown from the strengthening and maturation of our life together, much of which has grown out of Susanna's ministry among us and her fostering of connection through retreats and creative gatherings of many kinds. What is so exciting is to sense that the faithful prayer, presence and generosity of the whole community powerfully undergirds what we can now offer into the life of the world.

### **Sustaining Relation and Growth**

Earlier I quoted Rowan Williams' depiction of church in terms of 'the constant maintenance of relation and growth as we give into each others' lives and receive from each other, so that we advance in trust and confidence with one another and God'. In the last section of this report, I wanted to touch on two dimensions of how we are more formally enabling that 'constant maintenance of relation and growth'.

#### *Code of Conduct for Leaders and Complaints Procedure*

Last year, I said that as our community grows and as leadership is exercised by a larger number of people, we've been conscious of the need to put sufficient scaffolding in place to ensure we remain trustworthy and accountable. 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 creating hospitable, safe and generative spaces. One expression of this commitment was our recent Trauma-informed Practice workshop, led by Louise and Dave Bromhead, and attended by about 25 people both in person and online.

Another expression of this commitment is our Code of Conduct for Benedictus Leaders. A working group led by Pauline Ridge, and involving Vivienne Holmes, Heather Olley and myself, has developed this Code which has now been adopted by the Benedictus Council. A few printed copies of the Code are available tonight, for those who are interested to look at it immediately, and it will be available on our website next week. This Code will apply to all who lead Benedictus groups, retreats and events whether on a paid or volunteer basis – but we hope it sets a culture for

our community as a whole. It will help ensure that participants in-person and online find their involvement in any Benedictus offering to be nurturing and life-giving.

Along with this Code of Conduct for Leaders, we have also developed a Complaints Procedure so that we have a clear process available if a dispute or complaint should arise. I want to emphasise that these documents have been developed not because there is currently any dispute or problem; it's simply part of ensuring the integrity of our community in the long-term. In the new year, we'll be gathering with incoming leaders of Benedictus groups to work through the Code and the Complaints Procedure, to ensure we're all aware of what it requires. We are deeply grateful to Pauline, Viv and Heather for their work and professional expertise!

One final policy document I want to mention is our Financial Support Policy for Enabling Participation. As you know, most Benedictus events are offered free of charge or by donation. However, we also offer retreats, seminars and workshops with visiting presenters which can incur costs for accommodation, food and presenter-fees. Although Benedictus does not seek to make a profit from these events, participants are charged to cover the costs. We recognise, however, that not all Benedictus members can afford the full or partial cost of these events and we're committed to enabling the widest possible participation. For this reason, we have set a substantial sum in our budget, \$10, 000, for bursaries and financial support. This Financial Support policy sets out guidelines for disbursing that sum. We hope everyone will feel empowered to participate in the offerings to which they are drawn, for this ultimately strengthens us all.

### *Financial Situation*

One of the unexpected features of the Covid years for Benedictus was the emergence of our vibrant Zoom community and ministry, for which we give hearty thanks! A second unexpected feature was that because of our numerical growth and reduced activities over that period, we accumulated significant financial savings. As we emerged from the pandemic, these savings enabled us to invest in increased ministry resources – we employed Susanna part-time as Associate Priest, Melissa as Admin Assistant, and last year Elijah on a very part-time basis to help with our Zoom services. We were also able to purchase equipment and subscriptions necessary to continue transmitting our service on Zoom. The Council expected that these additional expenses would gradually eat into our accumulated savings, but we believed it was important to invest in our capacity to offer what was being called forth.

As you will see when Andrew presents the financial report and next year's budget, we still have a reserve of over \$110, 000 savings in the bank. However, we

are not covering our yearly operating expenses. The money we receive from giving does not cover our regular staff, rent and other costs. If this mismatch between income and expenses continues, it means we will continue to eat into our savings, and potentially lead to a reduction in what we can offer within and beyond the community. Council has been advised that a prudent financial reserve should enable us to pay a year's salary for all our staff, and we have now fallen below that threshold.

Benedictus is funded entirely by donations from our community. We realise that not everyone is in a position to contribute financially, and we profoundly value other forms of contribution to our common life. We also know that many of you have been generously supporting Benedictus for years, and we're profoundly grateful for that. For those who are able to consider initiating or increasing your contribution, so that we can move towards balancing our operating budget for next year and enabling the funding of new commitments in the future, we would very much appreciate your support.

### **In Conclusion**

We are the body of Christ. These words are often said in the liturgy and we can take them for granted. But in a culture that tends to either isolated individualism or herd-like conformity, there is something precious about being a community committed to honouring one another in all our diversity and particularity, while enabling common life and action as we grow into the fullness of ourselves in God. The body of Christ is not a clique or possession closed in on itself, but is willing to be stretched and given as we follow the One who calls us ever deeper and anew.

I am humbled and grateful to belong to this body – to witness your generosity and care, to share your sorrow and your joy, and participate in the unfolding of our gifts. May we continue growing together into all that we are called to be.

With my love and blessing,  
Sarah