

MERCY GROVE: BELAIR NATIONAL PARK

In 2015, two events occurred which resulted in the Blackwood Catholic Parish undertaking a unique project.

In June of 2015 Pope Francis issued his Encyclical letter ***LAUDATO SI*** which dealt with ecology, climate and our collective responsibility for the planet on which we live.

In December of that year the Pope launched the ***YEAR OF MERCY***.

Our Parish Pastoral Council debated how we should respond to these two papal exhortations and decided to undertake a combined project.

We knew that in the past the Belair National Park authorities had permitted special memorial plantings, so we asked if we could establish a grove to serve as a reminder of the Year of Mercy and to be an ongoing reminder of the importance of our environment.

By chance, the old Eastern Gatehouse on Upper Sturt Road, had recently been demolished and the opportunity to replant it, was given to us.

All the plants selected had to be indigenous to the area, propagated from seeds collected in the area and within a certain range so that there was a range of ground cover, understory, and large plants. They were sourced from the Belair Nursery and Men of the Trees at Kooyonga.

The site had been roughly levelled, but was covered in lumps of bitumen, building rubble and assorted rubbish.

The National Park people provided a water tank, which they have regularly filled for us, and showed us how to plant and protect what we planted.

All was ready for the big day, and on April 22nd 2016, after the 10.00am Mass, Fr. Michael led us in planting the site.

The weather was perfect; a large congregation was in attendance; the event was publicised in the Southern Cross; and the mood of the day was one of joyful celebration and community involvement.

On that day, we planted approximately 120 plants with individuals and families busily digging holes, putting seedlings into the holes and erecting guards around the new plants. Morning tea was served after the work was done.

A few weeks later, Clem Colla restored a family heirloom garden seat and we concreted that into place.

In November (27th) 2017 we had a major event with Archbishop Phillip Wilson celebrating Mass with about 200 parishioners and dedicating **“MERCY GROVE”**. With support from Upper Sturt Tennis Club we were able to set up urns, a PA system, chairs, an altar and manage car parking with a massive turn out of Parishioners. We had a supplementary planting to replace any lost plants and Archbishop Wilson also planted a tree.

In the succeeding summers, a roster of parishioner volunteers has made sure that the plants have had every opportunity to survive and we have been rewarded. We have had a survival rate of about 80% which compares very favourably with the normal 30% and we now have over 100 plants thriving.

We planned to have a follow-up Mass when we had a new archbishop. We hoped that we would be fortunate to have the same perfect combination of sunshine, mild temperatures, attendance etc. that we had for the first Mass. Unfortunately it was the wettest day of the year and celebrations were confined to “Our Lady of the Way” Church at Glenalta.

We believe it is the only example anywhere in Australia of a Catholic Parish having its own contemplative and sacred site in a national park, and it is now up to us to maintain the site for future generations.

Before planting



Taking Shape on April 22nd 2016



Since that initial planting, we have had regular working bees to keep the site under control with clearing of weeds, re-staking and re-guarding of some trees and some supplementary planting. We have also maintained a watering roster across the hotter months so that weaker plants are given every chance of survival. We have been supported by a series of rangers who have advised us on planting techniques and ensured that the water tank is not empty.

In June this year 200 shrubs, grasses and ground covers were planted as an understory corridor as habitat for small animals, birds and insects. The planting was carried out by students from Nativity School, Aberfoyle Park and four other local primary schools. This planting was a celebration of ten years of our Church community caring for and developing this corner of the Belair National Park. It is a small patch of sacred land that is a reminder of the importance of gathering and remember our responsibilities in caring for our Common Home.

Terry Tierney 2026