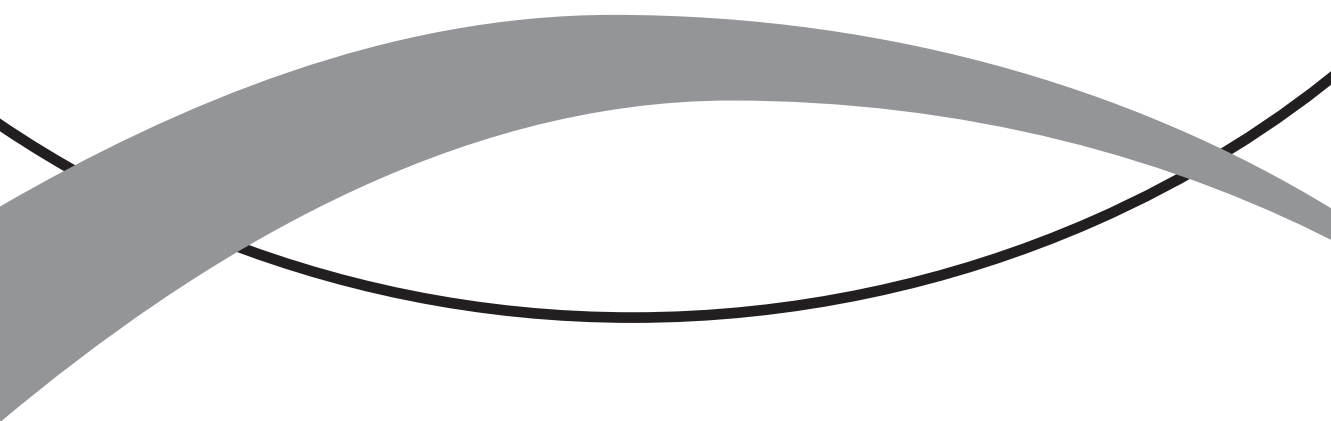


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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Covenanting Conversions

Rosemary Dewerse

Abstract

I am convinced that if the Uniting Church in Australia is genuinely to make good on our “Covenanting Statement,” signed with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) over thirty years ago, it will never be enough for we who are Second Peoples to revisit our words, and to review and reimagine our actions. We also must open ourselves to conversions in our Christian worldview. Emerging from years of friendship with two Elders from the UAICC in South Australia have been provocations for my theological and missiological assumptions about Emmanuel, the Kingdom of God, and the concept of mission. I reflect on them here in the hope of contributing to our ongoing journey as Covenanting partners.

Introduction

This reflection explores my conviction that unless Second Peoples in the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) open ourselves to conversions in our theological and missiological paradigms, then the full hope and possibility of the 1994 Covenanting Statement will never be realised.

In that Statement Jill Tabart, then President of the UCA, confessed the following:

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom...We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture and confused the Gospel with western ways. As a result, you and we are the poorer and the image of God in us all is twisted and blurred, and we are not what God meant us to be.¹

At the time, “my people” largely referred to those Christians of British and European descent who were part of colonising Australia. I want to suggest, however, that all of us who are not First Peoples, wherever and whenever in the world we originate from, risk crafting a “poorer” community, belittling and harming in ways that leave the image of God “twisted and blurred” in us all, if we refuse to truly hear and open ourselves to being formed by the ancient wisdoms of the First Peoples of these lands now called Australia.

For fourteen years I have been privileged to work closely with two leaders in particular from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) in South Australia – Rev Dr Aunty Denise Champion and Uncle Ken Sumner. This reflection traces in particular how relationship with them is occasioning critique of and expansions in my understanding of Emmanuel, the Kingdom of God and mission. Māori

¹ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement, 7th Assembly, 10 July 1994,” <https://uniting.church/the-covenanting-statement/>. Accessed 22 December 2025.

mātauranga (knowledge) also informs this. A work in progress, what I have been learning is changing how I conduct myself in these lands now called Australia.

I fully accept that what is occurring in my understanding may be very different from the path you will take. You may be disturbed by what I say; it may raise an enquiry for you; or you may find nothing I say surprising, being well ahead or abreast of me on this particular journey. I hope by sharing, however, to stimulate reconsidering conversations regarding our theological identity and lived practice as a Church in Covenant.

Who am I? Who has been shaping me?

I am a very recent migrant, from Aotearoa New Zealand.

Ko Ngongotaha te maunga. Ko Rotorua te awa. Ko tangata Tiriti te iwi. I was born under the shadow of Ngongotaha, the mountain that draws down water, the lifeblood of creation, into Lake Rotorua. I am given a home in Aotearoa New Zealand, as a descendant of Ireland, Scotland, England and Sweden via Latvia, because of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Fifteen years ago, I was whangai (adopted in) by rangatira (leaders) of the whenua (land) where I was born, namely Matua Don Bennett and Pihopa Ngārahu Katene. Rev Dr Moana Hall-Smith (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa) and Faye Pouesi (Ngāruahine, Te Atiawa) continue to mentor me like wise parents, and Natasha Koia (Ngāti Porou) as a sister. No reira tēnei te mihi.²

I met Aunty Denise Champion, an Adnyamathanha yura, in 2012 when my family and I first moved to South Australia. We quickly became collaborators, co-leading with Rev Dr Tracy Spencer the first Walking on Country for Uniting College for Leadership and Theology (UCLT) in 2013 and then publishing her first book *Yarta Wandatha* in 2014. More writing and co-teaching has occurred since, including a second book *Anaditj* in 2021, alongside articles. Years of learning from her is cementing her Yarta (Country) and Ngalakanha Muda (big history/wisdom) in my soul; our relationship has evolved into that of mother – Ngami – and daughter.

My friendship with Uncle Ken Sumner, a Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri korni, began more recently but quickly moved to soul-explorations shaped by significant, sometimes difficult-to-answer questions. Trust is its bedrock, informed by Uncle Ken's Kaldowinyeri – his wholistic worldview held together by the weave of Winamulldhi, the One Who is Making Perfect Good. My reflecting is stronger for his robust engagement with me.

An invitation to change

In the Covenanting Statement, Tabart offered acknowledgement, admission, lament and commitment on behalf of Second Peoples seeking genuine relationship with First Peoples. The response from Bill Hollingsworth, then Chair of the UAICC, pointed out that such relationship must be grounded in thorough-going respect for the “true stewards of this land.”³ Their words remain alive among us. For too long First Peoples have borne the brunt of an assumption that only the Christian Church holds the knowledge to save us all. If the commitment lying at the heart of the Covenanting Statement to equal partnership and together becoming who God meant

² This is my acknowledgement.

³ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”

us to be is to progress, however, then we Second Peoples must recognise and be learning from the wisdom of worldviews long nurtured “by the land, and by the Mystery that surrounds us all.”

“Conversion” derives from the Latin *conversio* – *to turn with or towards*. Most often, the word is used to speak of a person turning *away* from sin and their “old life” and choosing to follow Christ. In these lands now called Australia conversion to Christ occurred for First Peoples at the cost of often violent tearings from land, language, kin, culture, and ceremony. I am always sobered by the remarkable grace Aunty Denise and Uncle Ken extend to we who collude – consciously and unconsciously – with this harsh reality. While “conversion” is not a word they choose to use when speaking about the changes they see are needed, *I* am using it here in hope of provoking conversation.

A theological expansion: Emmanuel

I was taught by my parents and at Bible College that there are two types of revelation – general and specific.⁴ General revelation comes to us by way of creation. Specific revelation comes through the scriptures, with the gospel of Jesus Christ being the lens through which the whole of that record is understood. Moreover, Jesus is the focal point for *all* revelation. What emerges, I am realising, is a profoundly anthropocentric and focused lens. Christ is at work saving humanity in and through the Church “controlled [as paragraph 5 of the *Basis of Union* puts it] by the biblical witnesses.”⁵ The witness of creation – ancient in comparison to a Jewish-hosted story only a few thousand years old – recedes, becoming the scenery for and backdrop to this particular expression of God with us. These ideas lie in the UCA’s *Basis of Union*, shaped by the historical theological understandings of the three denominations the UCA was birthed from.⁶

On a weekend in August 2025, I stood on the side of a mountain in Ikara Flinders Ranges – Adnyamathanha Yarta (Country) – near where Aunty Denise lived for the first years of her life. That weekend was also the second week of the class “Kungan Kaldowinyeri: Listening to Creation” that I co-teach with Uncle Ken. I stood there practising his six-sense listening – looking out over coloured layers of mountains and the wide expanse of sky, feeling the pressing breath of Arraru, the north wind, hearing and tasting its ancient power, smelling the wintry dry, connecting with *mi:wi* (soul) – when words arose in me. “God is the ground of my being.” Looking around me, I knew. *Here God is*. Ancient. Majestic. Steadfast. Beautiful. Good. Nurturing. Self-giving. Everlasting. As I stood on that mountainside, very human – Christian – anxieties like faith and doubt, whether I am good enough or will go to heaven, fell away. Arrawatanha God Most High is here. With us. Enlivening all things; holding all things; working all things together for good. Anaditj; always was, always will be.

Driving home past Yurabila, the twin-peaked mountain that establishes for Adnyamathanha law and the sacredness of life, and their moieties Arraru (North Wind) and Mathari (South Wind), a sob grew in me for the size and the surety of it all.

⁴ I studied at the Bible College of New Zealand (now Laidlaw College) and London Bible College before completing a PhD with the School of Theology at Auckland University.

⁵ Uniting Church in Australia, “Basis of Union (1971 and 1992 editions),” <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/1152>. Accessed 18 December 2025.

⁶ My own church heritage is Presbyterian and Methodist. I was married in a Congregational Church. I grew up and worked for many years in the evangelical world.

One month later during an immersion journey, our class, led by Uncle Ken's daughter Natasha, learned to weave Kaldowinyeri, the worldview of Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri, with our hands. From the centre, Winamuldthi (The One Who is Making Perfect Good) inspires all things circling out and back, bound in profound interconnection, stitch by carefully precious stitch.⁷ Whether alive or dead, all is caught up in this weave. Two mornings later I received a call from home that my mother-in-law was in hospital. I knew in my mi:wi (soul) that she was passing and that Yarluiwe-Ruwe (Sea-Country) knew and was holding me. Her last days and beyond, which I was present for, were sacredly liminal, the weave profoundly real. God in Country, God in Jesus, before, behind, below, beside, above, within and without.⁸

The origins of this converting for me I can trace to the teaching of Eru Potaka-Dewes, a significant Māori kaumatua (elder) who was a founder-lecturer of a Māori theological college I had the privilege to work in. He taught that in Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) the forests, seas, winds, etc are the emanations or faces of Io, the Supreme Being.⁹ Look to them and we see divine wisdom manifest. Ever since I have mused on this. On Country this knowing became true within me.

The Epistle to the Romans is one of Paul's most tightly argued theological treatises as he seeks to explain to them the necessity for Jesus Christ. Intriguingly, in the opening chapter, while speaking of humanity's wicked suppression of the truth, he notes:

For what can be known about God is plain...because God has made it plain...Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they [we] are without excuse (Romans 1:19-21, NRSVUE).

To then paraphrase Paul in my own words, God had to come into our world in human form because that is the only way many of us would listen. Immune to God's presence made visible in creation, God has to look and sound like us to get our attention.¹⁰

First Peoples, however, have been listening and have known our Creator for millenia. Yarta wandatha; the land is speaking, the people are speaking. The wisdom they hold and choose to share we all can learn from.

In the wake of what I have described, enabled because of relationship, something is shifting deep within me. I know now, viscerally and certainly, what it is to say that God is in all things, revealing Godself through all things. When I take the time to live in grateful awareness of this, I feel I am breathing deeply, drawing from the vast and ancient resource of Christ-in-creation for navigating life with grace. When I focus only on the human dimension and what is happening in human interactions, I can feel my breathing turn shallow

⁷ Aunty Ellen Trevorrow: "Stitch by stitch, circle by circle, weaving is like the creation of life, all things are connected." Quote incised on a plaque in the pavement at Meningie, Yarluiwe-Ruwe, South Australia.

⁸ My Celtic heritage brought alive.

⁹ Eru Potaka-Dewes, 'Atuatanga: Radical Indigenous Theology' (Auckland: SATRS, 2003), CD. For more on Io see Pā Henare Tate, *He Puna Iti i Te Ao Marama: A Little Spring in the World of Light* (Auckland: Libro, 2012).

¹⁰ Wiradjuri writer and artist, Glen Loughrey, has argued that Aboriginal people do not need what John 3:16 proclaims because they had already been listening and known God for 65,000 years. Glen Loughrey, "James, Rhett & Jimmy – An Unholy Trinity," conference paper in "Raising Our Tribal Voice for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution" (Melbourne: University of Divinity, 2024).

and my capacity for peace-making, justice, love and compassion for and with my neighbour – human and more-than-human – diminish. Such, for me, is the wholistic reality of my expanding understanding, emerging as I learn in relationship with First Peoples to attend to biblical *and* creational witness.

Theological expansion: The Kin[g]dom of God

When the public ministry of God-in-Jesus began, Mark's Gospel records that he went about announcing the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). It was a new way of being community where power dynamics are reordered. The first become last, the poor are raised up, the oppressed are set free, the meek, merciful, grieving and persecuted are blessed, and all become co-heirs in a kingdom characterised by self-giving Love. The life of Christ showed us something of what this can look like in the everyday. The Church, as the body of Christ, is to be a visible expression of this in a "fellowship of reconciliation," as the *Basis of Union* puts it in paragraph 3, pilgrims on the way to a home located beyond this life in which we will know the fullness of the Kingdom.

While kingdom language was contextually apt in first-century Israel when preaching a counter-cultural vision, since Christianity's marriage with empire, terminology emphasising borders and boundaries, sharpened by declamations on sin, has strengthened in theology. "Judgement," "separation," "casting out," the necessity of being "saved," "righteous and unrighteous," "enemies," "pagans," "the world" (as opposed to the Church), "hell" and "heaven," "eternal life" and "damnation" have been key words in the vocabulary and lyrics of my faith heritage. Difficult to reconcile with the wholistic message of a God of love, their influence and residue lingers. Conversations and encounters in relationship with Indigenous mentors are provoking helpful reflection.

Conversions may come by way of a mountain-top epiphany but – even those – so often are made possible because of accumulations of smaller ruptures over time. Here I will record a sample of these for me and my expanding understanding. To give credit where credit is due, I will be noting exactly what I have been taught, by whom.

In 2022, Aunty Denise and I were working on our chapter "Big Boss or Dark Emu?"¹¹ She suddenly began talking as if the knowing of 540 million year old Ediacaran fossils found on her Yarta (Country) was *her* knowing. While I was struggling to wrap my mind around this, she explained that her ancestors are from all worlds in that place – Sky, Land, Creaturely, Human. In her circular, spiralling worldview all of their interconnected wisdom, reaching out and back across time, is inherent in her. Consequently, she was born *knowing* and that shapes her belonging and relating. This is a reality it is impossible, under Arrawatonha God, to ever step out of.

A later experience with Uncle Ken helped to land something of these interconnections for me. He told me that the traditional greeting of Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri was to hold one's palm to one's belly and then

¹¹ Denise Champion and Rosemary Dewerse, "Big Boss or Dark Emu? Indigenous Wisdom for the Academy," in *Religion Matters Volume 2: Further Explorations of Connectedness*, edited by Paul Babie and Rick Sarre (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 97-108.

sweep your hand out toward the other. The belly is the location of *mi:wi* (soul). There, our umbilical cord not only connects us through past generations into the present, but also the generations to come, *as well as* into all the lands (dust) we, our families, their ecologies, flora and fauna are composed from.¹² To greet another is to recognise and acknowledge these multidimensional, collective realities of our identity. The first time I greeted him in this way, and he returned the gesture, I felt a sudden profound portal of grounded connection thrum open.¹³ It was quite startling.

If, as Genesis 1, John 1 and Colossians 1 proclaim, God is Creator of all and God's *ru'ach* (breath) and *w/Word* enlivens and animates all things, then the only boundaries and borders that exist are those that enable recognition of our distinctiveness within the context of relationship. Within the human family, locally and globally, there is no way to step – or be cast – outside of God's realm. Including when we die. "Sin," the central human problem in much Christian theology, is not the calibration of our fitness for human and eternal community. We simply belong. This is an expansive gift that learning from First Peoples is offering my theology and practice. As in any family, bad behaviour carries consequences – and must – because it threatens relationship, tearing at it. But fundamentally, "nothing can ever separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:31-39). This has significant implications for how we understand living in community as "God's people," who "God's people" are, and how, where and when fullness of life can be experienced.

Jesus was very clear that the Kingdom is among us – the divine touching our humanity, making all things new. In *Te Ao Māori* (Māori worldview) – as in many Indigenous worldviews – this is not true apart from creation. *Wheiao* is the Māori word for the liminal or sacred place where worlds meet. It encapsulates the in-breaking of the divine, a threshold, a moment of turning when potential is birthed. When Rev Dr Moana Hall-Smith first taught me about this it took weeks to comprehend it.¹⁴ *Wheiao* explains a lot, however: the intensity in birthing my children, when the spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, and mental were all happening at once, the sense of divine connection whenever I paddle along the shoreline, the thinness of the weave when accompanying my dying parents, and the vibrations I felt in the land and trees as a Māori elder prayed before the ground was broken for our new home.

Kingdom talk I find (again) to be profoundly human-centred. For First Peoples creation is not just the *setting* for the human story, but, with us as with God (even as God is also more than), is subject and object in it. We cannot therefore make decisions thinking they will not impact the whole. Pā Henare Tate noted that Māori see everything through the lens of *Atua-tangata-whenua* (God-people-land), an interweaving trinity of community enlivened by *mauri* – the life-giving, dynamic essence of our Creator.¹⁵ If the *mana* (the intrinsic divinely-gifted dignity) of one is trampled, then the *mana* of all will suffer. This resonates with Uncle Ken teaching our class that when the land is made sick the people are sick, and vice versa. It also provides expanded meaning and deeper urgency to the body metaphor employed so eloquently by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. I am finding it extremely helpful (though to my shame I do not always remember) to

¹² Cf. *te reo Māori* (the Māori language) where *whenua* is the word for land and for womb.

¹³ "Thrum" in the musical sense of the word – a deeply resonant vibration or pulse.

¹⁴ See Beverley Moana Hall-Smith and Rosemary Dewerse, "Wheiao: Where Māori and Pākehā Meet," in Jione Havea, Emily Colgan and Nasili Vaka'uta (eds.), *Theology as Threshold: Invitations from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), 189-204.

¹⁵ Henare Tate, *He Puna Iti i Te Ao Marama: A Little Spring in the World of Light* (Auckland: Libro, 2012).

ask myself, as I have been taught, “Will what I am about to do or say trample the mana of God, of another person, of creation, or enhance it?” A good “Kingdom” question to be living by.

A final conversion-in-the-making regarding this “Kingdom” topic, for now, engages the query by the rich young ruler to Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29), and Jesus’ own, “Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?” (Matt. 12:48). The answers that were given to these questions spoke across divides and beyond expected boundaries, suggesting that relationship, and the wisdom to be found therein, reaches beyond our presumptions.

One day while we were driving along the Kurangk (Coorong), Uncle Ken pointed to emu on the shoreline and said that to watch his siblings is to be taught where to find freshwater. This called to mind for me the verses in Job 12:7-8, “But ask the animals, and they will teach you,/ the birds of the air, and they will tell you; /ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,/ and the fish of the sea will declare to you.” Uncle Ken went on to observe, “Land, waters, trees, creatures are our relatives...Relationship [with them] determines how we *be* in a place.”¹⁶ Those relationships are experienced generally by all, and then some more specifically. All Ngarrindjeri have ngartji – particular creatures and parts of creation in a sacred relationship with them of mutual guardianship and mentoring, protection, responsibility and spiritual connection.

I am finding myself paying greater attention these days. As I am writing a trio of magpies, sometimes one alone, have been visiting each day. They have been present through some potentially difficult conversations also, accompanying in song and in silence. Dried eucalyptus leaves are cleansing my mornings as I walk to work. The salty sea has been healing my feet. Country has held my immediate family in its weave. It is also speaking its ancient calm and call to responsibility into my soul.

As a result of what I am learning, I am becoming much more aware of a fuller size and depth in definition of familial relationships, with attending implications for practice in, to borrow a word coined by anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, the “everywhen.”¹⁷ But how to name this? “Kingdom” seems such a bounded, even exclusive, word. Kingdoms have citizens, defining who belongs, as well as who does not and may never belong, and for what reasons.

In 1995 Eugene Stockton, an Australian Catholic biblical scholar and archaeologist, suggested in his book *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation*, after decades of learning from Aboriginal peoples, that we speak of the *Kindom* of God to signify our belonging to and life within the sacramental family of the whole earth (cosmos) across time and space.¹⁸ I think there is something incredibly helpful in this idea for us to be exploring as Covenanting people in these lands now called Australia.

A very brief note on the purpose of Jesus Christ

I am very aware that genuine engagement with Indigenous spiritualities will critique understandings of the significance and purpose of the life and work of Jesus Christ for humanity.

¹⁶ In conversation, August 2025.

¹⁷ This word was coined to describe non-linear time that catches up the past, present and future, altogether. W.E.H Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Black Inc. 2010), 62.

¹⁸ Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria, NSW: Millenium Books, 1995), 135-143.

It is important to note that there has never, in fact, over global Christian history been one universal response to this.¹⁹

In the Patristic era and still today in the Eastern Orthodox Church Jesus' significance has been explained through the lens of the incarnation; his purpose is one of *theosis* or enabling our divinisation. In the Western church, the crucifixion and an emphasis on salvation has been in focus. Augustine, Ambrose and others explained Jesus' purpose, for example, as restoring the wounded honour of God (Satisfaction Theory). The Protestant Reformers taught that Jesus took on our sin as the only one who could appease the wrath of God (penal substitution). Pietist and Holiness movements focused on inward holiness to ensure individual passage to heaven. Hildegard von Bingen, meanwhile, saw Jesus effecting *verditas* or the greening of creation, while for Julian of Norwich and womanist theology Jesus' purpose is to be found in redemptive identification with suffering that finds no reprieve. Liberation Theologies emphasise Jesus' self-identified purpose in Luke 4 delivering the poor and captive from systemic oppressions. And the rich variations in understanding continue.

The possibility of uncovering together in Covenanting relationship a local, ancient and contemporary lens should excite us.²⁰

A Missiological rupture

The rupture attending my thinking on mission (as a person who discerned this as my vocation and who has committed many years of my life to engaging in and teaching it in Aotearoa NZ, Central Asia, and Australia) has been a case of a long slow tearing.

If anything should prove the need for Covenanting conversions, the history of Christian mission in these lands now called Australia should. "Mission" is a word and concept with a dark and troubled past. It was a means for paternalistic shielding of Aboriginal peoples from the ravages of colonisation while attempting to indoctrinate and "civilise" them. There are so many resources – published and oral – that speak of this and of the ongoing impact of the zealous and belittling harm and spiritual poverty that the Covenanting Statement confesses Second Peoples have vested upon First Peoples.²¹

¹⁹ "Different theologies of salvation exist, not because the Christian tradition is inherently contentious and cannot reach a consensus, but because each moment, era, and epoch raises different questions about the nature, means, methods, purpose and effects of salvation." Justin S. Holcomb, *Christian Theologies of Salvation: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 2.

²⁰ Some resources for this conversation include: Deverell, Garry Worete and Anne Patel-Gray, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023); Deverell, Garry Worete, "Christ as Country: Changing the Frame for Christianity in Gondwana," presentation to Pitt Street Uniting Church (Melbourne, 21 April 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHVLX5Sm7_o, accessed 18 December 2025; and Rosemary Dewerse seeks the wisdom of Denise Champion and Ken Sumner, "Alter-narratives: Indigenous Leaders Reflect" in *Uniting Church Studies* 27 No. 1 (June 2025): 69-77.

²¹ See, for example, Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," in *Location-shaped Theologies*, edited by Rosemary Dewerse (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2024), 16; John Harris, *One Blood: Two Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity* (Brentford Square, Victoria: Australians Together, 2018); Christobel Mattingley and Ken Hampton (eds.), *Survival in Our Own Land: 'Aboriginal' Experiences in 'South Australia' since 1836. Told by Nungas and Others* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1998); and Anne Pattel-Grey, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia: Critically Appraised from an Aboriginal Historico-Theological Viewpoint* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

It has been very difficult to sit with Auntie Denise and hear, among other things, how Christian leaders of the (Presbyterian) mission station at Nepabunna used the threat of starvation of Adnyamathanha women and children to force the end of 50,000 plus years of ceremony, and of the cycles of dependency that have resulted as Adnyamathanha said “yes” because “we couldn’t say ‘no.’”²² Each time she speaks of these things I feel deeply sad and ashamed that the Church is responsible for this devastating loss and ongoing injustice. I am committed to ensuring our students hear the truth of our history and consequently are challenged to grapple with the question of how we shall now live and minister.

Just as hard has been to hear from Uncle Ken stories in the church of George Taplin, the Congregationalist missionary who led Point McLeay mission at Ruakkan and his “brutal” son, Frederick.²³ In Taplin’s house, next to the church, is a wall of Ngarrindjeri recorded from a later time in numbered photos (named only decades later by their families). Reminiscent of concentration camp records, the wall includes pictures of Uncle Ken’s grandparents.²⁴ Further stories Uncle Ken tells about Raukkan are difficult to hear. Each time I visit I can feel my gut wanting to heave before I even step into the building. The last time I was there I forced myself to walk inside, look each person in the eye, and pay homage to their humanity and to their extraordinary resilience.

I no longer call myself a missiologist. The roots of the word “mission” lie in the Great Commission of Matt 28:18-20 but are inextricably associated with European colonisation and domination. Dutch theologian Michael Stroope in *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition*, and, more recently, Malawian missiologist, Harvey C. Kwiyani in *Decolonising Mission*, have traced the origins of mission to Roman imperialism and the idea of pilgrimage, co-opted by Popes to serve their endeavours and rhetoric in the Crusades from 1095 onwards.²⁵ The precise word and concept of mission itself was appropriated from existing religious and political thinking by ex-soldier Ignatius of Loyola in the mid-1500s. Conceived of as a “vocation characterized by robust service, obedience and mobility,” it was soon underpinned by the Doctrine of Discovery to support European political and commercial expansionism.²⁶ The Protestant Reformation expanded this into a religious and social enterprise seeking to establish Christian civilisation in colonies across the globe.

There was an attempt to redeem “mission” in the 1950s by locating it as God’s activity – *missio Dei*. Māori thought leader Jay Mātenga argues this is a modernist projection onto scripture.²⁷ When he reads the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption and new creation, he sees an arc of *renewal*, not mission.

When I see and hear the pain and retraumatising that this word and concept is raising in my Indigenous friends, I struggle to see how “mission” can be redeemed as a word and concept, or whether it should be. There is an urgent need to decolonise our language and mindset if we are to be genuine Covenant partners who are respectfully learning First Peoples’ “culture and values.”²⁸

²² Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, “Reimagining God and the Church,” 16.

²³ “Brutal” is the word Uncle Ken uses.

²⁴ My husband and I visited Dachau concentration camp in 2002.

²⁵ Michael Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2017); and Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Decolonizing Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2025).

²⁶ Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, 239. The Doctrine of Discovery is a set of Papal Bulls – the first issued in 1452 – that blessed violent conquest of lands and peoples who were not “Christian.”

²⁷ Jay Matenga, ‘Missions in Global Complexity: Navigating Participation in God’s Purposes’ at https://jaymatenga.com/pdfs/MatengaJ_MissionsComplexity.pdf. Accessed 23 December 2024.

²⁸ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”

There is much to be explored and pressed into if we are to break the colonising hegemony of “mission.” For now, I am finding myself drawn to Jesus’ words to his disciples in Acts 1:8 to be “witnesses.” Here the focus is on identity, and authenticity in that, rather than the task-based “make disciples” of Matt 28 that drives the missions’ industry. “Witness” decentres power, from one message that must be spoken and received to a personal and communal accounting of a story grounded in ongoing relationship. It opens space for dialogue and trusts the response to the integrity of the inspirited hearers.

There is opportunity for the Church in Covenant to reshape our practice.

Provoking expansions

Church history teaches us that understanding and practice are always a work in progress, shaped by our contexts. Faith is a grand adventure into the unknown Mystery that our finite minds will only ever know in part but can know more richly in community. I am very aware that when Second Peoples’ theology evolves from relationship with First Peoples there are risks. We could appropriate insights that First Peoples choose to share with us, distort them and/or use them to colonise again. Or we could be accused of so-doing because we are struggling to find the best ways to express to others, with respectful gratitude, how the teaching of First Peoples is changing us.

In 1994 Jill Tabart, on behalf of Second Peoples, confessed that the UCA “did not hear when you [First Peoples] shared your understanding and your Dreaming...we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.”²⁹ More than thirty years later, it is important that we are listening with open and receptive hearts. I am convinced that to truly and justly honour the sovereign wisdom and aspirations of First Peoples, to genuinely honour our Covenanting commitment, Second Peoples in these lands now called Australia must be informed and inspired by theology that is ever-expanding through conversions big and small.

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²⁹ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”



About Uniting Church Studies

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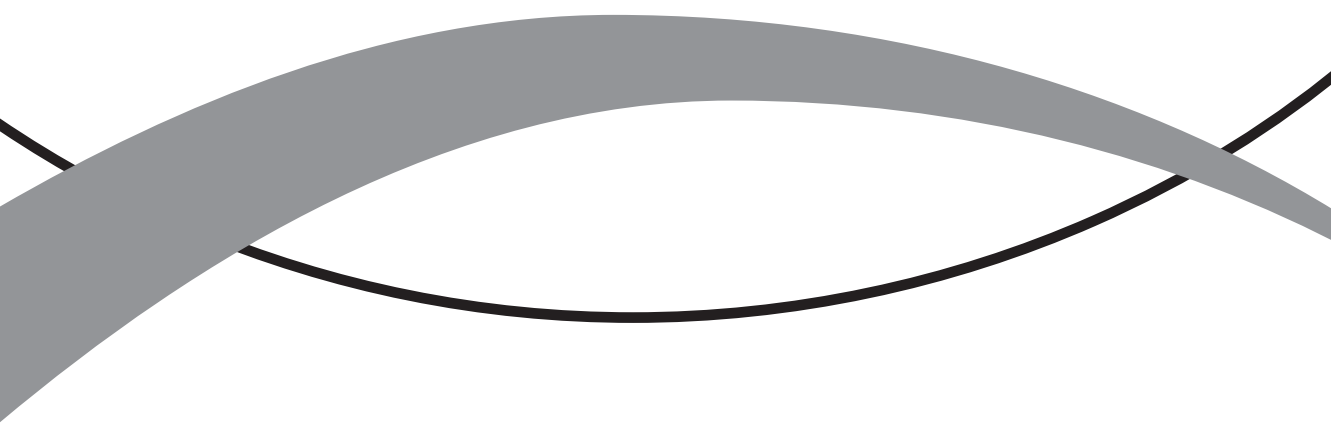
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