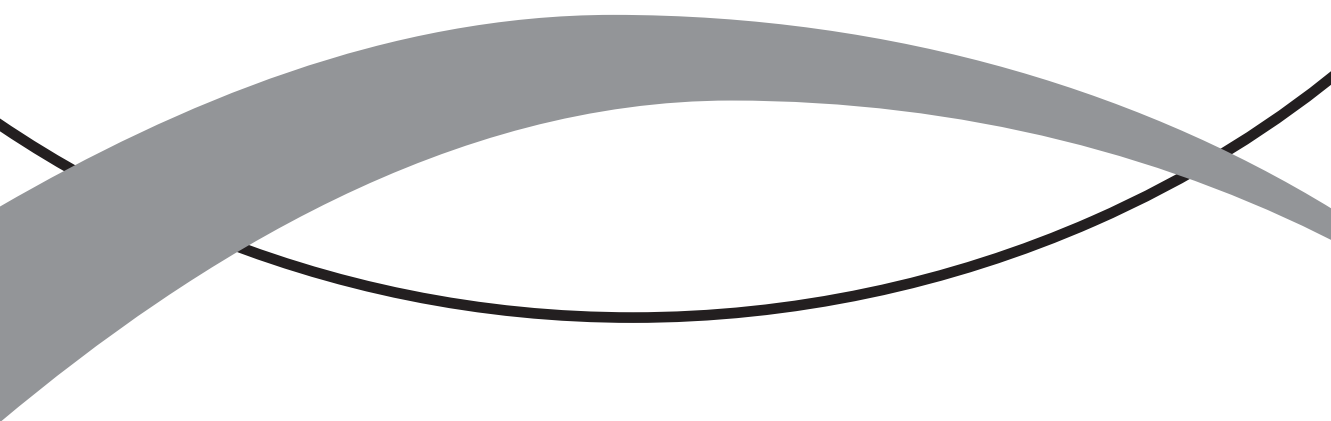


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

Vol. 28, No.1

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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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Editorial

Geoff Thompson and Clive Pearson¹

The call for papers for the themed articles in this issue of the journal was headed: “The Uniting Church and the Middle East.” It invited writers critically to explore the multiple fronts on which the Uniting Church engages the Middle East, noting how such engagement is inevitably shaped by the ongoing conflict in the region with its multiple intersections of theology and geopolitics. The invited themes included, among other things, the existence of congregations of Middle Eastern Christians in the Uniting Church, the relationship between the UCA and the Australia’s Jewish community, the reception of Palestinian Christian voices within the UCA, and responses to within the UCA to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The papers that have emerged are understandably more narrowly focused than those broad invitations suggested. The original brief was very broad. The theme that unites them is better named as “Uniting Church Encounters with the Middle East.” Notably absent from the resulting articles is any reflection on the relationship between the UCA and Australia’s Jewish community. An article had been proposed for this, especially in the wake of the Bondi “massacre”, but circumstances prevented its completion at this time.

Whilst two of the four articles focus on the UCA’s relationship to particular Middle Eastern communities, Clive Pearson’s “David, Goliath and Gospel: Metaphors in Conflict” explores the larger framework by attending to the diverse media in which the views, both Israeli and Palestinian, are being shaped and advanced: podcasts, newspapers, scholarly monographs and journals. The debates, including those amongst Israeli historians about the appropriateness of describing Israel’s actions as genocide, are vigorous and fast-moving, as are the Palestinian Christian voices seeking to articulate and enact the gospel in their current circumstance. Pearson argues that for the Uniting Church to enter into solidarity with the situation in Gaza there must be awareness of these debates in which the Christian faith itself is implicated and well as is the legacy of western imperialism. In addition to which, the case is made that more awareness is needed than broad statements and activism – essential though these are. There are critical theological issues arising which invite us to become more aware of the rapidly developing field of Palestinian liberation theology and the use of “land” in settler colonialism. The issue of encounter raised by Pearson’s article could be described as one of an informed solidarity that is seeking to be alert to an enduring complexity.

The article by Gaby Kobrossi and that co-written by Krikor Youmshajekian and Clive Pearson bring to the fore a different kind of encounter – an encounter fostered here within the life of the Uniting Church with communities with roots in the Middle East and its history and who have sought fellowship and an ecclesial home in the Uniting Church. In both instances the situations in the original homelands – both historical and present – overshadow that quest. These accounts both fall within a genre of diasporic literature that is global, but in this case is marked by being lived out in Australia and within the Uniting Church. They are stories much larger than ‘us’.

Both raise their specific sets of questions. In his “On the Possibility of a Soft Ecumenism,” Kobrossi traces something of the history of the Uniting Church’s relationship to the Lebanese Christian community. He

¹ Clive Pearson has acted as co-editor for this particular issue, and Geoff Thompson records his appreciation.

explains and discusses the idea of “soft ecumenism” fostering the sorts of relationships that could unfold between the Uniting Church and Middle Eastern Christian communities which lie outside the particular responsibilities the UCA has for connections with the Churches of Asia and the Pacific. Within this context he also writes of the challenges confronting those from the Middle East who formally enter the Uniting Church. Issues of recognition and the need to be “apologists” for the UCA and its theology to their diasporic communities are tension-filled realities. That is one part of the narrative. The other side is why people migrate – in this case, from a land repeatedly ravaged by invasion, civil war and economic collapse. Kobrossi’s explanation of his journey into ministry in this country is a reminder of how the answer to the question, ‘where are you from?’, may reveal a hidden history of survival and resilience

In their article, “The Golden Chain of Mercy,” Youmshajekina and Pearson explore the multi-faceted history of the Uniting Church and members of its predecessor denominations in responding to the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923). At the time Armenia was part of the Ottoman Empire, hence generally regarded as part of the Middle East. The atrocities that unfolded occurred throughout Anatolia and Syria as well as the Caucasuses. The response of the churches which came into union 1977 is a part of the pre-history of the Uniting Church and deserves to be known. The humanitarian effort of the churches was extraordinary – indeed the response was the first international aid program initiated from within this country. One of the most notable achievements was the Australasian Orphanage north of Beirut (at one stage the largest orphanage in the world) and the despatch of a ship carrying medicines, foods, and tools. The predecessors of the Uniting Church played a critical role. As for the Uniting Church, these connections were given particular expression by the 2015 Assembly’s recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915. This article provides much of the historical background that could further resource the reception of this recognition by the UCA at large. The Assembly resolution called upon the federal government to recognize the genocide: to date that has not happened and it places the Uniting Church inside an interesting position with regards to how the Anzac ‘myth’ is told today.

In “A Holy Dream, A Bloody War,” Inise Vakabua Foi’akau offers yet another form of encounter: a very personal, existential encounter forged by being part of a Christian pilgrimage to Israel when the current hostilities began on October 7, 2023. Foi’akau writes not only as UCA candidate for the Ministry of the Word, but also as a member of the Fijian community with its history of particular claims about ancestral and spiritual connections to Israel. She describes the disruption not only to the pilgrimage but to her own reflections on the connections between inherited biblical imaginations and the lived realities of those who inhabit those lands today. Her article is an invitation to “reconsider what it means to encounter God in a land where biblical memory and present human suffering coexist.”

A research article by John Flett and Stephen Burns, “Jesus Christ, the Earth’s Womb and the Tree of Life: A Coconut Communion,” explores the legacy of the proposal from Dr Sione ‘Amanaki Havea (1922-2000) about “Coconut Theology” and specifically about “Coconut Communion.” Flett and Burns summarise the reception of Havea’s initial proposals in ecumenical circles and his own proposal for the contribution of this particular Pasifika theology to the catholicity of the church. Taking some cues from this theology and a ni-Vanuatuan liturgy using coconut instead of bread and wine, the authors propose an order of communion using coconut and other Pasifika symbols for use in the UCA. They stress that any use of the

proposed liturgy must not be oriented to its “exotic” character but as means of entering “with a heart for deeper communion, openness to changing norms, and enjoyment of catholic spirit.”

There are two articles in this issue’s Reflections and Provocations. The first is Glen O’Brien’s close historical study of the date – 1793 – attributed to John Wesley’s Forty-Four Sermons in Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union. O’Brien demonstrates that there was no edition of Wesley’s Sermons published in 1793, and suggests that 1763 was probably the intended date. It was in that year that the Model Deed declared Wesley’s Forty-Four Standard Sermons to be authoritative standards of Methodist preaching. O’Brien research poses a confronting question to the UCA’s scholars: why has this error not been noticed until now? He suggests that, at least in part, it is due to a post-union lack of attention to Wesley Sermons. Just as other branches of Methodism have critically appropriated Wesley’s sermons, O’Brien contends that the time for the Uniting Church to do the same is long overdue. The second of the Reflections and Provocations is by Rosemary Dewerse, “Covenanting Conversions.” Weaving the UCA’s Covenant with UAICC together with her own engagement and ministry with the Indigenous Christians in both Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand, Dewerse writes of some of the conversions she has undergone through that engagement. These touch on her understanding of revelation, her sense of the whole, her readings of scripture, her understanding of Jesus Christ, and the rupture that has occurred in her thinking about mission.

This issue’s Book Forum engages the 2023 book, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* by trawoolway man and leading Indigenous theologian, Garry Worete Deverell. This is Deverell’s second book on Indigenous theology following his 2018 book, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawoolway Man Reflects on Christian Faith*. Deverell notes that in the interim between the two books there have been opportunities to reflect further on the nature and legacy of colonization on our imaginations and churches but also on the “decolonized versions of Christ, the Trinity and theological method, upon the ancestral spirit of country.” This book presents some of those reflections. The respondents are: Adam Couchman, a lecturer in theology and liturgy at St. Francis’ (Anglican) Theological College in Brisbane; Rebecca Lindsay, Uniting Church Minister and lecturer in Old Testament at United Theological College, North Parramatta; and Naomi Wolfe, a trawoolway Aboriginal woman and Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Divinity. The mix of academic expertise, ecclesial location, and culture represented amongst the respondents makes for a rich set of responses to the book, to which Deverell himself responds, nudging the ever-necessary conversation forward a few more steps.

The issue concludes with three book reviews. The first returns to some of the issues of the themed articles by means of Derek McDougall’s review of Mitri Raheb and Graham McGeoch (eds), *Theology After Gaza: A Global Anthology*. Published in 2025 the book provides an insights, primarily from Christian writers, into the Palestinians right to justice. The second book review is Dianne Rayson’s review of Michael Mawson’s *Standing Under the Cross: Essays on Bonhoeffer’s Theology*. Mawson is a leading Bonhoeffer scholar and is known to many in the UCA through his time on the Faculty at United Theological College. Stephen Pickard (also a former UTC faculty member) provides the third review, namely of Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden (eds), *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology*. The book’s 33 chapters presents the work of an impressive range of contributors, many with strong UCA connections.

As intimated in the previous issue, changes have been made to the administrative and editorial structures surrounding the Journal. In place of a single Editorial Advisory Committee, there are now two bodies: a Management Committee and an Editorial Panel. Some further appointments are pending, but the membership of both is detailed on the About Uniting Church page of this Issue.



About Uniting Church Studies

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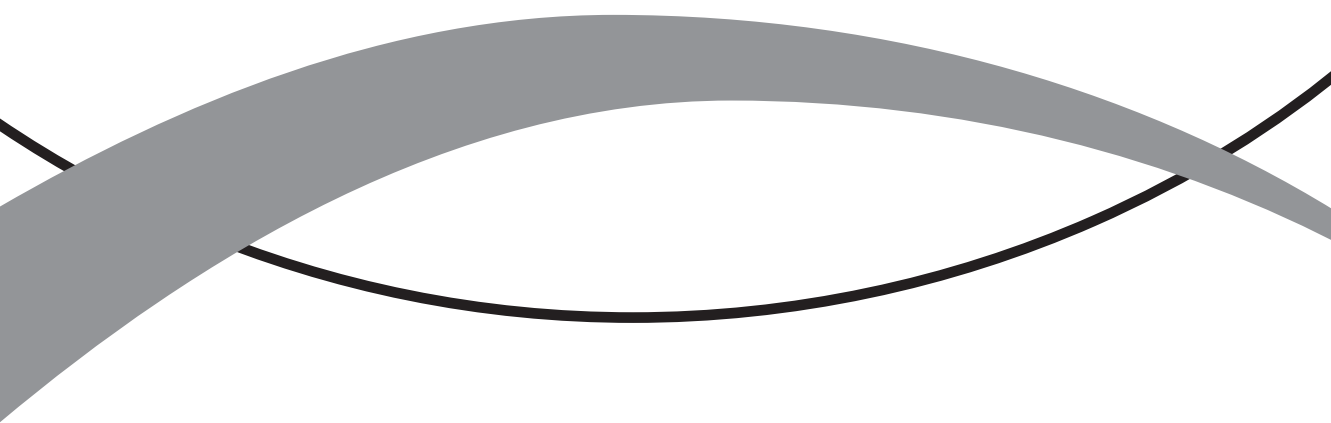
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Uniting Church Studies is a multi-disciplinary, open access academic journal focused on a specific subject – the Uniting Church in Australia. Contributions submitted as Research Articles or Reflections and Provocations are double-blind peer reviewed. The journal provides a forum for independent scholarly discussion, debate and analysis. It does so by means of a dialogue: between the academic and the practitioner; between church and society in Australia, and between the scholars of the Uniting Church in Australia and those of other Uniting and United Churches throughout the World.

Contributions and books for review should be sent to the Book Review Editor at the above address. Manuscripts submitted for consideration should normally be of 4,000–6,000 words, typed 1.5-spaced in 12-point font and submitted by email as an attachment. A style sheet for *Uniting Church Studies* is available from the Editor or on our website.

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