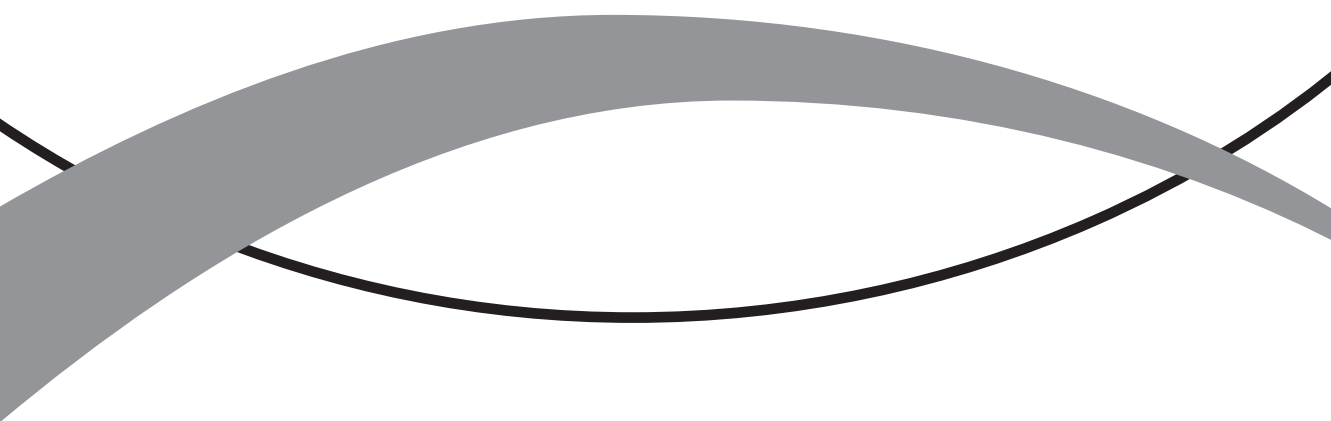


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

Vol. 28, No.1



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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Jesus Christ, the Earth's Womb, and the Tree of Life: A Coconut Communion

John Flett & Stephen Burns

Abstract:

This article explores the legacy of Dr Sione 'Amanaki Havea (1922-2000) and his distinctive Pasifika contribution of "Coconut Theology" with its proposals about "Coconut Communion." The article begins from attention to how Havea's ideas were initially received in World Council of Churches' deliberations about eucharist. It proceeds by considering the ongoing vitality of coconut theology, correlating coconut communion with eucharistic praying in Uniting Church resources for worship. To this end, it suggests a eucharistic prayer, with commentary. As it advances, the article articulates the view that coconut communion may be a means of grace in any context, a gift of tradition relevant to the whole world Christian community, in which it may yet sound yearning for "spring" in the chill of "ecumenical winter."

When Christ was crucified, dead and buried, and rose on the first Easter – the effectiveness of that great event was meant to be available for all peoples; and on the first day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in Jerusalem; it meant that the Power was available simultaneously to all the peoples of the earth.

— Sione 'Amanaki Havea, "The Pacifiqueness of Theology," 11 October 1977¹

The 1983 Vancouver assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) followed arguably the most important ecumenical document of the twentieth century – Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM, also known as the "Lima Document"). Alongside this was the "Lima Liturgy" of the holy communion, which is influential on the orders of service in *Uniting in Worship* and *Uniting in Worship 2* (UIW2),² just as it is on resources for worship in many contemporary Christian traditions. David Gill, a Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) minister compiled the main report of proceedings at Vancouver,³ and the report includes a passing comment about a contribution from Pasifika. Readers are informed that "Dr Sione Havea of Tonga, supported by

¹ Cited by Gilles Vidal, "A Pacific Theology of Celebration," in *Theologies from the Pacific*, ed. Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 77–88 (79).

² The influence of BEM (Geneva: WCC, 1982) on UCA assembly resources is multiple. It includes picking up into orders aspects of the Lima Liturgy such as the word of mission. A detailed study of shifts in Uniting Church worship from the 1980 "blue booklet" – which has both 17th-century Anglican rubrics and Roman Catholic offertory prayers (!) – to the more consistent approach, tempered by BEM, in the first *Uniting in Worship* of 1988 would produce many examples of UCA engagement with BEM.

³ *Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 23 July-10 August 1983*, ed. David Gill (Geneva: WCC, 1983).

representatives of the island churches, gave the Assembly a lesson in the delicate art of 'coconut theology'.⁴ As they were not contained in the report itself one needs to go to *International Review of Mission* (IRM) to find out what Dr Havea said in this "lesson."⁵ His remarks in the IRM herald the slightly more fulsome comments about coconut theology that he further developed at various events in 1985 and 1986 and which appear in the 1987 publication *South Pacific Theology*.⁶

As to the content of Sione 'Amanaki Havea's remarks at Vancouver, they do not use his later phrase of "coconut communion" but they do repeatedly mention "bread and wine" indicating that eucharistic celebration was central in his mind. Given his contribution and the context in which it was made, a stark conclusion needs to be drawn: eucharist was a central theme at the Vancouver assembly and Havea's injection of a Pasifika contribution on this very theme bore mentioning – yet it disappeared from formal deliberation. Without question, this absence embodied dominant ecumenical assumptions concerning the relationship between "Tradition" and "contextualisation," an unresolved problem basic to the current "ecumenical winter" and reflecting the "culturally and epistemologically exclusionary" nature of the "Christendom ecumenical project."⁷ While such an observation is problematic in itself, it is exacerbated by Havea's own forceful assertion that "we have as much and more to contribute from the Pacific as we have to learn from the West."⁸ Havea's views would strengthen in his later (1985/6/7) reflections on coconut theology, in which Havea argued for a "catholicity relevant to the whole ecumenical community"⁹ – by which he did not mean Pasifika reception of catholicity from some other place, but the contribution to catholicity *from* Pasifika.

Notably, Havea's argument is fundamentally christological, stemming from the conviction that Jesus "used his environment to contextualize the ecumenicity and catholicity of theology. He lived and appreciated his Hebrew world as it was meant to be: suitable for the existence of total man in right relationship with his God; – not a Jewish (regional) God, but the one God (universal)."¹⁰ The gospel of the one universal God is to be expressed in idioms of every region. In Pasifika, this means for Havea invoking the coconut.

Aspects of Havea's proposals about coconut communion were not entirely new. Records show that from the 1860s LMS missionaries to the islands used breadfruit instead of bread in sacramental celebration.¹¹ That said, just a few years before the Vancouver assembly, in the late 1970s, a ni-Vanuatuan order of service using coconut instead of bread and wine was produced, later published in the collection *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*.¹² From the 1980s through which Havea spoke numerous times about coconut communion, the institution at which Havea was the first Pasifika principal (1977-81) – Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji – started celebrating holy communion using coconuts. This has continued there, at least on occasion.

⁴ *Gathered for Life*, 13.

⁵ Sione 'Amanaki Havea, "Remarks, 6th Assembly, World Council of Churches, Vancouver, 1983," *International Review of Mission* 72 (1983): 578–580.

⁶ Sione 'Amanaki Havea, "Christianity in a Pacific Context," in Sione 'Amanaki Havea and Others, *South Pacific Theology* (Oxford: Regnum, 1987), 11–15.

⁷ Raimundo Barreto, "How World Christianity Saved the Ecumenical Movement," *Protestantismo em Revista* 46, no. 2 (2021): 222–244 (224).

⁸ A background paper by Havea for the Pacific Conference of Churches, cited by Randall Prior, *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 94.

⁹ Havea, "Pacific Context," 12.

¹⁰ Havea, "Pacific Context," 13.

¹¹ Vidal, "Celebration," 85.

¹² *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, ed. Cliff Wright and Leslie Lugui (Suva: Lotu Pasifika Publications, 1986), 111–114.

In other Pasifika contexts, however, both on the islands and in the diaspora coconut communion remains quite unknown, and is sometimes resisted where local practice has remained one following the “Tradition” born by early missionaries other than ones employing breadfruit, and so insisting on bread and wine as the only appropriate gifts of the table. Such insistence, however, fails to accord with the remarkable diversity of the matter of the sacrament in making eucharist. For example, it can be noted that research on the range of elements used for communion in the worldwide Anglican Communion shows that the likes of rice-cakes and yams, and soft drink Fanta, are commonly used as the staple food and festive drink placed on communion tables in various parts of the world.¹³ In the UCA, at first communion at Easter, milk and honey may also be served.¹⁴

It should be noted that Havea himself does not refer to the ni-Vanuatu order – or any other particular – order of service. But as perhaps the most widely known example, the ni-Vanuatu order merits reflection. To its immense credit, it is a powerful reminder that liturgy is rite not just about writing: liturgy is not a text, but an event. The order begins with a superb procession of the people, passing homes around the village which people join on the way.¹⁵ The order also opens generous space for free prayer and the people’s voices at multiple points.¹⁶ Free prayer and procession and voice of the people can each be understood as Reformation legacies too often forgotten, arguably sometimes in the UCA.¹⁷

In terms of its theological context, the ni-Vanuatu order draws less on historic liturgical precedents and takes its texts largely from the suffering servant narratives (ch. 53) of Isaiah, much of the liturgy being composed of readings from this portion to accompany actions with the coconut – its presentation, stripping, breaking, and so on. One New Testament text (the Pauline version of the institution narrative from 1 Corinthians 11) is used later, before returning to Isaiah – albeit another part, the garden passages (ch. 55) – which features towards the end of the order. While these later readings shift away from the suffering servant imagery, it must be conceded that images of violence drawn from Isaiah 53 and depicted in liturgical action with the coconut tend to lend the ni-Vanuatu rite an evident association with theologies of substitutionary atonement, the coconut being used to narrate and depict Christ’s way to the cross.

Indeed, this substitutionary thematic shapes the ni-Vanuatu rite to the extent that it omits mention of resurrection. This is at some distance from the strong emphasis on resurrection in BEM and the Lima and many other contemporary liturgies, including assembly resources of the UCA. In these, it is the gospel memory of Emmaus Road (Luke 24) which shapes the contours of the celebration, encounter with the risen

¹³ Inter-Anglican Liturgical Consultation, “Eucharistic Food and Drink,” accessed November 16, 2025, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/42392/ialc_report_on_elements_used_in_communion.pdf

¹⁴ *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005), 649.

¹⁵ On procession, note the 1549 Book of Common Prayer for its instincts about movement as a way to involve the people in the common “work” that belongs to them: moving from spectator status in the nave to take their alms for the poor to the “poor man’s box” – their offering, no longer identified with the bread and wine – and to gather close around the table. For details, see Shawn O. Strout, *Of Thine Own Have We Given Thee: A Liturgical Theology of the Offertory in Anglicanism* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2023), 28–33.

¹⁶ Although churches of the Reformation differ as to how they involve or restrain free prayer, they all emphasise the people’s voice in one way or another – especially use of the mother tongue.

¹⁷ See Stephen Burns, “The Congregation is Not an Audience: Twenty Years of *Uniting in Worship 2*,” *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 19, no. 2 (2024): 1–24.

Christ in scripture (vv. 27, 33) and breaking of bread (vv. 31-32). As UIW2 has it: "The Service of the Lord's Day has four parts, which could be briefly characterised as: gathering, hearing, being fed and being sent."¹⁸ And:

The pattern of worship from New Testament times has been for Christians to gather to hear God's word and to break bread together on the first day of each new week, on Sunday, the Lord's Day... In many historical variations, the fundamental order of Christian worship – word and sacrament together – can be recognised.¹⁹

Put together, what we see is that the ni-Vanuatuan rite might have missed ecumenical emphasis on communion with the risen and present Christ, but also that the Vancouver assembly missed gifts to the "whole ecumenical community" conveyed in coconut communion from Pasifika. Therefore, what we want to suggest is that the tradition being "mainstreamed" in Vancouver and the coconut theology seemingly overlooked at Vancouver can be placed in fruitful, mutual correlation from which both stand to gain. This is to say that coconut communion need not be marked by the same theological emphases as the well-known ni-Vanuatuan example, and that the ecumenical patterns adopted by the UCA can be turned towards and opened up to gifts from Pasifika. The church's rich heritage (in eucharistic patterns after the Emmaus model) need by no means be an "impediment"²⁰ to distinctive Pasifika approaches to eucharist, but rather that heritage can be enriched by Pasifika insights – insights which are a full part of what *comprises* the living tradition and so contributes to – echoing Havea here – catholicity relevant to the whole.

Although Havea himself does not provide an order of service, he does offer strong clues. Above all is his emphasis on celebration, key to his rationale for coconut theology. To be "relevant" – one of his favourite words – in the Pacific, Havea asserts that communion must be grounded in local cultures of celebration. The celebratory dimension of Pasifika life is in stark contrast to the drivers of so much European theology, which Havea reads as being marked by long shadows of war.²¹ But Havea's own emphasis does not imply some sense of joy which denies suffering, but rather invites attention to communal activity marked by honour, praise and glory (weight – significance; 2 Cor 4.18: "the weight of glory"). So, in Havea's own keywords, there is the beginning of a possible corrective to the ni-Vanuatuan order's somewhat one-sided stress on death. The christological centre of coconut theology as Havea expounds it places emphasis on Christ's resurrection after his death, carries rich sense of paschal mystery.²²

¹⁸ UIW2, 132. This is say that the Emmaus narrative shapes the actual order of the SLD itself.

¹⁹ UIW2, 138.

²⁰ An unfortunate attitude towards tradition in some UCA thinking. Cf. "Ministry in the Uniting Church," in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 218.

²¹ Havea, "Pacific Context," 11.

²² To fill out the discussion, we note a the wider bibliography dealing with Havea's own development of coconut theology and with coconut theology more generally: Seforosa Carroll, "Coconut Theology," in *Emerging Theologies From the Global South*, ed. Mitri Raheb, and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 331–343; Josefa Mairara, "The Floating Coconut: A Contextual Approach to Methodist Mission in Fiji," *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 2 (2007): 183–196; Randall G. Prior, "I Am the Coconut of Life: An Evaluation of Coconut Theology," *Pacific Journal of Theology* 10 (1993): 31–40; Bryant Richards, "Sione 'Amanaki Havea: A Pioneer of Ecumenism and Contextual Theology in the Pacific," *Pacific Journal of Theology* 49 (2013): 75–96; Tioti Timon, "'I Stand in the Middle of the Ocean': The Emerging Coconut Theology of Climate Change in Kiribati," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 100 (2019): 1–12; Kambati Uriam, and Helen Gardner, "Coconuts and 'Fautasi': In Search of a Pacific Theology," *St Mark's Review* 244 (2018): 58–77; Christine Weir, "The Opening of the Coconut Curtain: Pacific Influence on the World Council of Churches Through the Campaign for a Nuclear-Free Pacific, 1961 to 2000," *Journal of Pacific History* 54, no. 1 (2019): 116–138.

Paschal foci also find their place alongside stress on incarnation and Christ's humanity, with Havea writing about the "face" of the coconut in relation to Christ: "It has eyes, a mouth and features like those of a human head. When one drinks from it one draws nourishment by 'kissing' it."²³ It is not only that "[i]f Jesus had grown up and lived in the Pacific, He could have added another identification of himself – I am the Coconut of Life";²⁴ there is, Havea believes, a

full Christology [is to] be seen in the coconut. The Incarnation and the Virgin Birth is in the coconut. The full potential of new life is in the coconut and when it is ready (fullness) the new life breaks through in sprouts and, rooted in the soil, it grows towards heaven. There are glimpses of death and resurrection: "a seed must die in order to live." At the end, the authorities forced Christ to the earth's womb, intending to keep Him there with the Roman seal (power), and to say the end had come. But instead of the end they had expected, the shell cracked and resurrection took place. A new full-grown coconut came to its own.²⁵

Similarly, the ni-Vanuatuan order has no invocation of the Spirit, but Havea's coconut theology provides ideas for epiclesis: the Spirit as "sennet" for example – ²⁶ an image with profoundly rich possibilities for being able to speak of the Spirit in Pasifika terms, as gift and guardian of vā – the supremely precious relations between persons – marked by deep respect and right relations.

Havea's understanding of coconut communion further includes a most notable reason for using coconut instead of bread and wine: "bread and wine come from two different plants, but from the coconut both are from one and the same plant,"²⁷ so use of coconut furnishes a strong image of "one body" as the word is at play in sacraments (cf. 1 Cor. 10 &c).

Given the UCA's Basis of Union ¶2²⁸ – with its aspiration to seek special relationships with the churches of "Asia-Pacific"²⁹ – it might be expected that the Uniting Church could make good on what even its own theologian reporting on Vancouver overlooked: coconut theology invites deeper communion, new sense of catholicity, fresh opportunity to appreciate the grace of being part of "one body." Yet UCA assembly resources have not explored the possibility – which could be argued is a liturgical instance of the kind of "north-facing" theology that smothers the insights of regional theologising.³⁰ At the same time, we are well aware that local practice, even of diasporic Pasifika in the UCA, may only rarely, if at all, know of coconut communion.³¹ Furthermore, "The understanding of the place of the 'coconut' in Pacific cultures is not

²³ Havea, "Pacific Context," 14.

²⁴ Havea, "Pacific Context," 14.

²⁵ Havea, "Pacific Context," 14.

²⁶ Havea, "Pacific Context," 14.

²⁷ Havea, "Remarks," 580.

²⁸ We note with appreciation Joy Han, "The Call to Transcend Racial Boundaries: An Analysis of the Language in Paragraph 2 of the Basis of Union," in *The Present and Future of the Basis of Union: Marking Fifty Years*, ed. Geoff Thompson and Ji Zhang (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2024), 47–58.

²⁹ We recognise that the language of "Asia-Pacific" is no longer recognised by Pasifika, but retain it here only due to its historic use within the Basis of Union.

³⁰ See John Flett, "Plotting an Oceanic Voice: A Longitudinal Review and Analysis of Regional Theologising," *Colloquium* 54, no. 1 (2022): 5–60.

³¹ Our purpose is not to accuse but to invite exploration. (I [SB] have participated in coconut communion very occasionally in UCA contexts – for e.g., a national conference on worship, and at United Theological College, North Parramatta.)

something that is easily transferred into other cultures. This raises a question about its use in cultural contexts outside of the Pacific. The 'ecumenicity' of coconut communion may be in the validation of its contextual significance for Pacific Islanders rather than its adoption across any or all other cultures."³² Within this setting of contextual significance, we hope that all might be enriched.

Ordo

What follows is part of an order trialled at Pilgrim Theological College, in conjunction with a unit, "Theologies of Oceania."³³ Coconut was used for the gifts of the table while the sound of prayer both makes multiple allusions to – indeed, sometimes direct citations of – Havea's own construction while holding closely to the shape of the "standard" and "norm" of great prayers of thanksgiving in UIW2.³⁴ The version following corresponds to paragraphs of UIW2's *ordo*, employs UIW2-style "bluebrics,"³⁵ including ones that weave in scriptures. It also names formal aspects of eucharistic prayer. A brief commentary then follows, exploring further echoes of Havea, connections to more Pasifika theology, and decisions about liturgical practice.³⁶ By these means, the *ordo* of "the ecumenical Christian traditions" – and of "other major Churches"³⁷ with which the UCA associates itself – is gently brought into correlation with Pasifika contextuality, albeit here only in relation to part of the communion rite. At the same time there is a conscious and active challenge to the directive of SLD note 6: "In every service of the Lord's Supper, bread and wine shall be set apart with the use of Christ's words of institution as found in the gospels or epistle, and the manual acts described there...."³⁸ In the order here, there is coconut on the table.

18 > Setting of the Table

A coconut, partially pre-broken with the water removed, is placed amidst the worshipping assembly. Those who bring the coconut may, if so moved, kiss the coconut.

As Jesus walks across the sands,
entering the *fale*³⁹ to sit on the *fala*,
so he invites us all to enter with him.
None are left outside and without voice.

THE TAKING
a fale is a house
a fala is a woven mat

³² Cited with permission from one of the anonymous review, which we very much appreciate.

³³ Havea's writings were central to the unit. The majority of candidates for ordained ministries at the time were Pasifika. By happenchance it was also the first college communion (10.09.25) following the installation of a Pasifika moderator of the local synod, at the same time as the term of the first Pasifika national president of assembly.

³⁴ "Standard": UIW2, 8 (3 times), 48; "normative": 8. Rubrics (choreographical notes in red, also found throughout UIW2) are also used.

³⁵ For rubrics and bluebrics, see UIW2, 9.

³⁶ Some UCA theological reflection encourages thought, when proposing change, around implications in four categories – the ecclesial, theological, ecumenical, and liturgical ("Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church," in *Theology for Pilgrims*, 333, 352). While our reflections are not systematic explorations of these categories, they are very conscious of them.

³⁷ "Affirmations on Ordination," in *Theology for Pilgrims*, 409, 413.

³⁸ UIW2, 140.

³⁹ Many thanks to the blind reviewer who made the following excellent clarification: "[W]hile sitting together on the *fala* is often interpreted as a symbol of humility and mutual fellowship, it does not in Pasifika contexts automatically erase hierarchy. The mat is a space of *vā* – sacred relationality – where both symmetry and asymmetry are enacted. A father and son may share the same mat, yet the father remains father and the son remains son. Thus, if Jesus joins the mat, he sanctifies the relationship without dissolving its asymmetries, affirming communion that honours both mutuality and difference. Care should be taken to avoid overly romantic or Western egalitarian readings of Pasifika symbols."

All are welcome to sit at his feet.

The presiding celebrant takes the coconut and then places it back on the table.

Be present, risen Lord Jesus, as you were with your disciples,
and make yourself known to us in this meal; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen**

[Or]

According to our Saviour's command,
we set apart this flesh and this milk for the communion
to which Jesus Christ calls us,
and we come to God with our prayers of thanksgiving.

The presiding celebrant takes the coconut and then places it back on the table.

19 > Great prayer of thanksgiving

The Lord be with you.

SURSUM CORDA

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

All our thanks, all our praise, we give you,
o mighty God, for you alone are worthy.

PREFACE

In time beyond our dreaming, you formed deep sea and dark;
air and dry ground; sun, moon and stars;
sea creatures, animal companions, human partners;
and time for rest in the shade of the tree of life.

Gen. 1

In your great love, you set people at the heart of your *vanua*.
And so your people sing:

Gen. 2

vanua means land and more

Ps. 139; Ezek. 37; 1 Cor. 3

**Holy, holy, holy! God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.**

SANCTUS

Blessed are you, God of all creation:

as a coconut falls in its own time,

and when it falls, rolls down to the lowest possible level,

John 1, Phil. 2

so in the fullness of time you sent your beloved Son, Jesus Christ,
to be with those in need.

Gal. 4

Blessed are you, for ever.

Blessed are you, God of our salvation:
when the coconut is ready the new life breaks through;
it sprouts and, rooted in the soil, grows towards heaven.
“A seed must die in order to live.”

John 12

In the end, the authorities forced the Christ they killed
into the living earth's womb,
intending to keep him there with the Roman seal,
and to say that the end had come, that death had won.
But instead of the end they expected, the shell cracked—
resurrection took place.

Ps. 139; Eph. 4

A new full-grown coconut came into its own.
Jesus Christ, the coconut of life, is alive!
Blessed are you, Creator of the cosmos,
you bring life from death.

Eph. 2

Blessed are you, for ever.

*do not break the coconut—
this happens later, at the breaking*

On the night before he died, our Lord Jesus took a coconut,
gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying:
Take this and eat it. This is my body given for you.
Do this for the remembrance of me.
In the same way, he took the water, gave thanks,
and gave it to them, saying: Drink this, all of you.
This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you
and for everyone for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, whenever you drink it, for the remembrance of me.

INSTITUTION NARRATIVE

*do not take the coconut
this happened earlier, at the
setting of the table*

And so we remember Jesus, the friends of sinners:
who ate supper in the upper room,
fed crowds sat down on green grass,
cooked fish by the sea, and shared meals in homes of friends
as well as those who offered no greeting kiss,
no water to wash his feet, no oil for his head.

Matt. 11, Luke 7 ANAMNESIS

John 13

Mark 6

John 21, Luke 10

Luke 7

With this coconut flesh and this water, we do what our Saviour said;
we remember him, by whose grace are we saved, through faith.
We celebrate his presence with us now:

Eph. 2

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Blessed are you, our God, you meet us in Christ Jesus:
in your *pola*, in your *fale*, no one arrives early or late.
Touch us by your Spirit,

*pola means abundance
EPICLESIS*

that as the coconut flesh and water are one,
– and as sennet binds the coconut together –
may we be united in the body of Christ.

sennet is cord

1 Cor. 10

Come, Holy Spirit!

Blessed are you, our God, you meet us in communion:
in your mercy, no one is lost or left out.
Move us by your Spirit,
that as coconut is broken open, we too might be opened –
set apart – to seek and serve the hungry and thirsty,
the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned,
in whom you are found.

Matt. 25

Come, Holy Spirit!

Blessed are you, our God, whose love includes our neighbours:
just as sometimes the coconut floats to another island
taking nourishment to a people not yet met,
guide us by your Spirit
always to show the face of Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit!

All our thanks, all our praise,
through your Son, by your Spirit, o mighty Father,
now and for ever. **Amen.**

TRINITARIAN DOXOLOGY

20 > The Breaking of the Coconut

The coconut we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.
The water we drink is a sharing in the blood of Christ.
Behold what you are, become what you receive: the body of Christ.

1 Cor. 10

The coconut is broken fully open.

A brief commentary

The setting of the table (SLD ¶18) uses an invitation composed by the presbyter presiding, John Flett,⁴⁰ alongside an adjustment of a familiar prayer to accompany the taking of the gifts of the table, the first manual act. The prayer, from the Church of South India, is already in UIW2.⁴¹ It recalls Emmaus and other post-resurrection meals of Jesus and underscores the essential meaning of the meal as encounter with the risen Jesus by virtue

⁴⁰ The version here is amended by Stephen Burns to shape the text in the doxological mood of the UCA's assembly resources.

⁴¹ UIW2, 162.

of his promise of presence. We are reminded that the gift of communion is not because of our mental effort to think about Jesus nor from a narrow focus on the cross, as if communion was rehearsing for his funeral. Rather, “[b]aptised into Christ in his death and resurrection, we are invited to share in the meal of thanksgiving.” This

is the Eucharist, from the Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” Indeed, its primary note is *thanksgiving* – honouring God for all that God is, and giving thanks for all that God has done in work of creation and salvation.⁴²

Crucially, the adjustment also switches out bread and wine for coconut. As an alternative to the prayer at the setting of the table, simple words may be said to accompany the act of taking, using the phrase “set apart” used in eucharistic celebrations as well as of persons – for example, in ordination.⁴³ “Set apart” (which appears again later, in the great prayer of thanksgiving) has an interchangeable meaning with “consecrate,” a word used just once in UIW2 – of people, in the collect for Maundy Thursday: “take, consecrate, break and distribute us, to be for all people a means of your grace.”⁴⁴ This is crucial context for any reflection on communion: whatever elements are on the table – bread, wine, coconut – we, as much the “things,” are the holy communion. See also the echo of Augustine at the breaking of the coconut – “Receive what you are...” – noting that Augustine also says, “you are the mystery you receive.”⁴⁵

In the setting of the table and the prayer that follows reference is made to coconut flesh and water. However, “milk” might also serve for the latter. Milk carries maternal imagery, which is present, though marginal, in liturgical history with reference to eucharist.⁴⁶ It also resonates nicely with Pasifika understandings of land as mother. Yet the extraordinary aptness of “water” is appreciated with knowledge that coconut water can be used intravenously as a substitute for human blood.⁴⁷ While multiple meanings deepen sense of the celebration in the texts for prayer we opt to speak of “water” because milk is extracted from coconuts by a scraping or wringing technique which is not employed in rite.

This setting of the table also uses fragments of Pasifika language as well as taking courage from the Vanuatu example of daring movement and gesture. Both language and gesture here invite a reverent scene. The Tongan words *fale* and *fala* are used in the text: a *fale* is a house, a *fala* is a woven mat. To sit on the floor on the *fala* represents humility, sitting alongside others, with no hierarchy. The ritual picture is also intensified, as the opening rubric invites a gesture of devotion from those who bring the coconut to the gathered assembly. They may, if so moved, kiss the coconut. This directly echoes Havea’s own words connecting coconut to the face of Christ and it also resonates well with the rubric and bluebric in UIW2 which invites readers of the Bible to kiss the book, it being a sign of Christ’s presence in the midst of the celebrating assembly.⁴⁸ Kissing the coconut at this point, if so moved,

⁴² UIW2, 135 (both quotes).

⁴³ UIW2, 140, 164, 211; Basis of Union ¶14a. In *Theology for Pilgrims*, 199. Also: “Ministry in the Uniting Church,” in *Theology for Pilgrims*, e.g., 262, 283; “Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church,” in *Theology for Pilgrims*, e.g., 333, 335.

⁴⁴ UIW2, 612.

⁴⁵ UIW2, 219, 325.

⁴⁶ See Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

⁴⁷ Darilyn Campbell-Falck, Tamara Thomas, Troy Falck, Narco Tutuo and Kathleen Clem, “The Intravenous use of Coconut Water,” *American Journal of Emergency Medicine* 18, no.1 (2000): 8–11. This study focuses on the Solomon Islands.

⁴⁸ This is found after the gospel portion in the SLD3, not in the book but on the accompanying CD-rom.

reverences both Christ and creation. Like sitting together without hierarchy, kissing the coconut “speaks a thousand words” about this celebration in which “Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people” and “the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour.”⁴⁹

The second manual act – giving thanks (SLD ¶19) – begins with the *sursum corda*. The prayer unfolds with close consciousness of how eucharistic praying is described in UIW2:

The origins of this central Christian prayer lie in Jewish prayer at Passover and in the grace at every meal. Jesus built on these at the Last Supper. Our present sacrament also derives meaning from other meals hosted by Jesus – e.g. after the resurrection at Emmaus (Luke 24), or by the seashore (John 21). Its essence is thanksgiving for the mighty acts of God. It is a “Great” Prayer because it is the expression of all the gifts of God for our salvation, above all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is important that this significance be not diminished.⁵⁰

The preface in the prayer above, celebrating God’s mighty acts of creation, is quite conventional. It draws on Genesis, including imagery of the tree of life, because Havea calls the coconut a “tree of life for Pacific Islanders.”⁵¹ Its use here blends that reference with biblical glimpses of one of the most mysterious symbols believed to have been in the First Jerusalem Temple,⁵² later to appear in fragments of scripture, including a central role in John the Revelator’s vision of a renewed creation (Rev. 2.7; 22.2, 14, 19). The text also employs an evocative image from Robert Gribben’s prayer in UIW2, recalling the Dreaming of the First Nations of Australia.⁵³

A Pasifika word for land, *vanua*,⁵⁴ is pivotal. This Fijian word has very close parallels in *fonua*, (Tongan), *whenua* (Māori) and more, from around the region. Any of these other words might be used in the prayer where *vanua* appears, as all are overflowing in meaning, conveying all at once: land, womb, people. In addition to this richness, there is more, as in Pasifika use, “land” itself always encompasses not simply ground but seascape and skyscape, underworld and ancestors (*vanua* can also refer to the kava bowl). Connections between these meanings are commonly – and powerfully – fused in the widespread custom at the birth of a child of burying the umbilical cord or placenta from the mother’s womb in the land – mother earth (or given that ocean is part of what is meant by land, sometimes throwing the placenta into the sea). What is more, a tree, often a coconut, is then planted in the place where the placenta is buried or on the shore from which it was thrown into the water.⁵⁵ People, womb, land, tree – all are inseparably connected.

⁴⁹ Here citing just two portions of the UCA Basis of Union on holy communion (¶7), in *Theology for Pilgrims*, 195–96. We further note that kissing the coconut is intentionally quite different from the violent images and actions in the ni-Vanuatu order.

⁵⁰ UIW2, 135.

⁵¹ Havea, “Pacific Context,” 14.

⁵² Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T&T Clark, 2010) among her various other works exploring the First Temple.

⁵³ UIW2, 165.

⁵⁴ I. Sevatituvare, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva: PTC Press, 2002) is a very influential text shaping numerous other publications on this theme, and while other appropriate words from other Pasifika languages might be used in the prayer, we have kept *vanua* in the printed text to honour Tuvare, who like Havea, did so much to encourage regional theologising.

⁵⁵ Carmel Pilcher and Donota Kivi, “Sacraments and Creation: Ecology – A Conversation with First Peoples,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Sacraments and Sacramentality*, ed. Martha Moore-Keish and James Farwell (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 502–517 (512).

The *sanctus* underscores the fullness of divine presence in this *vanua*. Note, though, that the *benedictus* (“Blessed is the one who comes...”) is not used after the *sanctus*, as Christ is affirmed already to be present in the people of the land – and both land and people – including those in the celebrating assembly. It is not that Christ somehow arrives in the eucharistic action but rather, Christ is already graciously ever-present. Hence, we deem the *benedictus* to be redundant.

The post-*sanctus* makes the traditional move from a focus on the First to Second Person of the Trinity, and from praise for creation to praise for redemption. This part of the prayer especially echoes aspects of the “full christology” which Havea associates with the coconut. While two separate stanzas accent in turn creation and redemption, they are linked at the end of the second stanza by close reference to creation and Easter together. They are also bridged by a shared emphasis on time, which is key in Havea’s own connecting of christology and communion. For example, he says, “[t]he fullness of time (*kairos*) is there. No one can push back the time when [the coconut] will ripen, nor make it ripen any earlier: only at the fullness of time will it fall.”⁵⁶ So the prayer has “...in its own time,” “when [it] is ready....” Also, one stanza refers to the Pasifika *fale* (house), an image which was already used at the setting of the table.⁵⁷ Then, at the heart of this eucharistic prayer, praise for the paschal mystery makes a second allusion to the *vanua*: the dead Christ is placed in the living womb of earth, a melding of creedal orthodoxy with Pasifika cosmology.

A reference to *pola* stands next to one on *fale*. *Pola* is another rich word with multiple meanings, in Tongan language (Havea’s own) signifying “abundance” and related to “feast” (*kai pola*) as well as a traditional plate made from banana trunk (*polota*, with *lota* also being a word for “joy”). *Pola* attempts to gesture at depths that may not be carried by the more pedestrian “table.”

The institution narrative is, again, traditional – all bar its reference to coconut. The anamnesis that follows then alludes to several other meals of Jesus’ ministry – including at the home of Simon the Pharisee, who questioned Jesus’ choices – and to him eating in post-resurrection appearances. At every stage throughout his ministry – itinerant, on the way to Jerusalem, in the shadow of death, and after he was raised – Jesus’ purpose was always to open up the “feast for all peoples” (Isaiah 5.6-9), to make it manifest.

After a very common memorial acclamation the prayer turns to the Third Person of the Trinity, making *epiclesis*. Where *epiclesis* was missing in the ni-Vanuatu rite, it is emphatic (in triplet form) here. It relates to the food but is centred on the people as sacrament of Christ in the world. The three-fold structure also mentions three further coconut images drawn from Havea. These, as is customary, invite unity – though we are also conscious of more recent emphasis in Pasifika theologies on “de-onefication.”⁵⁸ This abandons “the dominant old colonial pathological *narrative of onefication*” that prevails in many Christian traditions and in ecumenical discussion (after John 17. 21). Instead, it lifts up the image of a varied “household” – notable for, like the language of oneness, being biblically-funded (e.g. Gal. 6.10) but arguably with more open possibilities, though it seeks a “Pacific subversion of

⁵⁶ Havea, “Pacific Context,” 14.

⁵⁷ On the significance of architecture, see Upolu Lumā Vaai and Gladson Jathanna, “‘Let the House Speak’: Memorialising the Islander Missionaries Chapel and Re-storying Ecumenism as the Pacific Household of God,” *Pacific Journal of Theology* 59 (2020): 4–20.

⁵⁸ Upolu Lumā Vaai, “There is no Unity without Unity with the Dirt: ReDirtifying Ecumenism as Pasifika,” in *Theologies from the Pacific*, ed. Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 188–201.

imperial oikoumene,”⁵⁹ which we suggest finds ultimate expression in the wideness of vision in the royal parable of Matthew 25. So, the epiclesis invokes the Spirit to enable encounters with difference and across distance, crucial in a church that aspires to be “multi-cultural” and to serve a diverse society.⁶⁰ We are reminded now that the basic meaning of liturgy is “public service,” a service to continue after the congregation for worship has ended.

The prayer closes with a trinitarian doxology, an idiom that distils the shape that has structured the eucharistic prayer. This is introduced by a line which had also followed immediately from the *sursum corda* – “all our thanks, all our praise” – a turn of phrase by Gail Ramshaw (in her widely-used eucharistic prayer “Triple Praise”). Here it serves as an *inclusio*, framing the beginning and end of the great prayer.⁶¹

In context of UIW2, the Great Prayer is followed by the Lord’s Prayer/Our Father/Prayer that Jesus Taught. That in turn is followed by the third manual act, breaking (SLD ¶20). Rubrics make clear that now is the time to break open the coconut. (At the institution narrative, the presider is not in the role of Jesus at supper, so the breaking should not happen then – nor should a taking, which came before the prayer at SLD ¶18.⁶²) The fourth manual act, giving, then follows (SLD ¶22).

Between the third and fourth acts, UIW2 suggests the *agnus dei* (SLD ¶21). While not needed in small congregations (only in sizable gatherings where large amounts need to be broken), the *agnus dei* is particularly inappropriate in connection to coconut communion. Just as bread and wine are not native to Pacific islands, neither are sheep or lambs. (In a very large group where time for a longer fraction is necessary, a possible Pasifika alternative to the “lamb of God” would be a song of praise for Christ Jesus, perfect pig of God.⁶³)

Ending

The order above intends to engage ecumenical norms that are standard in UIW2, and it leans on these more than does the 1979 ni-Vanuatuan coconut communion. But the order also resists unquestioning reception of north-facing norms by bringing forward strong Pasifika imagery sparked by Havea in his writing on coconut theology. The text for prayer, often shaped by Havea’s own words, seeks to correlate respectfully the UCA’s inherited style of eucharistic praying (at least in assembly standards) and gifts of regional theologising.

⁵⁹ Vaai and Jathanna, ‘Islander Missionaries Chapel,’ 9.

⁶⁰ *Theology for Pilgrims*, 616–625, among other important statements in a section on “the church’s vocation.” The pages cited carry the 1977 ‘Statement to the Nation’ and the 1985 ‘The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church.’ For critique of UCA-style multiculturalism, ongoing ‘skew[ing] toward the traditional ethnohistorical identity of Australian settler culture’ (64), see John Flett, ‘Multiculturalism as Theology and Policy: The Challenges and the Possibilities,’ in *Theological and Hermeneutical Explorations from Australia: Horizons of Contextuality*, ed. Jione Havea (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 55–66. For related concerns turned, see Cláudio Carvalhaes, ‘*Communitas*: Liturgy and Identity,’ *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 1 (2011): 37–47. On need for and ways of enacting liturgical changes, see Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011).

⁶¹ Gail Ramshaw, *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 54–57, also widely reprinted in, for example, Stephen Burns, *Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2018), 42–44. It is interesting to note that Ramshaw’s *Mystery Manifest: The Triune God, Figuratively Speaking* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025) explores a massive range of christological images, but *not* coconut.

⁶² Stephen Burns, ‘Manual Acts, Mass Confusion,’ *Uniting Church Studies* 26, no. 1 (2024): 61–72.

⁶³ This was first developed in Wesis Porop Toap, ‘A Melanesian Pig Theology: An Anthropological/theological Interpretation of a Pig Culture Amongst the Woala Highlanders of Papa New Guinea,’ diss., Pacific Theological College, 1988. It was later picked up by Ama’amalele Tofaeono, ‘Behold the Pig of God: Mystery of Christ’s Sacrifice in the Context of Melanesia – Oceania,’ *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Series II, 33 (2005): 82–102.

In so far as some may remain troubled that the elements used as gifts of the table are evidently different from those that turn up in UIW2,⁶⁴ we suggest that there may be help in precedents in other theological conversations. These show allowance for what they call “tolerable anomalies” (a term used in Anglican-Methodist dialogue to commend to all the possibility of non-episcopal ordination)⁶⁵ or “catholic exceptions” (applied to numerous issues in liturgical theology).⁶⁶ However, we much more strongly wish to underscore the fundamental point that a wider sense of what is “standard” is needed than whatever is common in the west.

Finally, some very practical considerations: When might coconut communion be celebrated? We say: Easter, Pentecost, anytime – but maybe especially in the season of creation, with preaching and Bible study devoted to learning more about indigenous insights into links between people and land – like the rich meanings of *vanua* – not least as made in Pasifika via the coconut. And with whom might it be celebrated? We say: by any community – not only Pasifika-majority congregations. However, we strongly wish to stress that coconut communion is *not* well used in restless quest for exotic pizzazz, co-opting what is cherished by a present minority. Rather, the mystery is to be entered with a heart for deeper communion, openness to changing norms, and enjoyment of “catholic spirit”⁶⁷ – which is the spirit we intend in this contribution.⁶⁸

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⁶⁴ This anxiety may relate to another concerning whether there ever was a “Last Supper” – a question the gospels answer in their own way by including accounts of post-resurrection meals. Helpful starting resources for exploring Jesus’ meanings at supper before he died include Bruce Chilton, *Jesus’ Prayer and Jesus’ Eucharist: His Personal Practice of Spirituality* (Valley Forge: TPI, 1996), which views the gospel narratives of a *single night* as indicative of a *period* after his altercation with the Temple through which Jesus encouraged his followers to offer their lives to God at “a rival altar” – their own everyday tables and mealtimes – after his own example.

⁶⁵ See *Anglican-Methodist Ecumenism: The Search for Church Unity, 1920-2020*, ed. Jane Platt and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2022).

⁶⁶ See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) and *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ See Basis of Union ¶10, drawing upon Wesley’s famous sermon, “Catholic Spirit,” accessed November 16, 2025, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit/>

⁶⁸ Grateful thanks for comments on drafts of this paper to the postgraduate seminar at United Theological College, North Parramatta on 26.09.25 and the semester 2, 2025 class on “Theologies of Oceania” at Pilgrim Theological College, Parkville: Nicole Bezzina, Matt Harvey, Phil Kemp, David Kim, Taumafai Komiti, Chris Phillips, Erika Schaumkel, Jenny Soakai, Sesi Taunga, and Cathy Turnbull. For their comments on our draft paper, we further thank Jione Havea, Charissa Suli, Salesi Faupula, and the two blind reviewers.



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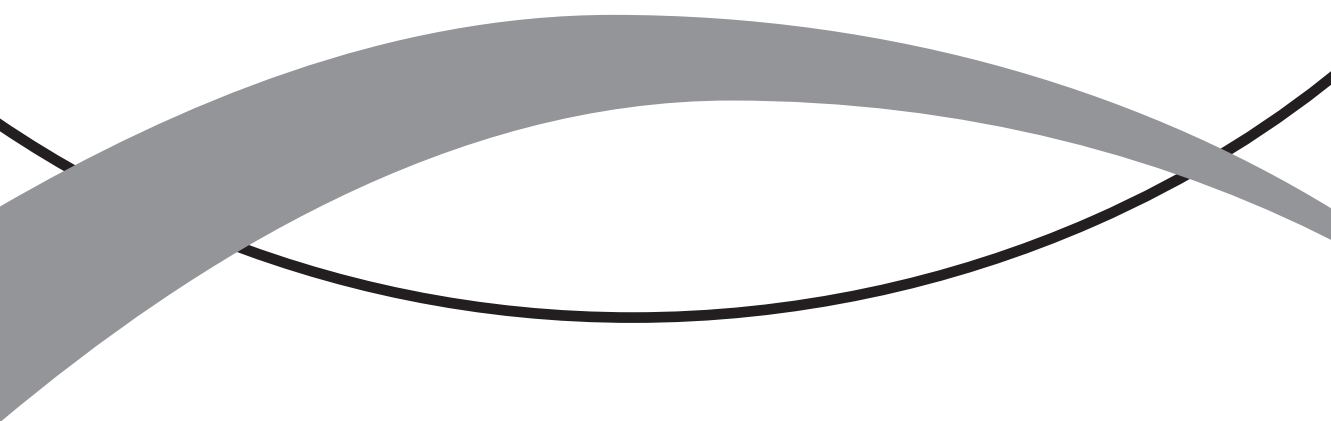
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