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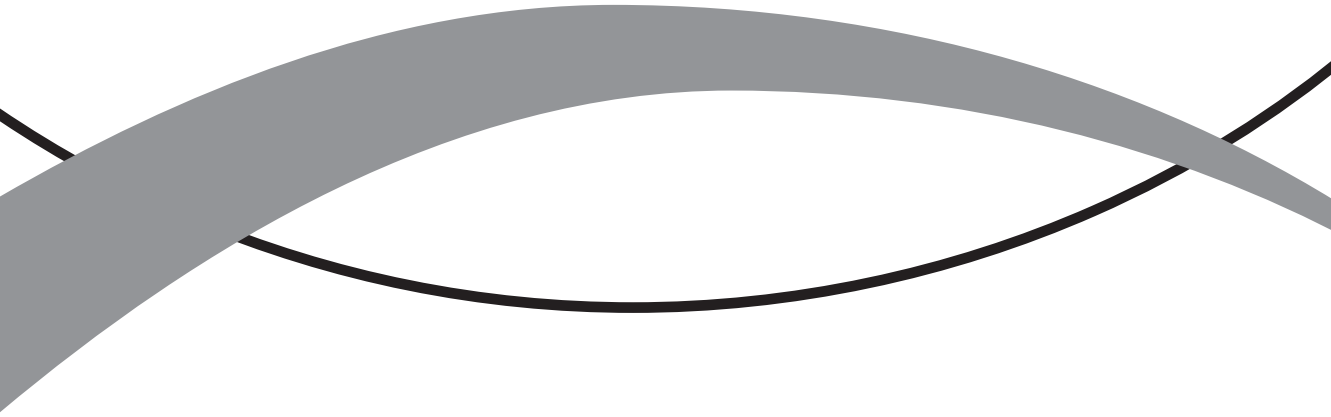

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Transforming Communities: talanoa and food as catalysts

Jione Havea and Faa'imata (Mata) Havea Hiliau

Abstract:

A human community is a collective of diverse peoples from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, interests, and commitments. 'Diverse' is the keyword here. Because of the intersecting diversities, every community – no matter how small – has the potential to irrupt and refresh itself. In church-speak, a community is a catalyst for *transforming* as the diverse people stretch out and touch one another's lives. In this regard, a community is (in itself) a catalyst for transforming. This is the first aspect of "transforming communities" (which is the theme for the 2025 Synod of NSW and ACT, in the Uniting Church in Australia). Transforming takes place internally. The second aspect relates to a key mission of the church, to enable transforming to take place in society (in which the church functions). The church (as institution) is the catalyst for transforming a community – beyond the church's horizons. In this essay we present *food* and *talanoa* (a native Pasifika practice and culture around story, telling, and conversing) as ingredients for creating environments in which transforming communities take root, and thrive.

"Transforming communities" is the theme for the 2025 Synod of NSW (New South Wales) and ACT (Australian Capital Territory) in the UCA (Uniting Church in Australia), the ecclesial body that we currently serve. To cut our proverbial long story short, the key contention in this article is that talanoa and food are catalysts that can create welcoming environments in which the Synod of NSW and ACT enable transforming communities.

Transforming communities

To our opening assertion, we add the following qualifications: First, we acknowledge that a community is a collective of diverse people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, interests, and commitments. 'Diverse' is the keyword here, and in the UCA and the cluster of islands now known as Australia, migration is one of the causes of cultural diversities. Migrants bring their home cultures into their new homes, and this contribute to the forming of multi-, poly-, inter-, cross- and trans-cultural communities.[1] *Migration* is one of the forming causes of cultural diversity, and *negotiation* is one of the transforming agents.

Second, because of the intersecting diversities and the negotiating demands, every community – no matter how small – has the potential to irrupt and refresh itself. In church-speak, a community is a catalyst for transforming as the diverse people stretch out and touch one another's lives. In this regard, a community

[1] See also Jione Havea, "Multi-, Poly-, Inter-culturality: Catalysts for Talanoa," *Insights online* https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/blog/multi-poly-inter-culturality-catalysts-for-talanoa/, Jan 09, 2025) and "Cross- and Trans-culturality: more Catalysts for talanoa" (https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/blog/cross-and-trans-culturality-more-catalysts-for-talanoa/, Feb 12, 2025)

(in itself) is a catalyst for transforming. This is the first aspect of what "transforming communities" means to us – transforming takes place internally, within all communities, as they are being formed.

Third, another aspect to "transforming communities" relates to a key mission of the church: the church is called to enable transforming to take place in a community. The church (as institution) is the catalyst for transforming a community – within and beyond the church's boundaries.

Fourth, from the living and transforming contexts of Pasifika, we present talanoa and food (in the following sections) as catalysts for creating environments in which transforming communities may take root, grow, and bear fruits. Food and talanoa are critical for preparing, establishing, "cooking," "feasting," and sharing formative relations, and relations warm and transform on the wings of reciprocity. A community that does not enable relations becomes individualistic and capitalistic; a community that does not encourage reciprocity cannot free itself from the transactional shackles of capitalist economies (see further the section on food).

Finally, we affirm that all human and church communities are made up of human-kind who live alongside Other-kinds (e.g., animals, plants, machines) and Earth. Actually, the human-kind depend upon Other-kinds and Earth. We will explain this affirmation in the section on talanoa, but we add here a caution: a community that fails to nurture healthy relations with Other-kinds and with Earth is self-centered and short-sighted. Such a community does not allow itself to be transforming – transforming in itself, and transforming in its presence in society.

Talanoa

The talanoa practice (something that we do) and culture (something that shapes who we are, and informs how we think and what we do) overlap so, like the chicken-and-egg riddle, we cannot say which one came first.[2] As a matter of introduction, we begin by explaining that the term "talanoa" has three registers:

i First, talanoa refers to *a story* (an account, or narrative). In native oral Pasifika circles, a story / talanoa is a weaving of several stories / talanoa. There is no isolated or unaffected story; every story /talanoa interweaves several stories.

ii Second, talanoa also refers to the *act of telling* (talking, presenting) a story. This act locates talanoa in the fluid arms of oratory. A story (talanoa) is told (talanoa) and retold (talanoa) for various purposes, from 'narrating an event' to 'dispelling mis- and dis-information' and 'setting the records straight'. Acts of telling and retelling are political; no telling / talanoa is innocent.

iii Third, talanoa also refers to the *event of conversing* (discussing) around *a story* and/or *a telling* of a story. Lurking behind this event is the question: who controls the story (talanoa) and/or the telling (talanoa)? In other words, who controls the narrative? This 'control' may be challenged through re-telling the same story to highlight other details, and in conversation with other folx; or through the telling of other stories, that preference alternative agendas.

[2] Lest we are mistaken, talanoa is not a methodology, as understood in academic circles, nor a concept or theme. Rather, talanoa is a native Pasifika practice and culture that interweaves what cultural critics reference as *orality* and *oratory*. In talanoa practice and culture the unscripted (unwritten, undecided), fluid, and fluctuating (some of the marks of orality) interweave with the spoken, contexted, and open-ended (some of the marks of oratory).

Talanoa refers to *all three at once*: story (as account), telling (as act), and conversing (as event). A story (talanoa) is dead if no one tells (talanoa) it; a telling (talanoa) tames the story (talanoa) if the teller does not make space for alternative understandings and for conversation (talanoa); and a conversation (talanoa) is adrift if it does not revisit the story (talanoa) and consider alternative talanoa (stories, tellings, conversations).

Theology as talanoa

Like talanoa, theology too revolves around stories, tellings, and conversations. And like in talanoa circles, theological reflections are set to enable and highlight – and in some cases to silence or control – some stories, tellings, and conversations.

Talanoa (story, telling, conversation) flows through all veins of life. Talanoa is in us (humans). We live with and around talanoa. We wake up with talanoa, we walk and work with and through talanoa, we eat (consume) talanoa, we breathe talanoa, we exhale talanoa, and we sleep with talanoa. And when we pass on, we die with talanoa.[3] We pass on, and so does talanoa – some talanoa die with us, and some pass on to the next generation. Talanoa flows in our veins.

Talanoa flows through all veins of life, and so does theology. Theology flows (or creeps) through all veins of life from the very distant and mysterious (e.g., God, skies, pleasures) to the very physical and indecent (e.g., earth, body, sexuality). To borrow from the Gospel of Thomas (saying 77): split a piece of wood, and there talanoa and theology greet you; lift up a stone, and you will find talanoa and theology. The point here is that theology and talanoa are everywhere, but this is not to say that talanoa and theology are in accord.

As a talanoa interweaves other talanoa, so does theology. Appealing to a current trend in critical theory: talanoa embodies intersectionality, and so does theology. Both talanoa and theology are inherently interested and political.

Talanoa is haunting and unending, and so is theology. Healthy theologies make room for restorying, for retelling, and for reopening conversations around matters of theology and of life. In these ways, theology too is ongoing and unending.[4]

The foregoing invites us to see that there is something for theologians and interpreters to learn from the native Pasifika practice and culture of talanoa. In this turn, appealing to the politics of contextual thinking, Pasifika (as context) has something to teach the christening theological enterprise (as provider of content). On that note, we return to the concern for Other-kinds and Earth indicated above.

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[3] We expect the same for Other-kinds – they have their talanoa, in their languages, and we expect that they could have a different opinion about us humans. We think that we control the narratives of life, but we have not learned to hear the talanoa of Other-kinds!

[4] For examples of the unending and haunting natures of theology, see Jione Havea (ed.), *Stirring Up Liberation Theologies: A Call for Release* (London: SCM, 2024) and Jione Havea (ed.), *Haunting Questions of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM, 2025).

Other-kinds

Sacred talanoa of creation teach us, as in the case of Genesis 1–2, that animals and plants were created before the humankind. The human community was formed and located in relation to, and in reliance upon, the animal and plant worlds.

In some of the Pasifika sacred talanoa, islands and islanders are created by animals. One of the sacred talanoa from the cluster of islands now known as Fiji, for example, names Degei – a snake god from a distant location[5] – as the creator of the islands and islanders. And several native Pasifika sacred talanoa name Tangaloa[6] – who comes in the form of a *kiu* bird in Tongan sacred stories – as the creator. In native Pasifika sacred talanoa, the humankind is one of the species of the animal world.

Sacred talanoa of creation (in the Bible and in Pasifika) also call attention to the energies of nature – wind, waves, storm, drought, light, darkness, and so forth. These energies too are among the Other-kinds that we encourage healthy relating with, and appropriate reciprocating alongside, by members of transforming human- and church-communities.

Earth

One of the Tongan sacred talanoa present the islands and islanders in relation to four interweaving bodies: sea (moana), (is)land, sky, and underground. This sacred talanoa starts with fire coming up from the *underground* (named Pulotu) through Moana (*sea*) to form an *island* named ʻAta (at the southern end of the Tonga group). This sacred talanoa opens by interweaving the underground (Pulotu), sea (Moana), and (is)land (ʻAta).

The creation of islanders brings the fourth body – sky – into this talanoa, through a bird, a plant, and a maggot (i.e., Other-kinds). Tangaloa (a *kiu* bird) came from the *sky* and discovered the island of ʻAta. Tangaloa dropped a seed onto the island, then flew away.

When Tangaloa returned to ʻAta, it discovered that a *maile* (a native vine) had grown from the seed. Tangaloa pecked the *maile* vine, and the plant fell down. Then Tangaloa flew away.

When Tangaloa again returned to ʻAta, a maggot had grown from the *maile*. Tangaloa pecked the maggot into two pieces – the top / head became Kohai (a female), and the bottom became Koau (a male). Tangaloa felt a crumb (read: leftover) in its beak and shook it off – the crumb became a third human, Momo (whose gender is not specified in the talanoa).

The talanoa continues, but at this point we celebrate how this sacred talanoa links islanders (and by extension, humans) to a maggot. In theological terms, humans are images of a maggot – who at the end will return to consume our dead bodies.

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[5] Ironically, land snakes are not indigenous to Fiji!
[6] In Niue, the name Tagaloa means rainbow.

We find the four earthly bodies in the Tongan sacred talanoa – land, sea, sky, and underground / deep – in the opening verses of the Bible:

> When God began to create the heavens (sky) and the earth
> The earth was then unformed and void
> but darkness was over the face of the deep (underground)
> and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters (sea). (Gen 1:1–2)

At the intersection of these sacred stories, we affirm that human and church communities are founded on Earth (sea, land, sky, underground) among Other-kinds. And we assert that being transforming communities requires care for and solidarity with Earth and Other-kinds.

Talanoa is transforming

In the section on food (below), we restory three gospel stories in the spirit of the practice and culture of talanoa. We do not pretend to say everything about the gospel stories, but we seek to show how talanoa-based readings of the gospel stories are transforming.

There are more to say about the gospel stories, and we invite readers to interrogate and engage our restorying of them on the basis of their own practices and cultures. We do not have the final say on the gospel stories, but we herein set the table for talanoa-informed and food-oriented engagements with them.

Food

There is a joke among Pasifika (for Pacific) natives that an event is not a "true" Pasifika event if food is not served.[7] Food is a crucial ingredient in the gathering of Pasifika communities. We gather with and around food, and in the process of *preparing*, *consuming*, and *redistributing* (leftover) food we also share talanoa (story, telling, conversing). In Pasifika circles, in the islands as well as in the diaspora, food and talanoa are vital for *forming*, and *transforming*, communities.

In Pasifika village events, and in significant family events like funerals and weddings, members of the community and relatives (*whānau, aiga, kāinga*) from other villages and islands (locally and overseas) bring food items for the event. The contributions are brought because of relations (bear in mind that extended family ties are strong in Pasifika), and in the spirit of reciprocity.

Put differently: a village or family had contributed to an earlier event / feast of ours, so when they do an event / feast, we reciprocate. The sharing of food – and of leftovers – is not just about hospitality. It is also about relationality and reciprocity, which are critical for what might be called "Pasifika economy."

[7] The second part of this joke is about how a "true" Pasifika feast includes corned beef (*pi supo, kapa pulu*) and KFC, and other non-native food items.

Pasifika economy

Food is a currency in the Pasifika economy. This economy is communal, relation-building, and reciprocal, rather than individualistic and transactional. The communal mindset is the basis for what Leslie Boseto (of Solomon Islands) called "wontok economy" – an economy that is based upon the relations between "wontok" (for "one talk" – people who communicate and share values, across village and island boundaries).[8] Wontok economy promotes and privileges relationships – in the past, in the present, and for the future – over against building profits and establishing monopolies. Wontok economy is about people, and food plays a crucial role in the co-existence of Pasifika people.[9]

In native Pasifika minds, *preparing* food is significant. Matagi Vilitama (of Niue) has developed a *umu* (lit. ground oven; read: kitchen) theology based on the critical role that cooking plays in Pasifika communities.[10] As people gather around the *umu* to prepare for a feast, they warm up old relationships and form new ones. In the process of *preparing* food people form and transform their relationships.

An essay by Tangikefataua Koloamatangi (of Tonga) reminded readers of the location of the *umu* / kitchen – it is at the back of the home (*toumui*). *Toumui* is not always neat and tidy. When the *umu* fires up, *toumui* is filled with smoke and mess. But this is the place from where people who are neat, tidy, and proper at the front of the home (*toumu'a*) are served and fed.[11] Like Koloamatangi, we see and affirm the important role that *umu* and *toumui* play in forming and transforming Pasifika families and church communities.[12]

One does not come empty-handed to a Pasifika event / feast, and most folx will not only bring their contribution but they also stay to help with the preparation, cooking, and serving of the food. There are lots of laughter around the *umu* at the *toumui*, because of the talanoa that folx share.

Moreover, people do not leave empty-handed from a Pasifika event / feast. They will take at least talanoa to munch over later, as well as some leftover food from the table. And whatever food is left at the *toumui* are distributed to those who contributed food items and those who helped with the *umu*.

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[8] Wontoks speak and act around shared relational values. See Leslie Boseto, "The Gospel of Economy from a Solomon Islands Perspective" in *Voices from the Margin: Reading the Bible in the Third World*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 179–84.

[9] For a reflection on Pasifika economy, see Jione Havea "Unsettling Economies: A Moana Account(ing)," in *Unsettling Theologies: Memory, Identity, and Place*, edited by Brian Kolia and Michael Mawson (Cham: Palgrave, 2024), 223–237. And for another reflection on food in Pasifika circles, see Jione Havea, "Food crises: Rereading Numbers 11 with and in Moana Worldviews," in *Food: How What We Eat Is Weaponized*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2025), 249–60.

[10] Matagi Jessop Vilitama, "*Fetuiaga Kerisiano*: Church as a Moving *Umu*," in *Theologies from the Pacific*, edited by Jione Havea (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), 103–115.

[11] Tangikefataua Koloamatangi, "*Ko e Punake mo 'e ne Ta'anga, pea mo e Folofola* (Composer, Composition, and the Canon)" in *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific*, edited by Jione Havea (Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 69–81.

[12] On kitchen-based thinking, see also Kathleen P. Rushton, "Whakawhanaungatanga (doing right relationship), Beyond a Failure of Nerve and Imagination," in *Theology as Threshold: Invitations from Aotearoa New Zealand*, edited by Jione Havea *et al.* (Lanham: Lexington /Fortress Academic, 2022), 57–70.

Feeding Four and Five Thousand

There are two feeding stories in the Gospel of Matthew: (1) the feeding of a crowd of "five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt 14:21) with "five loaves of bread and two fish" (Matt 14:17), and (2) the feeding of a crowd of "four thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt 15:38) with "seven [loaves] and a few small fish" (Matt 15:34). Both stories emphasize the magical effect of Jesus's *words* (he gave thanks for the loaves and fish) and *touch* (he broke the bread, then gave to his disciples to distribute), which enabled a small amount of food to feed a huge crowd. And there were leftovers – twelve basketfuls of broken pieces in Matt 14, and seven basketfuls of broken pieces in Matt 15.

The story-world of both feeding talanoa vibrates in the power of Jesus to heal. As Jesus healed the sick with his *words* and *touch*, so did he "heal" the hunger of thousands of people with his *words* and *touch* over a few loaves and fish.

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In modern contexts where cost of living is so high, there is something encouraging about the possibility that a few food items can go a long way. A little could be shared, and there would be leftovers. This understanding gives hope for poor people who follow Jesus, because of his capacity to heal and provide. The poor do not have much, and they are broken, but their faith can help them feed and collect leftovers from the little that they have.

In the Pasifika context, these talanoa challenge our fixation on size and amount. *Big* and *lots* are sneaking into our relational and reciprocal cultures. Some of our people would not go to an event because they don't have, for example, mats, pigs, and yams to contribute. The Matthean feeding talanoa push back at the *big* and *lots* mindset, which reflect economies that are based on capital and wealth.

In Pasifika minds, everyone has something. No matter how small – like the loaves and fish in the Matthean stories – no one is empty-handed. Many do not have a pig or a mat to contribute, but they have something – like a piece of firewood, a mature coconut, one or a pair of strong hands (to help with cooking), the spirit of willingness to be present and to relate, and a few talanoa – which they can contribute to the *umu*. The Matthean stories affirm that no matter how small, everyone can contribute, participate, and share in family and village events.

The challenge for our people, both in the home-islands and in diaspora, is to *be sustainable* with the *small* and *few* that we have. Being sustainable requires what Tongans call *fakapotopoto* – being wise with what one has. The opposite of *fakapotopoto* is *fakavalevale* – being foolish and wasteful (*laiki*). The *big* and *lots* mindset makes people susceptible to *fakavalevale* and *laiki* behaviors – one of the upshots of capital and wealth. On the other hand, *fakapotopoto* intentionally makes space for relationality and reciprocity.

In the Matthean stories, we see *fakapotopoto* in the collecting of the leftovers. The broken bread and fish were not wasted (*laiki*) but, we imagine, collected for an evening snack! The Matthean stories therefore appeal to our Pasifika minds and context, in many ways.

Notwithstanding, the Matthean stories can also irritate families who are struggling to make ends meet – for example, among the homeless families in the cluster of islands now known as Australia (which functions according to the ticks and tricks of capitalism), and in war zones like those in Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, Ukraine, and yonder. There are no magic words or multiplying touch for their few morsels, and their families sleep hungry at night. Put differently, we affirm the obvious: the Matthean stories, like the fish in them, have bones!

A boy's (family's) contribution

Neither of the Matthean feeding stories could answer a critical question in the Pasifika food-economy: Who brought the loaves and fish? In both Matthean stories, the disciples gave the impression that the food were theirs.

There is another story of the feeding of a large crowd in the Gospel of John (6:1–14). This story is also about a crowd of people who followed Jesus because they were drawn by the signs that he performed e.g., healing the sick (6:2). The number of people is estimated at five thousand men (6:10), but there is no mention of women and children in the crowd,[13] as in the Matthean stories. Nonetheless, in the eyes of the Johannine story, it was "a great crowd" (6:5).

Upon seeing the great crowd, Jesus, as we expect of a native Pasifika elder, indicated that he wanted to feed them. He asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (6:5). Even though Jesus was testing Philip,[14] his question appeals to a capitalist form of economy: that bread / food are products that one could buy and sell. The transactional form of economy privileges those who have money. Philip's response is steeped in this economic mindset: he estimated that "it would take more than half a year's wages [Gk: two hundred denarii] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite" (6:7).

A different economic mindset emerges with Andrew's response: "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (6:9). Food is available. But obviously, it is not enough to feed such a great crowd. Andrew did not suggest that they buy more food, but he left the boy's food with Jesus. The story continued along the lines of the two stories in Matthew: Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, distributed the food, and after the crowd were satisfied the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

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Based on the understanding of Pasifika economy noted above, we offer the following readings: First, the critical question – Who brought the loaves and fish? This question is important in the Pasifika relational and reciprocal cultures. People need to know who contributed, so that they would relate and reciprocate later.[15]

[13] This oversight is significant given that, as John's talanoa goes on to reveal, the loaves and fish were taken from a boy.
[14] The next verse adds that this was a test, for Jesus already knew (and readers anticipate, if they have read the Matthean talanoa) what he was going to do.
[15] The question also draws attention to *toumui*, the place where the food was prepared, and not just the cooked food that Andrew took from the boy. Both aspects of this question inform the first and second readings that we propose.

Andrew identified but did not name the boy who brought the food. We assume that he was among the unnoticed women and children in the crowd.[16] In our Tongan minds, he was more than a "boy" – more importantly, he was a *foha* (son) or *tama* (child) that belonged to a family and community. He was not named, but with our Pasifika eyes we can see his family, especially his mother, who prepared the food for him. His family may have also been in the crowd, so the food that he carried (and taken by Andrew, whether by consent or by force – we do not know[17]) was not for him alone, but for his family.

Second, because we see this son's family, we also see other families in the crowd. We imagine that they too brought food, carried by their children, and upon being told to sit down, they would have taken their food out and ate along with the others. We respect the power of Jesus's words and touch, as part of God's transformative moments, but we also see families with their food, the leftovers from which would have helped fill the baskets that the disciples collected afterward.

Third, we also see families in the crowd that did not bring any food. Having food is about access to resources, and people do not have the same privileges. But in the wantok economy, *people who have* share with *people who do not have*. We therefore imagine that families who brought food would have invited and shared with less-privileged families who did not bring any food. In our native Pasifika ears, the twelve baskets of leftovers tell us that all in the crowd of 5,000+ had something to eat (compare to "have a bite" in Philip's response) and were satisfied.

Fourth, we wonder, what did the disciples do with the leftovers? We suggested above that the leftovers were saved for an evening snack. But for who's snack? Did they redistribute the leftovers to the great crowd? The Matthean and Johannine stories do not answer our questions, but they are the kinds of questions that arise in Pasifika relational and reciprocal cultures.

Finaly, speaking of relational and reciprocal cultures, what did Jesus and the disciples do to build the relationship, by reciprocating, with the unnamed son and his family? The Matthean and Johannine stories do not answer this question also. But in the world of talanoa, retelling (talanoa) the story (talanoa) and inviting critical conversation (talanoa) in ways that account for the unnamed son – as we have done above – is one way of building relationality and reciprocity.

So what?

We presented talanoa and food as catalysts for transforming communities. We here add that the call to be transforming communities is not limited to the NSW and ACT Synod. This call is critical for our contexts, which is marked by cultural diversities and suffocated by climate injustice.

Put sharply: Without engaging the practices and cultures of minoritized cultures, a community – church, public, academic, or otherwise – is not transforming enough. And without accounting for and acting on

[16] Women and children are often unnoticed and unnamed in the Bible.
[17] Andrew could be accused of doing what bullies do in schools – they take young kids' lunch.

behalf of the wellbeing of Other-kinds and of Earth, a community – church, public, academic, or otherwise – is not transforming enough.

We presented our talanoa as food for reflection and action. We have set the table. And we invite readers to bring their talanoa to the table. And let this feast (of talanoa and catalysts) continue!

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Abbreviations

Documents

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

AssMin	Assembly Minutes
BOU	Basis of Union
CS	Covenanting Statement
RP	Revised Preamble
UCMC	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
UCAConst	Uniting Church Constitution
UCARegs2025	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
UIW2	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

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

This journal

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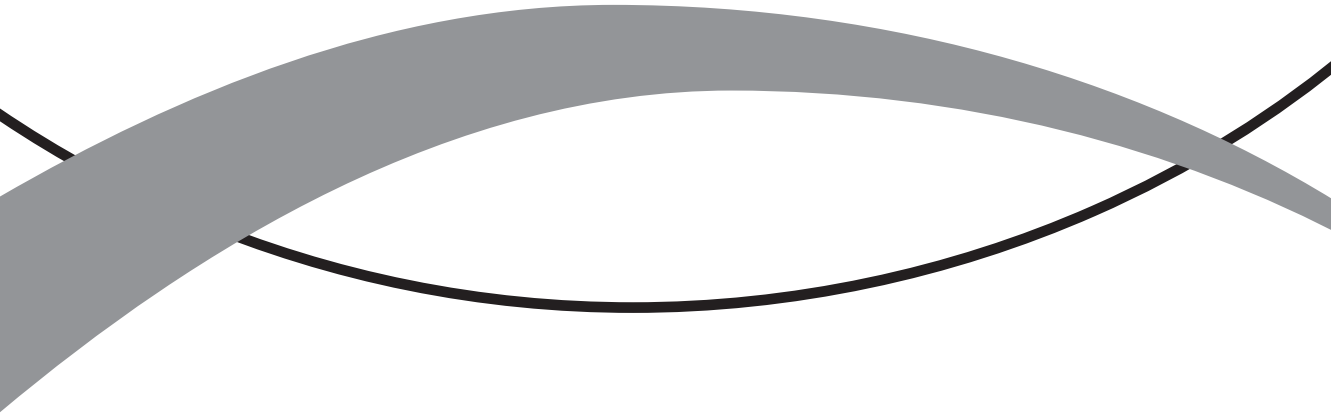
UCS	Uniting Church Studies



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