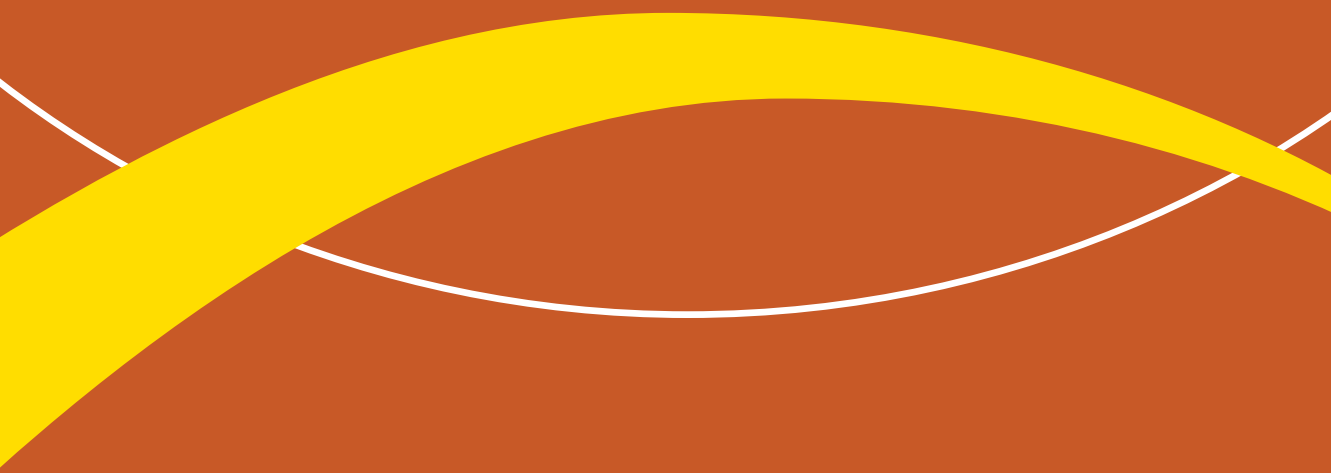


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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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.

David, Goliath and the Gospel: Metaphors in Conflict

Clive Pearson

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to situate the statements on the enduring Middle East crisis inside current scholarship to do with the region. It assumes the need for a deeper historical and geopolitical understanding. It draws upon podcasts to provide an historical appreciation of the importance of Gaza through time. It seeks to explain the emergence of the state of Israel as a consequence of late nineteenth century thinking on Zionism and evangelical understandings of the restoration of Israel. The current situation in the whole region can only be understood in the light of the fall of the Ottoman empire and post-World War 1 reconfigurations of territory. The present plight of the Palestinians was seeded in the establishment of Israel and the dislocation of its people during the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948. In the late twentieth century a number of 'new historians' arose in Israel to challenge the received Israeli understanding that its people were like David facing an Arabic Goliath. That metaphor has become inverted. The article mediates Palestinian experience and the emergence of a liberation theology raising afresh the question of how should the gospel be understood in a time of genocide. Munther Isaac presented the image and idea of Christ in the rubble; the Israelis have made use of an AI system to assist in the selection of bombing sites called 'the gospel'.

In the aftermath of the Hamas' raid of 7 October 2023 the Uniting Church has sought to make its position clear on the 'worsening conflict' in the Middle East. It has done so through public statements, resolutions and articles on Palestine and Israel. The basis on which these have been made is "our Christian faith and in our commitments to justice, human rights and dignity" in a context of an "unfolding humanitarian crisis." The most recent advocacy of the church has been directed towards the need for ceasefires, humanitarian aid, the end of occupation, the release of all hostages, respect for international law, the rejection of anti-Semitism and racism, the ending of weapon exports, and the pursuit of a "just and lasting peace for all in Palestine and Israel."

The purpose of this "discerning" has been to "render a transparent resource for Uniting Church members, partners, media and members of the public who wish to understand our position and advocacy."¹

This resourcing has come with calls to 'take action' that lend themselves to local witness and worship.² The present response is built upon previous statements reaching back to 2008.³ These things have their

¹ Uniting Church in Australia, 'Statements, Articles and Resources on Palestine and Israel', 5 August 2025, <https://uniting.church/palestine-and-israel/>

² These practical actions include displaying banners, writing to the government, making use of a FAQ resource in order to engage with others, and making use of the President's liturgical lament for Gaza.

³ Uniting Church, Assembly: "Jews and Judaism: A Statement by the UCA," (2009); Assembly Standing Committee, 'Statement on Palestine and Israel, (2008); 'Statement on Palestine', (2015).

urgency and their place. They reflect the sense of Palestine presenting a *kairos* moment ⁴ to the world-wide churches. It is not surprising that the Uniting Church has adopted the World Council of Church's 2025 statement, *A Call to End Apartheid, Occupation and Impunity in Palestine and Israel*.

The intention behind this bibliographical essay is to consider how the Uniting Church's positions sit within a number of currents within contemporary scholarship to do with the Middle East. For that purpose it is interdisciplinary with a particular focus on historical and theological studies. The essay is constructed on the grounds that the church needs to have a broader grasp of why this geopolitical series of problems has become so enduring. It must necessarily engage with competing religious understandings, the emergence of a Palestinian liberation theology, and the impact of Israel's 'new historians'. It examines claims to do with who is the "David" and who is the "Goliath." It invites consideration of how religious rhetoric is used and what might be meant by references to the 'gospel'. This essay should also be read in a way that complements the other articles that deal with the consequences of the Armenian genocide, growing up in war-torn Lebanon, and being a pilgrim in Israel on 7 October.

Podcasting History

The most readily accessible accounts that have relevance and bearing on the regional conflict in the Middle East is via well-researched podcasts. The Empire: World History podcast with the eminent historian, William Dalrymple, and Anita Anand has repeatedly made use of specialist guests from leading universities to explore Gaza through time, the rise of Zionism, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the emergence of Hezbollah.⁵ To these can be added other series on the Armenian genocide, the fall of the Ottoman empire, the manoeuvring of European diplomacy, and the wars between Israel and Arab nations. The Rest is History podcast with Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook has covered the Iranian revolution beginning with the disillusionment and then the overthrow of the Shah.⁶

Of particular interest is the 11-part series Dalrymple and Anand oversaw on Gaza. Writing in *The Guardian* Dalrymple noted that it is a "place about which we have traditionally learned remarkably little." Its history, he believes, is "something we obviously badly need to know in order to grasp current events."⁷ Without such a narrative we succumb to what the Palestinian poet of the West Bank, Mahmoud Darwish, described as "the ambush of a new past."⁸ His verse echoes the lament of Jean-Pierre Filiu: "The Gaza I knew, whose length and breadth. I've travelled, has ceased to exist."⁹

The podcast series set about the task of exploring the intersection of time and this particularity of place. The intention behind the podcast was essentially two-fold. In the first instance Dalrymple and Anand were

⁴ In 2009 Palestinian Christians released the *Kairos Palestine Document*. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/kairos-palestine-document>

⁵ William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, "The Deep History of Gaza," Episodes 291-301; "Israel's 1982 Invasion of Lebanon," Episode 352. <https://empirepoduk.com>

⁶ Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook, "Revolution in Iran," 19 January, 2026. Episodes 636-639. <https://therestishistory.com/episodes>

⁷ William Dalrymple, " 'One of the Oldest Urban Centres on the Planet': Gaza's Rich History in Ruins," *The Guardian*, 17 October 2025.

⁸ Mahmoud Darwish, "To Our Land," *The Butterfly's Burden*, translated by Fady Joudah, (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2007).

⁹ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *A Historian in Gaza*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025).

committed to taking a “deep dive” into Gaza’s past, “one of the oldest urban centres on the earth.” They wished to look past the “hellscape” that Gaza has become and the present perspective of its being “little more than a huge refugee camp on a recently settled portion of desert.”¹⁰ Their series captured the first intimations of the Palestinians under the name of Pelesets (of Ghazzati) and then the Palashtu, dating from the 15th and 8th centuries BC respectively. It described a history in which the city had often been an “incredibly rich and prosperous port” with trade in spices, sweet wine, perfumes – and later, cotton and citrus fruits. Dalrymple and Anand set aside time to consider the “golden period” Gaza’s experienced in the early Christian period (fifth and sixth centuries). It was a noted intellectual centre and a site for the first monasteries in Palestine. They also described how the city and its hinterland has been “one of the most fought-over and contested spaces” because of its strategic location. It was subject to invasion and conquest from the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, the Byzantines, Umayyads, Mamluks, and the Ottomans into which can be inserted the Crusades.

The second intention of this podcast series was dedicated to how the “catastrophe” of 1948 (*al-Nakba*) arose as a consequence of two world wars. It mapped the ways in which the British army sought to take Gaza from the Ottomans in 1917 and how that then gave way to the British Mandate and the increasing tensions between Zionist settlers and Palestinian Arabs. To what extent was Arab revolt of 1936-1939 a response to the repressive tactics of the British? The latter episodes then focussed upon the end of the mandate, the conflicting responses to the UN partition plan, the war of 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel and the impact on Gaza following the mass displacement of 700,000 Palestinians. Its population almost doubled overnight.

This series did not stand on its own. In one earlier episode Dalrymple and Anand had paid specific attention to the Sykes-Picot agreement: in 1916 the British and the French set forth the parameters by which they would carve upon the Middle East following the defeat of the Ottomans. This agreement along with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which expressed the support of the British for ‘a national home for the Jewish people’ in Palestine set in place the framework in which the subsequent crises would play out.¹¹

Implicating Empires

The current “terrible moment” (Dalrymple) invariably draws attention to the legacy of the British mandate and the various responses of the United States since it became the first country to recognize officially the state of Israel in 1948.¹² Those positions did not arise out of nowhere. At one level it is an obvious response to the persistence of anti-Semitism in Europe and then the Holocaust – but that is only part of the story. So much also depended on the case that was being made for a Christian Zionism. Donald Lewis has noted how the seeds of such were to be found in arguments made on behalf of the restoration of Israel during the

¹⁰ William Dalrymple, “One of the Oldest Centres on the Planet,” *The Guardian*, 17 October 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/17/one-of-the-oldest-urban-centres-on-the-planet-gazas-rich-history-in-ruins>

¹¹ Andrew Thomas, “What was the Sykes-Picot Agreement and why does it still affect the Middle East today?,” *The Conversation*, 14 February 2025. <https://theconversation.com/what-was-the-sykes-picot-agreement-and-why-does-it-still-affect-the-middle-east-today-246332>; Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Random House, 2010); Bernard Regan, *The Balfour Declaration: Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine* (London: Verso, 2018)

¹² See Daniel E. Zoughbie, *Kicking the Hornet’s Nest: US Foreign Policy in the Middle East from Truman to Trump*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2025).

Reformation.¹³ Of more immediate causative significance, though, was the Christian Zionism of certain evangelical groups in the mid- to late-nineteenth century: it has access to the political elites of time through the likes of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The Christian faith is heavily implicated in what has come to pass.

In his study on *Lobbying for Zionism* (2025) Ilan Pappé examines how an “aggressive” lobby arose on both sides of the Atlantic. It took on a more substantial form from 1948 onwards. It is not a monolithic movement. It comprises “groupings of ideas, individuals and organisations.” Pappé identifies how the lobby seeks to cultivate political elites: it has been operative in campaign funding in the United States and the distribution of what he argues is propaganda. Through his research Pappé has shown how the lobby makes use of smear campaigns and the blacklisting of those who do not support Israel and who campaign on behalf of the dispossession of Palestinian lands and civil rights. Those who speak out against what they see as the excesses of Israeli policy, and the way in which Zionist thinking justifies the further settler appropriation of lands, are liable to be dismissed as anti-Semitic.¹⁴

The Cost of Shifting Geopolitics

These podcasts – and numerous others – provide a primer for the ongoing Middle East crisis. They provide an umbrella under which more detailed monographs can assist the Uniting Church in its prayers of intercession, expressions of solidarity and a basic desire to be better informed. That is an aspiration insofar as, generally speaking, the complexities of the recurring sequence of troubles is far removed from the matters of restructure that haunt the church.

The podcasts invite a broader reading, initially, of how various empires are implicated in the present. The legacies wrought by the fall of the Ottoman empire, for example, cannot be underestimated. Its defeat in the First World War led to the establishment of new nations and the determining of frontiers. In his comprehensive study of the great war in the Middle East Eugene Rogan describes how European imperialism replaced four centuries of a multinational empire ruled by the Muslim Turks. The fall of the Ottomans indirectly then laid the foundations for the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict – “more than any other legacy” suggests Rogan.¹⁵

Like Rogan, Kim Ghattas has been a guest on the Empire podcast – in her case, reporting on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the birth of Hezbollah. Ghattas is more widely known for her much-acclaimed *Black Wave* in which she makes use of an empathetic story-telling approach through real-life characters. The framework is one of “perspectivity” which allows her to examine complex problems through the intimate interconnections among diverse experiences and points of view. The focus of her particular work here is on the impact on the Middle East brought about by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that is contested through proxy wars. Ghattas is not writing about Palestine and Gaza *per se*: her narrative

¹³ Donald M. Lewis, *A Short History of Christian Zionism: From the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021).

¹⁴ Ilan Pappé, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic*, (London: Oneworld, 2025).

¹⁵ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 405.

begins in Lebanon. She is seeking to answer her opening question, “what happened to us?” across the region from 1979 onwards.¹⁶

“The New Historians”

Seeking to interpret afresh the received understandings of the national myths of Israel have been a number of scholars described as “the new historians.” This term was first put to use by Benny Morris in 1988. Their number includes the prolific Pappé as well as Avi Shlaim and Simha Flapan.¹⁷ They do not constitute a movement as such, but they do share important ground with regards to sources for their work. Each of them was able to make use of access to official government papers from multiple archives having been declassified after the *Nakba*. These new historians all inverted the metaphor of David and Goliath which had come to prominence during the 1948 war. Back then Israel saw itself as David facing the Arab Goliath. In their work Palestine is David, Israel becomes Goliath on account of its military hardware and logistics.

Shlaim laid out a set of their findings over and against the Zionist position (which he described as “one of the most successful public relations exercises of the twentieth century”). This “varnished position of the past” Shlaim reckoned to be “selective, simplistic and self-serving.”¹⁸ The received understanding which the “new historians” have contested had persisted unchallenged for four decades: it is still widely held – and, as Shlaim suggests, “goes roughly as follows.”¹⁹

The passage of the United Nations’ partition resolution (29 November 1947) called for the establishment of two states – one Jewish, the other Arab. The Palestinians, their Arab neighbours and the Arab League rejected the plan. Towards the end of their mandate the British sought to frustrate the establishment of the Jewish state, but to no avail. The ending of the mandate and the proclamation of the state of Israel led to the invasion of Arab states intent on “strangling the Jewish state at birth.” The ensuing conflict was likened to a battle between “a Jewish David and an Arab Goliath”. Israel won seemingly against the odds: during the war itself thousands of Palestinians fled to neighbouring Arab states. The Israeli leaders then sought peaceful co-existence but Arabic intransigence made that impossible. This “deadlock” was only partially broken when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made his unprecedented visit to Jerusalem in 1977.²⁰

In “a nutshell” the revisionist position was one in which the British had actually sought to prevent the emergence of a Palestinian state. The Jews outnumbered the Arab forces both in terms of soldiery and weapons. For the most part, Palestinians did not choose to leave: they were forced out. The Arab opposition was no ‘monolith’: their rulers were too divided. The quest for a political settlement was frustrated more by

¹⁶ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty Year Rivalry That Unravelling Culture, Religion and the Collective Memory in the Middle East*, (London: 2020)

¹⁷ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Avi Shlaim, “The War of the Israeli Historians,” *Annales*, 59:1, January-February 2004, 161.

¹⁹ Shlaim, “The War of the Israeli Historians,” 161.

²⁰ Shahin Berenji, ‘Sadat and the Road to Jerusalem: Bold Gestures and Risk Acceptance in the Search for Peace’, *International Security* 45:1 (Summer 2020), 127-163.

the Israelis than the Arabs.²¹ It should come as no surprise that Shlaim discerned that Israelis were likely to be perceived as ‘conquerors’ by the Palestinians

These first writings of the new historians have been followed by other publications – both by them and by others. It should come as no surprise that these revisionist arguments have been frequently disputed by more right-wing historians in Israel. The familiar criticism of this alternative reading of history has been its selective use of the declassified archival material, the neglect of Arab sources that might suggest a contrary interpretation, and the failure to take seriously the anti-Semitism to be found in Islam. It is said the new historians pay insufficient attention to the need for security. Their work has not been contained to the academy, though. It has received widespread attention: it has inserted itself into the country’s public and political domain.²²

For members of the Uniting Church the most accessible of these new historians is Pappé. His many books are readily available in bookshops throughout the country. One of those in his corpus which is especially relevant at present is his *Ten Myths about Israel* first published in 2017. The edition currently available in Australian bookshops was actually released in 2024 with a new preface written in the wake of October 7, the first year of the Israeli campaign against Hamas and the 35,000 then dead in Gaza.²³ The specific myths that he addressed gathered around claims like: i). Palestine was an empty land; Palestinians voluntarily left their homeland in 1948: ii). The Jews were a people without a land; Zionism is Judaism; Zionism is not colonialism: iii). Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East; the war of 1967 was a war of ‘no choice’; iv). Various ‘mythologies’ surrounding the Oslo Process and those to do with the Gaza Strip itself, which, elsewhere, Pappé describes as an ‘invention of the Israelis in 1948, faced with a seemingly intractable refugee problem’;²⁴ v). The two-state solution is the only way ahead.

The preface to this second edition is especially instructive. It was published under the heading of “Decontextualizing and Dehistoricizing Gaza.” It was marked by a distinction being made between context and pretext. The former referred to the Hamas al-Aqsa Flood on 7 October 2023 with its “atrocities and war crimes” and “the brutal Israeli retaliation.” The pretext was mediated through the accompanying comment made by António Guterres, the UN General Secretary: “these actions did not take place in a vacuum.” The tragedy of this “terrible moment” cannot be separated from “fifty-six years of occupation”²⁵ In this preface Pappé argues that Israel and its allies have “dehistoricized” these events – that is, they forget this history – in order to “pursue genocidal policies in the Gaza strip” and, in the case of the United States, reassert its presence in the region. Pappé also insists on how matters of context should extend behind the *Nakba* through to the mid-nineteenth century, when

evangelical Christianity turned the idea of “the return of the Jews” into a religious, millennial imperative and advocated the establishment of a Jewish state, the return of the Messiah, and the end of time.²⁶

²¹ Shlaim, ‘The War of Israeli Historians’, 162-163.

²² On the complexity of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ histories and their impact on Israel’s ‘*habitus*’ – ‘everything we have learnt from other people since birth, but which has become so deeply habituated that even to ourselves it feels not learned but innate’, see: Alon Helled, *Israel’s National Historiography: Between Generations, Identity and State*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

²³ Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths about Israel* (London: Verso, 2024).

²⁴ Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of Gaza* (London: Oneworld, 2026), 92.

²⁵ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, ix-x.

²⁶ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

This extension of context enables Pappé to fuse an “obscure theological vision” into a “political project” that led to the “famous, or infamous, 1917 Balfour Declaration.” Pappé is thus in a position to further the trajectory through a “cultural and intellectual Zionism” into a “settler colonial one intent on Judaizing historical Palestine regardless of the presence of a distinct indigenous population.”²⁷

Into this mix Pappé inserted his reading of “the forced relocation” of Palestinians in 1948 as an “ethnic cleansing” and the conviction that subsequent resistance is “terroristic.”²⁸ This preface is designed to situate the current conflict inside a longer history, and, more narrowly, within “the siege of nearly two decades that followed Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005.”²⁹ The purpose of the Preface is not to vindicate the Hamas attack; Pappé considers that the attack may well have provoked Hamas’ own demise. His intention is to understand why it happened and set that purpose within the context of his ten myths – with a proviso. Will the Hamas attack lead to yet another myth through the way in which it led to comparisons with the Holocaust and the Palestinian liberation movement being likened to an extension of Nazism?³⁰

It is not surprising that the new historians are more highly regarded in the west than in Israel itself. They provide a narrative which readily supports the Assembly’s endorsement of the World Council of Church’s statement on Palestine and the Kairos 2 document. Some care, nevertheless, needs to be exercised. The research of the new historians has become a part of the Israeli historiography, but not without some critique and pushback. It is also a mistake to think that they possess a common mind across the board. They do not. Morris is especially critical of Pappé, a former Israeli politician, on two grounds – historical method and whether or not Israel is pursuing genocide in Gaza.

On matters of method Morris has described his fellow revisionist “as one the world’s sloppiest historians.” For Morris the problem lies in Pappé being a “proud postmodernist” who rejects the idea of there being an “historical truth.” There are, instead, “only a collection of narratives” that reflect the number of participants in any event: each is legitimate and serves a political end. Morris takes issue with how Pappé “often omits and ignores significant evidence,” he is selective and does not seek to access a wider spread of archival sources. According to Morris, Pappé’s work “is politics by other means.”³¹

Pappé and Morris are also at odds over the question of genocide. Pappé has not been averse to making use of the language of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Back in 2010 he referred to an “incremental genocide” that represented a continuation of the ethnic cleansing of 1948.³² In his most recent work he describes how modern Gaza has been reduced to ruins “after a genocide perpetrated before our eyes.”³³ Morris has been more circumspect. It is his belief that Israel has not committed genocide, nor is it doing so now in Gaza.

²⁷ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

²⁸ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

²⁹ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xii.

³⁰ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xiii-xiv.

³¹ Benny Morris, “The Liar as Hero,” *The New Republic*, 17 March, 2011. <https://newrepublic.com/article/85344/ilan-pappe-sloppy-dishonest-historian>; Shahd Dibas suggests that Pappé’s work is better described as an example of “critical activist scholarship.” See Shahd Dibas, “Review of Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*,” *Journal of the Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 25:1 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.3366/hjps.2026.037>

³² Ilan Pappé, “Genocide in Gaza,” in William A. Cook, (ed), *The Plight of the Palestinians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 201-205.

³³ Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of Gaza* (London: Oneworld, 2026), 136.

That is despite the willingness of some politicians invoking the biblical text to destroy the Amalekites. Morris asserts that genocides are “a top-down affair ... determined by a government or ruling party.” That is not to deny or excuse how Israel has committed “probably many ... war crimes.” It is also possible that genocide “may yet occur.” There is the possibility of a “trigger”. Morris notes that it was President Trump, who was the first national leader to have called for the removal of the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip. None of this qualified response is intended to excuse how often religious leaders in Israel have called for the “flattening of West Bank towns” in the wake of what Morris describes as “terrorist attacks on Jews.” It is a trajectory of thought that is consistent with “occupiers routinely treat[ing] the occupied as less than human” and indulging in a “blanket demonization.”³⁴

A Reckoning

The work of the new historians has provoked a counter-narrative within Israel that is consistent with what has emerged in diaspora. The most prominent of these Jewish voices has come out of New York. Peter Beinart’s YouTube and “notebook” postings are widely available on-line, as is his best-selling monograph easily accessible in Australian bookshops on *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza*.³⁵ It was reviewed by Jenna Price in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.³⁶ Fundamental to Beinart’s position is the imperative of American Jews to come to a “reckoning” with Israel’s conduct in Gaza. He repeatedly inverts the David and Goliath myth. Unlike Morris, Beinart is not afraid to use the language of genocide. Himself a liberal Jew, Beinart argues for the need for his co-religionist to leave behind the rhetoric and self-understanding of a permanent Jewish victimhood. He does not condone the attacks of 7 October, but is conscious of how that has enabled a sense of “false innocence.” The narrative of victimhood set within the longer legacy of anti-Semitism has justified the American Jewish community to ignore Palestinian suffering. It is a position that has cost him long-time friendships. Beinart favours a single democratic state with real rights for Israelis and Palestinians.

The Poetics of Testimony

The contemporary emphasis on decolonization in the Uniting Church necessarily raises questions of historiography. From the Palestinian perspective it is insufficient to begin with the events of 7 October. In her *A Short History of the Gaza Strip* Anne Irfan explores the question of what “led to this fateful day unfolding.” She proceeds with her task mindful of how to delve into history beyond that day can run risk of justifying either the Hamas attacks or Israel’s “genocidal war” on Gaza.³⁷ It must nevertheless be done in order to understand what is now happening. *A Short History* begins with the catastrophe of 1948 and ends with the rise of Hamas and its electoral victory in 2006. Hamas did not secure a majority, but they were able to benefit from the loss of confidence in the Oslo peace accords of the previous decade, its stands

³⁴ See, Benny Morris, “Israel Is Not Committing Genocide in Gaza. But It May Be on the Way There,” *Haaretz*, 02 February, 2025. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2025-01-30/ty-article-opinion/.premium/its-either-two-states-or-genocide/00000194-b831-d5a7-ab9d-ffb9b2450000>

³⁵ Peter Beinart, *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning* (New York: Knopf, 2025).

³⁶ Jenna Price, “This book is so powerful, it’s hard to resist the urge to cry,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February, 2025. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/this-book-is-so-powerful-it-s-hard-to-resist-the-urge-to-cry-20250206-p5la1h.html>

³⁷ Anne Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2025), 18.

on corruption and lawlessness, and disaffection with its rival, Fatah. In Irfan's opinion "[f]ew events in 21st-century Palestine would prove more consequential" than this electoral result that allowed Hamas to form the government in its capacity as the largest party.³⁸ Irfan ends with an epilogue that testifies to the resilience of an "old man," a survivor of the *Nakba* who, as a child, was forced from his village. Now, in a shelter in Khan Younis, he declares himself to be "still a refugee," and though "they talk of taking Palestine as if we are nothing. But we are still here. We are still Palestinians."³⁹

The personal, anecdotal way in which Irfan ends is not uncommon in Palestinian writing. It is to be found even more strongly in Filiu's autobiographical account of his return to Gaza in early 2025. He describes the challenges of finding fresh water, enough food, medical care, shelter, and the need to move from one city to another. It can be seen as an immersive form of recording history through being an eyewitness. The theologian, Rebecca Chopp, (in a very different kind of context), would describe this practice as a "poetics of testimony". It is a bearing witness.

In his history of *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* Rashid Khalidi effects a different kind of personal link to anti-Semitism in Europe and the origins of modern Zionism.⁴⁰ The case was first made in 1896 in a pamphlet by Theodore Herzl for a Jewish state with "sovereign rights" to control immigration. Herzl anticipated the acquisition of land and property achieved "gently," "discreetly and circumspectly." He imagined that the dispossessed should be found employment in "the transit countries while denying employment in our own country."⁴¹ Khalidi's great-great-great uncle was Yusuf Diya, a Muslim intellectual and former mayor of Jerusalem, sent a letter of response to Herzl via a rabbi in Paris. Diya described Herzl as a "true Jewish patriot" and expressed his respect for the Jews who are "our cousins" through Abraham. He then proceeded to remind Herzl of the "brutal force of circumstances that had to be taken into account." Palestine was part of the Ottoman empire. It already had its own indigenous population. Herzl's scheme would most likely undermine the co-existence of Muslims, Jews and Christians living side by side in the land. It may unsettle the security of Jews in the Ottoman empire. It was "pure folly". Diya concluded, "in the name of God, let Palestine be left alone." Herzl replied in what is now known to be the first exchange between the political case being made for a Zionist state and "a cogent Palestinian objection to its embryonic plans for Palestine." Herzl simply failed to address the substance of Diya's concerns. He anticipated that Jewish immigration would benefit the indigenous people whose wealth and well-being would "increase by bringing in our own".

Biblical 'Software'

The decolonizing temper of the times inexorably draws attention to the emergence of a Palestinian liberation theology. Its current expression is to be found in the anthology on *Theology after Gaza* reviewed elsewhere in this edition of the journal.⁴² The origins of this particular expression of a liberation study were in biblical studies read through Palestinian eyes hosted by Naim Ateek. His monograph on *Justice and Only Justice*

³⁸ Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, 150-154.

³⁹ Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, 207.

⁴⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance*, (London: Profile Books, 2024).

⁴¹ Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 4

⁴² Mitri Raheb and Graham McGeoch, *Theology after Gaza: A Global Anthology*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2025).

is widely regarded as the foundational text of a Palestinian liberation theology. It laid out a number of core principles, namely: i). Christ was a Palestinian Jew who lived under Roman occupation; ii). justice comes before peace and only then can reconciliation be achieved; iii). inclusivity of the other arises out of a Christ-like lens and should be contrasted with theologies and ideologies that are exclusivist; and iv). the commitment is to a revolutionary non-violence. Ateek's pioneering work was published in 1989; it marked the beginning of a prolific career that has run through to now.⁴³ In more recent times the key thinkers have become Munther Isaac and Mitri Raheb. They are supported by a cadre of emerging activist theologians.⁴⁴

For the Uniting Church to express solidarity with the situation in Gaza, and on the West Bank, some familiarity with a Palestinian liberation theology is desirable. It is tempting to move immediately to the desperate situation in Gaza and the plight of those who have lost homes, family members and the basic infrastructure of life. How should these things be interpreted through a theological lens? This core question cannot be left unaddressed, but, maybe, first, there is an equally pressing demand to address the key matter of land. It presents itself in several forms. How has the land been used in the service of as a settler colonialism to the exclusion of Palestinian rights? What are the implications of the restoration of Israel in the salvation history of the Christian faith for the indigenous peoples of the land? Raheb warns of how easily a conservative turn to Old Testament prophets and End Times scenarios is inclined to support the continuing expansion of settlements. That tendency is often reinforced by the way in which "Christian Pilgrims visit Palestine[and] only want to reinvent the holy land of the Bible."⁴⁵

The Zionist appropriation of biblical texts is most likely to attract immediate attention. In his *Decolonizing Palestine* Raheb provides biblical examples of Israeli politicians justifying settlement which can lead to indigenous Palestinians being seen as "aliens" and "strangers" in their own land. The book of Joshua in particular has been co-opted into this "tunnel vision."⁴⁶ They become the equivalent of Philistines or "accursed Canaanites," while Arabs are the descendants of Ishmael.⁴⁷ The stakes are very high: Raheb concludes that "[l]and theology has been a theological tool for Palestinian dispossession and oppression."⁴⁸ His warning should be heeded: the "hardware" of military occupation of Palestine comes with "software" readings of biblical concepts to do with land, election and chosen-ness.⁴⁹

In its most raw form is the practice of drawing upon scriptural texts like those to do with extermination of the Amalekites and applying them to the current context: the Palestinians become the Amalekites. The two critical texts are Deuteronomy 25: 17-19 and 1 Samuel 15:1-3. Each of them creates a "typology of memory": they both remind Israel to "remember what Amalek did to you" in the course of the exodus of Egypt. In keeping with Deuteronomy, once settled in the land promised to them, Israel is commanded by God to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." In 1 Samuel, Samuel instructs Saul to honour

⁴³ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); and, more recently, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israeli Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017); *Call and Commitment: A Journey of Faith from Nakba to Palestinian Liberation Theology*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023).

⁴⁴ For example, John Munayer and Samuel Munayer (eds), *The Cross and the Olive Tree: Cultivating Palestinian Theology Amid Gaza* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2025).

⁴⁵ Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2023), 53.

⁴⁶ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 63.

⁴⁷ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 97.

⁴⁸ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 80.

⁴⁹ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 97.

that command: “go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” It so happens that Saul spares the king and what is valuable to him, but “all that was despised and worthless” was “utterly destroyed” (1 Samuel 15:9). In the wake of 7 October this call to “remember Amalek” was readily ripped out of context, including by President Benjamin Netanyahu himself in an address given to troops. Was he citing the Deuteronomy reading or 1 Samuel? Was the relevant directed only at Hamas, or, as some critics claimed, did Netanyahu include civilians as well, hence did his citing of the Amalekite possess an intent of genocide?

⁵⁰ In a sense the specifics of this controversy do not matter as to which version is deployed. On the ABC Religion Report, Siobhan Martin and Andrew West reported that this cry to “remember Amalek” has been used by many top politicians, soldiers in the field and become embedded in mainstream popular culture.⁵¹

There is here a deep hermeneutical concern: is it right to equate biblical Israel with the secular state of today? What is to be made of a history where the word Israel was equated with the Northern Kingdom and yet used again to describe a political entity in the twenty first century, though that kingdom had disappeared in the 8th century BC? Raheb notes that the theological concept continued referring to “the people of God.”⁵² It only came to possess a geonational reference again in the twentieth century when the state of Israel displaced the land of Palestine.

Raheb also probes the practice of hermeneutic retrieval. Why are some biblical texts and themes to do with biblical Israel recovered for the sake of politics today? It is legitimate to ask what should be made of biblical figures, for instance, who intervened on behalf of the exploited. Raheb reads Matthew 5:5 in the light of Psalm 37: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land (rather than the earth)”?

‘Christ in the Rubble’

It is, most likely, that a Palestinian theology is currently best known and represented by the vivid icon that adorned the cover of Isaac’s *Christ in the Rubble*. The image is of the infant Christ wrapped in a keffiyeh laid in the rubble: it was a message that was “heard by millions around the world.”⁵³ Isaac reflected on how “it also spoke to the hearts of our people” and allowed them to “reclaim their God-given honour and dignity.”⁵⁴ The image itself with its evocative nature combining the Christmas story, the innocence of a newborn in

⁵⁰ Noah Lanyard, “The Dangerous History Behind Netanyahu’s Amalek Rhetoric,” *Mother Jones*, 3 November, 2023. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/11/benjamin-netanyahu-amalek-israel-palestine-gaza-saul-samuel-old-testament/>; Leila Fadel, ‘Netanyahu’s Reference to Violent Biblical Passages Raises Alarm Among Critics’, *NPR Radio*, 7 November, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>; Yosef Silver, “Amalek & Netanyahu’s Call For Mass Murder,” *Mid-East Journal*, 26 February 2024. <https://www.mideastjournal.org/post/amalek-netanyahu>

⁵¹ Siobhan Martin and Andrew West, “What Is the Biblical Story of Amalek? And Why Is It Being Used in South Africa’s ICJ Case Against Israel?,” *ABC Radio*, 31 January, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-31/biblical-story-amalek-south-africa-icj-genocide-case-israel/103403552>

⁵² Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 62.

⁵³ Isaac also discusses how the image generated criticism: why was the infant Jesus not wrapped in a Jewish flag in order to symbolize God’s solidarity with Jewish children killed as well; wrapped in a keffiyeh was this icon not a “manifestation of terrorism”? See Munther Isacc, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2025), 208-9.

⁵⁴ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 205.

face of so much complicity,⁵⁵ and the stark evidence of destruction resonated strongly and led to multiple representations – for example, in *Time* magazine, the art of Kelly Lattamore.⁵⁶

This icon shifts the attention away from how narratives of David and Goliath are put to use. It alters the direction away from land and invites fellow Christians elsewhere to consider how they understand the gospel. It furnishes an alternative to the momentum that lies behind the Christian Zionist appropriation of themes to do with the restoration of Israel, hence the fulfilment of God's salvific plan. Isaac's use of the icon is extraordinarily timely: in a rather confronting manner, the A1 system through which the Israeli military reviews surveillance and determines target sites in Gaza is known as "Habspra," "the gospel."⁵⁷

The image of Christ in the rubble demands a response to a lament full of questions: "where is God when we suffer? How do we explain his silence?"⁵⁸ Isaac cites the work of Raheb to the effect that "the God of this land does not repel brutal armies, but rather shares one fate with his people ... He walks with us in our pain."

God is under the rubble in Gaza. He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. This is our consolation. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.⁵⁹

The pastoral and theological strength embedded in the concept of God in the rubble negotiate its way through the mystery of the cross⁶⁰ and the "comfort" of the resurrection.⁶¹

In a rather haunting, ironic way, the image of Christ in the rubble resonates with the work of the Jewish philosopher, John Roth, writing in the wake of the Holocaust. There is a scene in Elie Wiesel's novel, *Night*, where fellow Jews in a concentration camp are left standing in front of a child hanging on the gallows, not yet dead. One cries out "where is God?" to which comes the reply that God is that child. Roth drew upon psalms of lament to construct a theodicy of protest around questions like "how long?" and "where are you?". It was a theodicy formed in an act of genocide.⁶² Might Christ in the rubble constitute an equivalent?

Situating Solidarity

There is, of course, a broad spectrum of ethical and theological themes that a public theology in Australia should insert into its expression of solidarity. Isaac intimates a number of those in his *Christ in the Rubble*.

⁵⁵ Isaac describes how a member of the US Congress determined that 'there are no innocent Gazans'. Ibid., 118

⁵⁶ Kelly Lattamore, 'Christ in the Rubble', *Patheos*, 24 December 2023. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithontheedge/2023/12/christ-in-the-rubble-by-kelly-lattamore/> It is not surprising that the image has been subject to some pushback. See, for example, Teresa Piriola and Julie McCrossin, "'Baby Jesus in the Rubble' Handle With Care", *Light of Torah*, 10 January 2024. <https://www.lightoftorah.net/post/baby-jesus-in-the-rubble-handle-with-care>

⁵⁷ Harry Davies, Bethan McKernan, and Dan Sabbagh, "'The Gospel': How Israel Uses A1 to Select Bombing Targets in Gaza," 4 August, 2024. <https://youarewithinthethenorms.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Gospel-how-Israel-uses-AI-to-select-bombing-targets-in-Gaza-Israel-The-Guardian.pdf>; Joseph Gedeon and Maggie Miller, "Israel Under Pressure to Justify Its Use of A1 in Gaza," *Politico*, 3 March, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/03/israel-ai-warfare-gaza-00144491>

⁵⁸ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 199.

⁵⁹ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 199-200.

⁶⁰ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 200-201; 213-215.

⁶¹ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 200-201; 216-218.

⁶² J. Todd Billings, "John K. Roth, the Psalms of Lament and the Place of Theological Reflection on the Problem of Human Suffering," *The Other Journal*, 2 (2003), 1-5.

The most notable involve the call for repentance⁶³ rather than a “call for “dialogue” or “reconciliation”,”⁶⁴ to which can be added the recognition of a God-bestowed human dignity on the Palestinian people.⁶⁵ This emphasis on intrinsic worth and value is made in the face of western “hypocrisy” and “double standards”⁶⁶ (and the racism and demonization of people by the Israeli state government). On the basis of a theory of the just war the principle of proportionate response should be invoked, given the asymmetries of power and the long-lasting nature of the *Nakba*. It is incumbent upon the ecumenical church to make a strong stand against the naming of AI systems that abuse the idea of the gospel.

For the Uniting Church to address this *kairos* moment is a daunting task. The humanitarian crisis, the importance of justice, peace and dignity are matters of life and death and thus cannot be side-stepped. It constitutes, at the same time, entry into a seemingly enduring complex of problems with deep historical roots and in which conservative evangelical and imperial expressions of the Christian faith are implicated.

The expressions of concern and solidarity that the church has already made would benefit greatly from the composition and distribution of appropriate educational and liturgical resources. The metaphors of David, Goliath and the gospel might even serve as the medium through which the particular issue before us now is set inside the geopolitics of the wider region.

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⁶³ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 171-174.

⁶⁴ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 170.

⁶⁵ Isaac repeatedly describes the taunt of Palestinians being called “animals” and “terrorists.” In the counter-protest on Bondi beach in Sydney the cry that “they’re terrorists” was clearly discernible. Isaac describes how “many in the Western world, and certainly their leaders, do not see Palestinians as equals. We are less human, it seems, less deserving of human rights and dignity” (*Christ in the Rubble* 117). Again: ‘This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. ... We are not humans in their eyes. But in God’s eyes ... no one can tell us we are not!’ *Christ in the Rubble*, 180).

⁶⁶ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 103.



On the Possibility of a Soft Ecumenism

Gaby Kobrossi

Abstract:

The Uniting Church has a number of critical ecumenical partnerships with churches overseas. Though UnitingWorld it involves itself in various programs of solidarity and development. Most of this work is carried out in the Asia-Pacific region in keeping with the *Basis of Union*. At the same time the Uniting Church has committed itself to be a multicultural church. There is not always the same routes present for ecumenical alignment for all diasporic communities back to their churches of origin. That is the case for ministers and members who come from a Middle Eastern backgrounds, even though they provide an obvious link back to biblical lands not found in the prevailing ecumenical models. In the absence of such, following a visit to Lebanon by the then President of the Assembly and Director of UnitingWorld, a pattern of ‘soft ecumenism’ has emerged. It is dependent upon a network of friends committed to this link. Of critical importance is the role of ministers received into the Uniting Church from this region. They become, in effect, apologists for the Uniting Church, meaning that they find themselves in an in-between role between their communities (both at home and in the original homeland churches) and the Uniting Church. They often need to explain and defend stands made by the Uniting Church and its understanding of faith and practice while they themselves need to negotiate what ministry involves in a church different from their own. In the process of reception there is seldom any interest in what their prior experience has been and in what gifts from a very different context they bring.

2017

It now seems like another period in a “long and wounded history”¹ – Beirut, 2017. The Australian writer Theodore Ell described how Lebanon in this time experienced “the heights of its peacetime fortunes.” In the intervening period between then and now the country fell into a “crisis that strained every aspect of life to the point of near-collapse and refuelled old enmities that turned society against itself.”² Ell was writing in the immediate wake of the Beirut port explosion, the largest ever non-nuclear explosion in human history. His account of *Lebanon Days* preceded the events of 7 October 2023 and how the subsequent regional conflict spread to embrace Israel and Hezbollah. Ell did not anticipate the subsequent Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon and the targeting of sites in Beirut.

¹ Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in Diaspora*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1-2, 199-202.

² Theodore Ell, *Lebanon Days* (Crows Nest: Atlantic Books Australia, 2024), xv.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* Lyda Dankha noted how the “current wave of Israeli attacks” since Black Wednesday (8 April 2026) has led to the displacement of 1 million people. “When the bombs fall,” she reported, “it is the middle of the night in Australia. My phone lights up. ... You are safe, and your loved ones are not” It is like “watching [one’s] homeland fracture in real time.”³

Back in January 2017 a delegation from the Uniting Church made its way to Lebanon. The party included the President of the Assembly, Stuart McMillan, and the Executive Director of UnitingWorld, Rob Floyd. They met ecumenical church leaders as well as the President of the country. McMillan delivered the benediction at the ecumenical service for the week of Christian Unity. The visit was reported in the Lebanese newspapers. They attended a public lecture on ecumenism at the Near East School of Theology delivered by Clive Pearson, former Principal of United Theological College.

Over the course of the past fifty years the Uniting Church has implemented a number of partnerships with denominations in Tonga, Niue, Fiji, the Philippines, and Korea – for instance. It has recognized the Armenian genocide. It has also sought to live by its aspiration of being a culturally diverse church. This visit to Lebanon played with the hope that some sort of ecumenical link might be established with the Armenian Evangelical Church, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and the National Evangelical Church of Beirut. Each one of these churches is evangelical / *injileen* (meaning Protestant).

The visit coincided with the setting up of the Middle East National Conference within the Uniting Church. It was the twelfth such conference to be established. These national bodies have often been able to facilitate the process of bridge-building between churches in the country of origin and the Australian church. Such relationships are not possible for isolated monocultural congregations.

That observation was pertinent to the visit as well. There are forty-nine Arabic speaking evangelical congregations between Bankstown and Liverpool in western Sydney. The earliest of these began as groups meeting in people’s homes. The great majority of these churches have been set up after 1985. The common practice has been to become a tenant in an already built church – four are currently making use of a Uniting Church building (Bankstown, Fairfield, Panania and Guildford). Those who serve as pastors were originally the equivalent of a lay preacher in Uniting Church categories of ministry. Only one of the forty-nine pastors would be acknowledged as an ordained minister of the Word back in Lebanon. None have formal links back to churches in Lebanon. Their status of being non-aligned in this way differs markedly from the history of the Orthodox, Catholic, Melkite and Maronite churches. In each one of those traditions ecclesial links were established between the homeland and the diasporic community very early: priests were sent and institutional responsibility determined.⁴ Would the visit of the delegation to Beirut lead to steps being taken to bring such congregations under the umbrella of the Uniting Church due to its ecumenical and multi/cross cultural ethos?

³ Lyda Dankhar, “While bombs drop on Lebanon, I grieve: We are safe, but my loved ones are not,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 2026. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/while-bombs-drop-on-lebanon-i-grieve-we-are-safe-but-my-loved-ones-are-not-20260528-p601r6.html>

⁴ Gaby Kobrossi, “The Practice of Being a Lebanese Minister in the Uniting Church of Australia,” D. Min thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2021, 75-82.

On his return to Australia McMillan reflected on how the “impact of our time in Lebanon upon us has been profound.” In times of great trial for the peoples of Lebanon and Syria, he spoke of the importance of them not being abandoned by “the global Christian community.” McMillan was especially moved by one evangelical leader declaring that the Christian presence in these lands was informed by a “theology of impact.” McMillan summarized the benefits of a prospective ecumenical partnership:

How might the Uniting Church in Australia live out our commitment in the Basis of Union to serve the world, in the Middle East? We are called, as stated in the Basis to: “bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries.”

Our friends have asked us firstly to pray, to pray for peace in the Middle East, to pray for the Christian communities, and to pray the love of Christ is evidenced through the people of God, for all people, regardless of their faith.

There are other ways we might strengthen our new relationships and find together how to answer the call to serve the mission of God for the world. There is clearly much we can learn from our sisters and brothers in the Middle East. Please join me in prayer for this Christian community and for the next steps in our growing relationship.⁵

In the Meantime

These hopes are yet to be realized. The work of UnitingWorld is primarily directed towards the Asia-Pacific region as per the *Basis of Union*’s prescription for what was the new church. It seems as if Asia here refers to lands east of the Indian sub-continent. The term “Middle East” is itself an invention of British imperial policy and American journalism around the turn of the twentieth century. The policy direction of UnitingWorld is more self-consciously geared towards aid, solidarity and development rather than ecumenism in a more ecclesial sense. The Middle East National Conference in the Uniting Church effectively no longer exists.

In the absence of any formal ecumenical agreement (in the meantime) a network in Sydney has been established, Friends of the Middle East. It has maintained links with NEST (the theological college) and church leaders in Beirut. With the support of the Camden Theological Library it has provided NEST with access to a digital library. That initiative followed conversations with the past President of NEST, George Sabra, who identified this issue as the most pressing for staff and students, hence their ongoing ministry. The collapse of the economy and the damage done by the port explosion meant that the school of theology no longer had funds to buy books. The present President of NEST, Martin Accad, has declared that the digital library program

has been a wonderful resource. Compared to what it would cost to get anywhere near equivalent resources in hard copies for our library, there is not even a conversation to be had!

⁵ Stuart McMillan, “A Theology of Impact,” 30 January 2017, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/2561-a-theology-of-impact>

Accad understood this initiative (which owes so much to the library manager of Camden Theological Library, Moira Bryant) in terms of a sharing, a partnership in faith.

we continue to be deeply grateful for all the support we get from friends all over the world. God is blessing the ministry of NEST and it is a joy to partner with many across the world in serving our region for the advancement of God's Kingdom and presence through his church!⁶

The Friends have also assisted in the establishment of a summer school to be led on-line on the theme of "trauma care" led by Stephen Robinson, the head of disaster chaplaincy.

These initiatives are a part of what has been named as a "soft ecumenism." It is a form of ecumenism which recognizes the importance of inter-church support, especially in a time when distant neighbours in Christ are in need. It comes about through the initiative of friends rather than a formal council of the church; it seeks to show what is possible and why. It depends upon the participation of those familiar with the "other" church and is not unaware of what life is like for those who have migrated to Australia from that "other" place. It listens.

For a soft ecumenism to take root and flourish there are a number of things that need to happen. Some of those are internal to the life of a church that McMillan had insisted seeks to bear witness to that unity faith and life in Christ that extends beyond the many "boundaries" that can inhibit a "growing relationship." They include the politics of recognition, due awareness of a particular diaspora, and, how ministers from the 'other' culture are received. The intersection of these three things should not be glossed over. In most cases it is likely that a minister who is to be received into an Australian church does not arrive in the new land as a solitary individual. There is already a diasporic community in place: the Lebanese one is not small. It reaches back into the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁷ There have been three waves of migration: the first two were primarily Christian,⁸ the third came in the wake of civil war and was both Christian and Muslim.⁹ In a way that may not be appreciated in the Uniting Church, the Lebanese diaspora is one of the oldest and largest migrant-derived cultures in the country.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority live in Sydney. For a period of time Redfern was known as 'Little Beirut', 'Little Lebanon' or "Little Syria."¹¹

That is one side of the equation: there is another. Some of those factors that are critical for the deepening of vitality of that soft ecumenism relate to the churches, in this case, in the Middle East. What kind of trustworthy lines of contact can be put into place? Is there a template for a soft ecumenism that expresses

⁶ Friends of the Middle East, <https://www.fmeorg.au/librarysupport>

⁷ Lebanon did not come into existence as a state separate from the Ottoman Empire until 1923. It did so under a French mandate. Lebanon became an independent state in 1943. The Lebanese were for some time called "Syrians." According to Ann Monsour that practice lasted through to the 1940s. Ann Monsour, "Enduring Bonds: Lebanese Immigrants in Queensland," *Queensland History Journal*, 23:6 (2017), 359–377.

⁸ Nelia Hyndman-Rizk, "At My Mother's Table: Migration, (Re)production and Return between Hadchit, North Lebanon and Sydney," PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2009, 41–42; 44–49. See, Paul Convy and Ann Monsour, *Lebanese Settlement in New South Wales* (Sydney: Migration Heritage Centre), 5. Hyndman-Rizk actually argues for four ways as she breaks up the first wave into two. It is more usual to identify three. See also, Kobrossi, "The Practice of Being a Lebanese minister," 65–71.

⁹ Maram Shaweesh, *Making Home in the Suburb: Everyday Encounters in the Lebanese Australian House* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature, 2024), 33–65.

¹⁰ The 2021 census recorded that there are 248,434 individuals of Lebanese ancestry, 60% were born in Australia.

¹¹ Anne Monsour and Paul Convy, "The Lebanese in Sydney," *Sydney Journal*, 1:2, (June 2008), 71.

solidarity in Christ and a willingness to share insights and prayerful concern? Will promises be honoured, especially with regards to societies where codes of honour and shame are prevalent?

Belonging In Between

At first glance it may not seem obvious that the reception of ministers from the other land is so significant in the establishment and nurture of a soft ecumenism. It is so for several reasons. The received minister is a conduit and a bridge-builder on account of knowing people and events in both places. In the new land they function as both an interpreter of the ecclesial and social situation in their home country; in the diaspora they are both an interpreter and an apologist who possess a potential to respond to criticisms made, in this instance, of the Uniting Church.

The Uniting Church could do better in its reception of ministers. On entering the reception process there is surprisingly little interest shown in one's past experience. The focus of interest falls upon what needs to be done in order to meet the ethos of the Uniting Church. For someone like myself coming out of the Middle East that is not entirely unexpected. The churches of my origin homeland are unfamiliar with the covenant with indigenous Australians: they have a history of not being comfortable with the ordination of women and tend to adopt a more conservative position on matters to do with sexual orientation and practice.

On arrival in Sydney in 2007 I found myself on the receiving end of the hospitality of ministers from Arabic-speaking congregations. These colleagues in ministry had come to offer support when our manse was burgled in our first few days. There were meals and home visits. To some I was known through my previous work for the Bible Society in Lebanon and the occasional project I had done for the society in Australia. This welcome was tempered with an array of questions.

At some point in proceedings several questions to do with my call and the Uniting Church were raised. It was a very awkward grammar. The nature of a question expects a response, an answer that reveals something about me, my identity, how I understand my vocation. The questions they raised are the same as those posed by priests from the Maronite, Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

- Why do you choose to serve with the Uniting Church?
- Why are you working church that believes in the baptism of infants?
- Why are you work in a church that accepts the ordination of women?
- Why are you serving a church that welcomes divorced ordained ministers?
- Why have you chosen to work in a church that believes in 'the holy Catholic church'?

For the first five years of my ministry in Bankstown these questions – which are really a form of criticism – were put to me repeatedly. The tone of the questions always conveyed a note of disbelief, surprise and sometimes a sense of mocking.¹² I found myself needing to address these questions and others as I sought to negotiate my way more deeply into the Uniting Church. The process of reception is not confined to the

¹² Gaby Kobrossi, "An Unusual Call," *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review*, 44 (2023), 25-37.

expectations laid upon the arriving minister by the regulations and panels of the Uniting Church. It is a much longer journey into belonging.

Living in Diaspora

There is in the set of questions listed above a pressure politely expressed to conform to one's cultural heritage. There is something that is not quite right about that sentence, however. There is a delicate tension to master. On the one hand, there is the ongoing sense of identity that is bound to the Lebanese homeland. Dankhar rightly captured how "[o]ur community did not sever ties when it settled here. That is not how migration works. Our hearts exist in two lands now."¹³

On the other is the experience of the Lebanese diaspora. The number of Lebanese living outside the homeland is three times the size of that resident in the country. Hage has explored the transnational differences that have emerged in diaspora for those now living in Europe, the Americas and Australia.¹⁴ Those variations do not necessarily overcome one the consequences of taking leave of the original birth culture.

It is well known that the act of migration can lead to perceptions and understandings that are "frozen" in time. In a post on Instagram Malabi Das has described how migrants often carry with them into the future a static view of their own first culture. It is "preserved" in the state that existed when they left their homelands. Das comments on how "they leave behind living cultures that continue to evolve in their absence." Hage has identified how those living in diaspora through diverse media instantly keep with up with politics and news from the Middle East.¹⁵ In the current crisis Dankhar describes how

[w]e're glued to our phones, sending money for school fees because our relatives can no longer survive on local wages, hearing that electricity is rationed to hours a day, that hospitals are overwhelmed – that's if you're lucky enough to afford medical care. More than four-fifths of Lebanon's population now lives below the poverty line.¹⁶

That kind of awareness and concern is not the same as a daily immersion in the own original culture. Das is thus right: she is only too well aware of how migrants may be cut off from the cultural evolution of their home countries, irrespective of this readily available media exposure and occasional return visits to one's home towns.¹⁷ In my case those cities are Saida/Sidon of biblical repute and Beirut.

What Das' post draws attention to is a shift in immigration studies. The standard practice had been to regard the movements of people from one country to another, hence from a spatial perspective. That reading of what transpires, of course, remains: it is why passports, visas and the like are required. By way of an aside

¹³ Dankhar, "While bombs drop on Lebanon."

¹⁴ Ghassan Hage, *The Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Ghassan Hage, "The Differential Intensities of Social Reality; Migration, Participation and Guilt," in Ghassan Hage (ed), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 194-197.

¹⁶ Dankhar, "While bombs drop on Lebanon."

¹⁷ Malabi Das, "Frozen in Time: Cultural Stagnation in Immigration Story," LinkedIn, 5 September 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/frozen-time-cultural-stagnation-immigration-story-das-she-her--nspbe>

it can be very difficult for someone from Lebanon to get a visa to come to Australia, although that was not true in my case. It is now recognized, though, that migration studies attracts a “temporal dimension.”¹⁸ This particular focus is itself rather more complex than might first meet the eye. The study of how time intersects with the experience of migration and reception is laden with more issues than simply getting permission to fly from one place to another. Those who do research into “timing” and migration address factors to do with enduring – that is, how was time spent, where and in what conditions prior to setting foot in the new country.

It hardly needs comment: how people from the same country experience this time of enduring before migration will differ markedly. In some cases it will be a time that is relatively settled where hopes of a better life arise. One such example is that of Abbas El-Zein. In his memoir, *Leave to Remain*, he describes his growing up in Beirut.¹⁹ In a somewhat protected manner he experienced civil war and invasion in Lebanon prior to his exodus. In due course he made his way to this country as an economic migrant: “I was here, like a large number of migrants, to look for work and pursue a career that had little chance of bearing fruit in my country of origin.”²⁰

In this account there is little of the trauma that haunts much Lebanese story-telling. Now resident in Sydney he found himself contemplating matters of identity. There were still dislocations that he needed to explore. El Zein wondered what categories of the self would stand out: would it be “my ethnicity, my nationality, my religion of birth, my profession, my political or philosophical beliefs, my cultural interests?”²¹ The distinction was made between a physical home, a homeland (*heimat*) and home as a place of belonging. El Zein sensed the complexity of belonging to two places with different claims upon the self. Referring to living in Australia he saw that

given time, we do overcome the foreignness of a place and we recognise it, one way or another; It becomes a part of our memory by force of habit. It is a matter of living there, of seeing and hearing and understanding. It is much harder, however to overcome our strangeness to the place, around foreignness, because it is a matter of creating a new language.²²

I live in a multiple cultural and linguistic environment. Migrants survived by growing body parts. New ears and new eyes are perhaps their most valuable acquisitions. New tongues are much harder to come by.²³

El Zein’s reflections were essentially those of the curious, the one who is navigating how the self changes through space with less of a focus on time. There is not the same level of rupture and the struggle for survival that might accompany those who migrate as refugees or out of fear. Syrine Hout captures a different

¹⁸ Giuliano Sanò, Giulia, Storato, and Francesco Della Puppa, “Claiming Time Within Migrations,” *The Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 25 (2024), 1223–1229.

¹⁹ Abbas El Zein, *Leave to Remain: A Memoir* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009).

²⁰ Abbas El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere: On Longing and Belonging’, in Ghassan Hage (ed), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 227.

²¹ El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228.

²² El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228–230

²³ El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228–239.

reality through her study of Lebanese literature. For those outside a conflict zone the uncertainty as to how long a war might last, and the threat to life, might seem like an obvious push to leave the land of one's birth as quickly as one can. It is a recurring theme: home for "so many [becomes] gone" as a consequence of "cataclysmic events."²⁴ There is a heightened concern for the well-being of parents, siblings, and the extended family. Conversations to do with leaving can only heighten anxiety. It is a delicate space.

An Unusual Call

What do any of these narratives have to do with the reception of ministers into the Uniting Church and how that might then serve a soft ecumenism? In the first place it opens up the need to listen to the experience of the about-to-be-received minister and understand their companion experience in and through another culture. It facilitates the prospect of being a bridge-builder and an interpreter between the Uniting Church and another where the Christian life is lived out in a very different kind of experience. The autobiographical turn and interview matter.

I made my way here through an "unusual call" to take up the position as a youth worker, first of all, for the Bankstown and District Uniting Church. I was ordained and would become the first Arabic-speaking evangelical (meaning Protestant) minister in the Uniting Church. In order to be accepted I needed to show paperwork to do with my studies, and certificates to do with ministry; I was informed of what processes and procedures I would need to follow.

On no occasion was I asked about my prior experience of life and ministry. There was no discussion of what it was like for my home to have been bombed by Israeli jets and my family believed me to be dead. Nor was there any need to give an account of what it was like for my two sisters and myself to be strafed by Israeli jets on our way home from school. I did not speak about my father's advice to leave our other home in the hills of southern Lebanon and head for Beirut as a 16 year-old lest I be coerced into a militia. There was no need for me to reflect upon what it was like to arrive in Beirut and be homeless. There was no conversation around how I worked with the Red Cross in the midst of war-time carnage. There was no enquiry into the impact of my family when, for five years, my siblings were sent to France for safety. No one asked me about how and why I entered the ministry and what experience I might have had serving the first multicultural church on Beirut, then the Bible Society and its work throughout the Middle East.

Telling Tales

These things are mentioned here not because of a desire to draw attention to myself. They are not peculiar to me. In her work on Anglophone literature coming out of Lebanon, Syrine Hout felt obliged to do justice to "long-term effects on youth" in particular.²⁵ My experience was mirrored by that of Hikmat Kashou, now Pastor of the Resurrection Church in Beirut, writes of how frightened he was as a child:

²⁴ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1; 199.

²⁵ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 3.

Our hearts would be in our mouths. Our stomachs were always upset. Our house was bombed a number of times, relatives lost their lives, and beloved friends went missing.²⁶

These kinds of experience percolate through the lives of everyone in Lebanon today. Throughout history what we now know as Lebanon has been subject to invasion by much stronger nations and through competing pressures from within and from without it has been subject to periodic bouts of civil war. William Harris has examined the land's troubled past back to 600 CE in order to understand the problems of sectarianism and social cohesion that has bedevilled the nation since independence on 1 January 1944.²⁷ Theodore Ell has described how the civil war erupted in 1975 which has left a legacy of suspicion and distrust.²⁸ The inability to create a stable political culture has led to mafia-like like state.²⁹ Ell was writing in the immediate wake of the economic meltdown which was further exacerbated by the port explosion in Beirut. In his journal of this time Charif simply referred to all these forces coming together bearing witness to "the collapse of a civilization."³⁰ The history of Lebanon is one of intergenerational trauma.

The present deadly circumstances that have come about through the Israeli desire to eliminate Hezbollah from southern Lebanon and the teeming southern suburbs of Beirut is not without precedent, of course.³¹ It has happened before. Back in 1982 Israel under Menachem Begin bombed and laid siege to an Arab capital for the first time. Since 2 March 2026 Israeli forces have once again invaded the country with the explicit aim of seeking to destroy Hezbollah as part of the Middle East conflict involving Gaza, the West Bank, Iran and the United States. This present incursion has led to massive displacement of peoples and created a humanitarian crisis. The noted Lebanese historian and journalist, Kim Ghattas, describes how history is "tragically repeating itself" in her homeland.³² The tragic irony of this state of play is that Israel's conflict with Hezbollah on Lebanese soil is a consequence of the mid-twentieth century evolution of Israel and the displacement of Palestinians. The complicated nature of regional politics saw the PLO driven out of Jordan into Lebanon; Hezbollah itself was established in response to the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the example of Islamic governance at that time being shown by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.³³ Ghattas has set the politics of this seemingly perennial armed conflict in a wider context in her much acclaimed *Black Wave*.³⁴

Ell's particular interest was in conversation. It was his desire to explore how people spoke about tragedy, resilience and hope. That is a familiar feature of Lebanese literature. It is to be found in the anthology *Lebanon Through Writers' Eyes*.³⁵ In her work on Anglophone Lebanese fiction Syrine Hout considers consequences: home for "so many [becomes] gone" as a consequence of "cataclysmic events."³⁶ The question of "where are you from?" so often asked in diaspora (al-shutat) is reframed; it involves considerations of

²⁶ Hikmat Kashouh, *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times: Disciple-Making in the Arab World*, (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 3.

²⁷ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ Theodore Ell, *Lebanon Days* (Crows Nest: Atlantic Books, 2024).

²⁹ Ell, *Lebanon Days*, xvi.

³⁰ Charif Majdalani, *Beirut 2020: The Collapse of a Civilization. A Journal*, (London: Welbeck, 2020).

³¹ Fareed Zakaria interviews Kim Ghattas, "Israel Goes to War on Hezbollah," CNN, 6 October, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/06/world/video/gps1006-israels-war-against-hezbollah>

³² Kim Ghattas, "History is Tragically Repeating Itself in Lebanon," *The Financial Times*, 21 March 2026.

³³ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

³⁵ T.J. Gorton and A. Féghali Gorton, *Lebanon Through Writers' Eyes*, (London: Eland, 2009).

³⁶ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1; 199.

not where so much, but what did you experience “there and then.” Memory becomes a history marked by “the destruction of lives, families, institutions and infrastructure”.³⁷ In response to this seemingly innocent question, the response is so much more than the name of a country, a village, a birthplace.

For those who do leave Lebanon and make Australia home there is often a further unwelcome response to negotiate. Shaweesh refers to the common experience of Lebanese citizens and migrants being exposed to sustained expressions of stereotype.³⁸ The legal theorist, Scott Poynting, with Greg Noble has exposed how often the Lebanese have been subject to dog-whistle politics.³⁹ Incidents like the Cronulla riots (2005) and reports of youths engaging in ‘Leb’ style gang rapes have far too often be used by politicians (and radio ‘shock jocks’) to demonize the Lebanese people in general. Following the Cronulla riots only one Christian theologian took issue with this narrative in an article dedicated to the care of “the alienated neighbour . . . for Christ’s sake.”⁴⁰

On coming into the Uniting Church there was no apparent desire to enquire into these “companion experiences”. Jürgen Moltmann identifies these as “events in our past which never become “past” but are continually present to us.” They form and mould us: they are ever-present beneath the ordinary experience of living but can come again to the surface. Moltmann links his discussion of companion experiences (which travel with us through time) to what he identifies as “limit situations.” Such episodes are moments of finitude or “elemental experiences of love, life and death.” They possess a capacity still to “shake” us even though they have happened some time ago now in the past.⁴¹

Bridge-builders

It is not unusual for those who have migrated from ministry in one land to its equivalent in another to be described as “bridge builders.” It takes time, of course, to make the necessary connections, especially in a new land, and acquire El Zein’s “new eyes” and “new mouth.” The push and pull factors, which accompany the act of leaving one’s first home, need to be negotiated. That is the case, even if and when, the Christian life itself, irrespective of particular places and personalities, is always caught between an earthly and heavenly citizenship. In the case of migrants who come to Australia from the Middle East there is a further dimension to this dynamic.

The push factors are not hard to see. In recent times villages and towns in southern Lebanon have been reduced to rubble. The targeting of the southern suburbs of Beirut has killed and made homeless innocent citizens, quite apart from those who are more closely aligned with Hezbollah. The Near East School of Theology is located in the Hamra district of central Beirut – hence, at a remove from the southern suburbs like Dahieh. In response to the movements of frightened peoples into their area of the city the Near East

³⁷ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1.

³⁸ Shaweesh, *Making Home in the Suburb*, 40, 41, 89.

³⁹ Scott Poynting and Greg Noble, “‘Dog-Whistle’ Journalism and Muslim Australians Since 2001,” *Media International Australia*, 109:1 (November 2003), 41-49; Scott Poynting, “What Caused the Cronulla Riot?,” *Race & Class*, 48:1 (2006/7), 85-92.

⁴⁰ Clive Pearson, “Alienated Neighbours: Interpreting the Cronulla Race Riots for Christ’s Sake,” *Oxford Forum on Public Policy* (Summer 2008). <http://www.forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer08papers/archivessummer08/pearson.pdf>

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, (London: SCM, 1002), 18-23.

School of Theology has sought to provide care, food and games for the children in a nearby shelter under the name of “Neighbor to Neighbor.”⁴² The pressure on other less affected suburbs mounts. Even before the latest rounds of attack, buildings throughout the city have been pockmarked with bullets while others have crumbled, a wall here, a roof there, under heavier fire. Only the façades of buildings may testify to what was once an elegant city, sometimes described as “the Paris of the (Middle) East” (1960-1975).

Such is the instability of life and ever-present nearness of threat. It is not difficult to see why so many might take leave. It is, of course, not quite so straightforward as that. The reality is much more complex. There is a heightened concern for the well-being of parents, siblings, and the extended family. Conversations to do with leaving can only heighten anxiety. There is also for those like myself the grasp of the land being biblical. It is so in a way which Australia, ‘at the ends of the earth’, cannot be. The glory of Lebanon features in the Psalms; the cities of Tyre and Sidon feature in the ministry of Jesus as does Tyre in Paul’s. The landscape abounds in biblical and Christian history throughout the ages. It can be difficult to leave despite the current violence and destruction.

In a rather ironical way the push factor can be reversed and become more of a pull, a call to return. One such experience is that of the theologian, Elie Haddad. He found himself having to think through a biblical and theological response to emigration and repatriation. Haddad spent thirty years in Canada before making the decision to return to Lebanon. Out of this experience he identified a number of “inappropriate attitudes” in how decisions are made. These include the tendency to put security and safety for one’s own family on a par with God’s calling on one’s life.⁴³ There is also the habit of thinking it is “*our* mission rather than the mission of God;”⁴⁴ there is a failure to have in place a framework for hearing and discerning the “voice of God;”⁴⁵ all these things can happen, Haddad argues, because “we impose our own worldview upon the Bible.”⁴⁶ The real issue at stake is not whether one leaves or stays but why.

The lines of why one might migrate can become blurred. The receiving society may express concern as to whether someone from another land, and a very different culture, might assimilate. Now and then the rhetoric is full of “Australian values”: Hage has argued that this practice betrays a “white paranoia.”⁴⁷ Is the pathway for “fitting in” and “getting by” the same for those who come to Australia as an asylum seeker, a refugee, an economic migrant or family reunion? In my case coming to Australia was in response to a call to ministry in Bankstown (Sydney) that seemingly came out of nowhere. It represented a radical rupture with my existing life and ministry. It was a struggle to say “yes,” but I was aided by a reading of the call made by Gad to David, 2 Samuel 24:14: “I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great, but let me not fall into human hands.”

⁴² Near East School of Theology, “Neighbor to Neighbor,” 16 March, 2026. <https://www.facebook.com/NearEastSchoolofTheology/posts/1511003584364029/>

⁴³ Elie Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections on Emigration,” in Jonathan Andrews (ed), *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, (Carlisle, Langham Global Library, (2018), 36-37.

⁴⁴ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 38.

⁴⁵ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 39-40.

⁴⁶ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 40-41.

⁴⁷ Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003).

It takes time to come to terms with the difference between how churches in very different contexts practice the continuing ministry of Christ. What may be self-evident to members of the Uniting Church is not always so to the newcomer – nor is it always better. Being in this liminal space, though, has its advantages. Miroslav Volf refers to the importance of having a “double vision” – that is, the capacity of seeing things from two seemingly opposed perspectives. From the perspective of being a migrant bridge builder it requires a willingness and a confidence to interpret one party to another. That is not a straightforward task, either. Being a migrant, being in a minority, places the one whose first language and experience is different from the majority, into a subaltern position. The issue here is not one of what El Zein mapped as having to do with knowing when you “belong.” There is a sense in which you never do. Your life story (and your ministry practice) always retains an element of the “other.” The issue is one of politics and how the institutional church determines its practice and what it will privilege.

Being on the bridge between Beirut and Sydney is like being on a tightrope, full of frustration but also possibility. It is a site that comes with what Hage has thoroughly described as an anatomy of responsibility.⁴⁸ It opens up the opportunity to mediate to Australian churches what being a ‘believer’ in the gospel, an *injileen*, might mean to remain steadfast in faith, in the face of so much menace, thereby demonstrating resilience and hope. It can mean advocating for the use of Kenneth Bailey’s insights into the reading of Jesus, his parables, and Paul and his epistles. Bailey’s work is not the same as that of those who might today seek to decolonize biblical texts. His work is designed to help us read the text mindful of the cultural customs of the Middle East, alongside those who write on “Jesus of Arabia.” Being in the liminal space can also carry the weight of responsibility that manifests itself in the occasional call for prayers and financial support in times of crisis. It can also mean being an advocate for a ‘soft ecumenism’ that introduces the Uniting Church (and its “theological culture” and “DNA,” as outlined in the Assembly document, Act 2) to its counterparts in the Middle East.

‘Soft Ecumenism’

There has been no formal agreement established between the Assembly and the evangelical synods and union in the Middle East. In the absence of such, the Friends of the Middle East came into being on the basis of being a voluntary association. At the heart of its work lies what the Friends have described as a vision of “soft ecumenism.” It assumes that ministers received into the Uniting Church from the Middle East can work alongside interested colleagues. Its self-understanding is based on a recognition of each other’s gifts, a common heritage and a “shared desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ who was himself from the Middle East and whose ministry extended into the lands of Lebanon and Syria.” It expressed a joint desire “to recognize and honour the Indigenous People as the First Nations of Australia” and the Armenian genocide. It was further held together by a willingness to “learn more about each other’s Church life and context.” In terms of crisis (and where the opportunity to do arises) this template of soft ecumenism called for prayer and acts of solidarity. It sought to balance interest in the church overseas with the diaspora in Australia. It looked towards a time when there might exchanges between ministers and students, the

⁴⁸ Ghassan Hage, “Introduction” in Ghassan Hage and Robyn Eckersley (eds), *Responsibility* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012).

sharing of resources, and the potential for twinning congregations. It is an intentional form of ecumenism which presented itself through the reception of an Arabic-speaking minister into the Uniting Church.

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The Golden Chain of Mercy

Krikor Youmshajekian and Clive Pearson

Abstract:

This article seeks to situate the Assembly's resolutions (2015) to do with the Armenian genocide within a broader historical context than is possible in a resolution and its rationale. For that reason it notes that the 'annihilation' that took place between 1915 and 1923 was foreshadowed by the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s. The particular focus of this article is on the Australian response to the plight of the Armenians who were understood to be a Christian minority within the Islamic Ottoman empire. The arrest of leaders began on the 24th April, 1915 – that is, on the eve of the Anzac landing at Gallipoli. The churches played a significant role in the subsequent humanitarian relief. The denominations that came into the Uniting Church were most active (though their actions now seem to be lost on the memory of the contemporary church). They participated in 'the golden chain of mercy', supported the sending of a ship to assist with food, goods, medicines. The Australasian churches were responsible for running a large orphanage at Antilyas, north of Beirut. The decision of the Assembly to recognize what unfolded places it inside a contested discussion as to what constitutes a genocide. Thirty-four countries have acknowledged such, but not the Australian government which has tended to prioritize post-war reconciliation with Türkiye and the construction of Australian identity on the basis of the Anzac myth. Most western historians agree that it was a genocide, even though the term was not invented until 1943.

'Recovering Memory'

The occasion was the 14th triennial meeting of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. The location was Perth: the venue was the Winthrop Hall of the University of Western Australia. The date was 12-18 July 2015. In the midst of much other business the Uniting Church unanimously adopted a resolution to do with the Armenian Genocide. The resolution had three parts. The first acknowledged that the massacres and forced deportations of 1915-1923 did indeed constitute a genocide. The second commended the state governments of New South Wales and South Australia which had already acknowledged the genocide. It sought to encourage other state governments to do the same. The third represented a commitment to commemorate the genocide as a 'day of observance' on a date on or near the anniversary of the genocide. To that end agencies of the Assembly were set the task of preparing resources 'for all congregations' in the Uniting Church. It was imagined that those resources would be educational and liturgical.¹ Following the adoption of this three-part resolution the President, Stuart McMillan, made a brief comment, the 300 members of the Assembly stood for one minute in silence in memory of the 1.5 million victims of the genocide, and the Moderator of NSW-ACT, the Revd. Myung Hwa Park offered a prayer.

¹ Uniting Church Assembly, resolution 15:23.01 (i) (ii) (iii).

In the lead-up to its adoption, one of us, the Revd. Dr. Krikor Youmshajekian, then chairperson of the Sydney North presbytery and president of Armenian Missionary Association of Australia, explained the reasons behind the resolution. The rationale described the origins of Armenia and how it became the first nation to declare itself Christian in 301 CE. That decision led to the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular language. The full Assembly was able to hear how, through its history, the Armenian nation had stood firm in its Christian faith, resisting pressures from beyond, like that of the Persians who had wanted the country to embrace Zoroastrianism. The rationale presented in an abbreviated form the rise and rule of the Ottoman empire in which the Armenians constituted a Christian minority. The massacres and deportations that were destined to come under the designation of genocide were preceded by the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896.²

It might at first glance seem as if this reference to the massacres of the 1890s is at a remove from the subsequent response of churches in Australia to what would unfold between 1915-1923. Why it was included in the rationale needs to be unpacked. The plight of the Armenians in this earlier period on account of the repressive policies of the Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Hamid II were widely reported as “horrors worse than death.” The news media in Australia carried articles from the popular press in London with headlines like: “Armenian Horrors: Fearful Holocaust”, “Horrible Massacres: Children Buried Alive” and “Eight Thousand Butchered: Three Thousand Roasted Alive”. Such reports encouraged churches in Australia to hold protest meetings and, in a resolution adopted by the federal assembly of the Presbyterian Church, call upon colonial governors “to take such steps as shall effectually forbid the repetition of such outrages.” In both Australia and New Zealand, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union were “stirred by intense indignation” at the tragedy that was falling upon their fellow Christians.³

What this reporting and protesting meant was that the difficulties facing the Armenians was well known already in church circles before events took an even more sinister turn in 1915. Back then the term genocide did not yet exist: it was first coined by a Polish Jewish jurist, Raphael Lemkin, in 1943.⁴ It was adopted by the United Nations in December 1948. What came to be known as the Armenian genocide began on the 24th April 1915 – in other words, the day before the Gallipoli landing of ANZAC troops. On that day the government of the Young Turks rounded up 250 intellectuals and community leaders. In due course this gave way to the mass killing of able-bodied men, conscripted labour and the forced deportation of women, children and the elderly on death marches. Without a name to describe what was happening, Winston

² Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War and the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 10-13. Rogan situates these massacres in the unfolding geopolitics in the wake of the Russo-Turkish war ceded to Russia. That transfer of peoples emboldened Armenian demands for greater autonomy within the empire. Pressure was brought to bear on the Ottomans by the European powers. The Ottomans discerned a threat now arising out of the Armenians, especially as activist groups espousing violence arose during the 1880s. Rogan notes that the ‘volatile situation inevitably led to bloodshed’ – the Ottoman Armenians became ‘the target of terrible massacres’. Rogan concluded that ‘the bloody events of 1894 to 1896 proved nothing short of a catastrophe.’ Some Armenians then sought to work with liberal parties seeking reform in the Ottoman empire

³ Vicken Babkenian and Peter Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2016), 30-33.

⁴ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

Churchill declared these events to be “an unnamed crime.”⁵ The rationale ended with a list of those nations, churches and other organizations that had recognized what had transpired as a genocide.⁶

This decision was welcomed by the Armenian community both here in Australia and abroad – in both Armenia and also in the United States. It led to the Uniting Church being awarded the Freedom Award by the Armenian National Committee of Australia at its banquet on 4 November 2016. In his speech of thanks, the President at that time, Stuart McMillan, advised the attendees that he had written to the Prime Minister urging the government to recognize the genocide.⁷ The day of observance was, however, somewhat occasional and the provision of the educational and liturgical resources eventually came to depend upon the work of the voluntary network, the Friends of the Middle East. The most prominent of the annual observances was the 110th anniversary when the President of the Assembly, the Revd. Charissa Suli, hosted a commemorative service.⁸

The Golden Chain of Mercy

There is only so much that can be conveyed in a rationale for a resolution to the meeting of the full Assembly. That consideration raises the interesting question as to whether there might have been some further information which would have established a deeper understanding within the Uniting Church of the Armenian genocide – and why the Turkish state and its historians continue to object to this naming. For them a solution to the ‘Armenian problem’ was necessary, firstly due to the emergence of radical activist groups in the 1880s, and then due to the geopolitics of wartime measures. The Armenians were Christian as were the Ottoman’s European and Russian enemies. How this counter-narrative is dealt with is important insofar as the integrity of the Uniting Church’s resolution depends upon the plausibility of the claim to genocide.

In some important respects something was missed in the position adopted by the Assembly in 2015 in terms of imagination and adherence. This dilemma arises out of the recency of the Uniting Church coming into being. The Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches came into union, hence well after the Armenian genocide had run its tragic course. The connections between an always emerging present with those contributing denominations has progressively weakened through the passage of time. One of the consequences of that eclipse is that few members of the Uniting Church are aware of how widespread the Christian concern for the Armenian situation was at the time and, additionally, what role their own antecedents had played in the relief campaign.

⁵ In a radio broadcast on 24 August 1941 Churchill referred to the killings carried out by Nazi death squads as a ‘crime without a name’. His Armenian statement was made on 20 October 1915: Armenian National Institute, ‘Winston S. Churchill – Statement on the Armenian Genocide’, <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/churchill.html>; Also see, Richard Langworth, ‘Winston Churchill and the Armenian Genocide, 1914-1923’, *The Churchill Project*, 5 September 2020. <https://winstonchurchill.hilldale.edu/armenian-genocide/>; Johann Justus Vassel, ‘In the Beginning, There Was No Word’, *The European International Journal of Law*, 29:4 (2018), 1053-1056.

⁶ The Armenian National Institute, ‘Uniting Church in Australia’, 12 July 2015. https://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.504/current_category.189/affirmation_detail.html

⁷ National Council of Churches in Australia, *Newsletter*, December 2016. <https://www.archive.ncca.org.au/ncca-newsletter/december-2016/item/947-recent-events-the-uniting-church-in-australia-receives-armenian-freedom-award>

⁸ Uniting Church, Assembly, 27 March 2025. <https://uniting.church/110-anniversary-armenian-genocide/>

This gap in contemporary knowledge has been addressed in two ways. The first was through the launch of monograph, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, co-authored by Vicken Babkenian and Peter Stanley. This launch fittingly took place at St. Stephens Uniting Church in Macquarie Street, Sydney, on 13 September 2016. Back in 1915 the minister of St. Stephens, then a Presbyterian Church, was the Revd. John Ferguson. In response to news making its way back to Australia concerning the plight of the Armenians, Ferguson established the Armenian Relief Fund. On this occasion Babkenian delivered an address with a slideshow, while descendants of those Australians who supported the orphanage set up on Australian auspices were honoured.⁹

As the title suggests, Babkenian and Stanley's widely acclaimed history explores the Armenian genocide through the responses of Australians at the time. The primary focus is not simply on the policies pursued in the Ottoman empire towards Christian minorities, notably the Armenians but also includes the Pontian Greeks and Assyrians.¹⁰ The particular niche in the international literature to do with these 'annihilations' is how ordinary Australians responded half a world away through accounts provided by Anzac prisoners of war,¹¹ journalists such as Charles Bean¹² and American missionaries. Babkenian and Stanley accordingly describe the setting up of the Friends of Armenia, the Armenian Relief Fund, and the work of a cadre of compassionate humanitarians. Their number included a significant proportion of women activists among whom were Edith Glanville,¹³ Isobel Hutton, Cecilia John, Jessie Webb, Hilda King, Mary Bryce and Edith Searle. Of particular interest for the subsequent Uniting Church (and its 2015 resolution) was the role played by two clergy, Loyal Lincoln Wirt and James Cresswell.

Wirt was actually a Congregational minister from California but with strong Australian connections. In imitation of John Wesley his autobiography bore the title of *The World is My Parish*. It so happened that Wirt had made his way to Australia in 1901: during his time in the country, through to 1907, he served in ministry at the Congregational church in Newcastle, in mission work in Redfern, and then at Brisbane's Wharf Street Congregational church (where he established the first kindergarten in Australia).¹⁴ His return to Australia in May 1922 was in his capacity as a speaker recruited by the American Near East Relief to render its humanitarian aid international. Wirt was a noted evangelist and commanding speaker, besides which he

⁹ Krikor Youmshajekian, 'Armenia's Angels in the Uniting Church of Australia', *Armenian National Committee of America*, 7 November 2016. <https://anca.org/armenias-angels-in-the-uniting-church-of-australia/>

¹⁰ See, Themistocles Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Century Australia*, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature, 2026), 1-2. Kritikakos weaves together the 'collective victimhood' arising out of the 'systematic extermination of around 2.5 million Christians – between 1914 and 1923 – across Anatolia (Asia Minor), Eastern Thrace and surrounding territories'. The Armenian genocide is better known than the other two. The experiences of the Greeks and Assyrians are 'largely unknown and overlooked'.

¹¹ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 84-101.

¹² Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, pp. 109-111, 127-128, 141-142. Charles Bean was the official Australian war correspondent. In December 1915 he forwarded the report of an interview he had conducted with an Armenian soldier in the Ottoman army. Bean informed an Australia readership that the Turks were intent on 'wip[ing] out the Armenian nation'.

¹³ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 223-234. Edith Glanville (1871-1966), welfare worker, a philanthropist, a Justice of the Peace, an activist, a feminist, lecturer and broadcaster. Edith lost her older son Leigh who was killed on the day the Australian forces landed on the beaches of Gallipoli. She never fully recovered from that loss, but rather than give into grief she concentrated her energy and considerable talents into a wide range of activities. After the First World War ended she helped set up the Armenian Relief Fund – and later a breakaway group known as the 'Friends of Armenia'. She travelled extensively through the 1920s and 1930s to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine, seeing for herself the impact of war and violence. Edith was also instrumental in setting up orphanages for Armenian children in Lebanon and Syria. She and her husband, George, sponsored one of these orphans, by then a young man. Also, see: Vicken Babkenian, 'Edith May Glanville: Champion of the Armenian Relief Fund', *Journal of Ashfield and District Historical Society*, 2008. https://www.academia.edu/3580937/Edith_May_Glanville_Champion_of_the_Armenian_Relief_Fund

¹⁴ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 164.

had travelled through the refugee-stricken lands and possessed eyewitness accounts. By the time he arrived in Australia he had already set up relief committees in Hawaii, Japan, China, Korea and the Philippines.

From May through to September 1922 Wirt travelled the country explaining the “moral mandate” to assist the suffering Armenians. He drew large crowds and was able to work with leading churchmen, civic leaders and politicians. He was able to elicit sympathy and solidarity from a highly receptive Australian public. It was through Wirt’s initiative that the idea of sending an Australian “mercy ship” – the *Hobson’s Bay* – full of Australian food (as well as leather, condensed milk, clothing and other supplies) to Beirut and Constantinople. Passing by Gallipoli led him to coin the phrase “Anzac bread.” It was Wirt who also conceived the idea of an Australasian Orphanage at Antilyas, north of Beirut: it became a home and refuge, initially, for 1700 children. Wirt understood his mission to be one in which “a golden chain of mercy” was stretched across the Pacific “with a link in every country.”¹⁵

Cresswell was also a Congregational minister but, in this case, from Adelaide.¹⁶ Babkenian and Stanley describe him as “entirely ordinary” until he found himself immersed in the work of the Armenian Relief Committee. Prior to setting out for the Middle East he had unsuccessfully petitioned the Commonwealth government to allow entry for “young people” of Armenian stock. Cresswell set sail with Miss Gordon on the *Hobson’s Bay* in January 1923. They made their way to the Australasian Orphanage at Antilyas bearing messages of support and a large Australian flag. In his inspection of the home Cresswell noted “a vast array of Australian-branded” products: South Australian honey, blankets bearing the label of a “well-known Australian firm,” bread made out of Australian flour and “small boys, making boots out of leather from Sydney tanneries.” During his visit “eleven little boys” arrived after an arduous journey: Cresswell noticed how “they could not remember their parents and few of them even knew their own names.”¹⁷

Cresswell and Miss Gordon visited other orphanages, run by the Americans, in Syria before making their way to a Greek refugee camp where mainly women and children were living in caves: Cresswell reflected how what he saw was “beyond words ... no words seem adequate to describe the misery ... of these poor people.”¹⁸ Cresswell made his way through Palestine to Greece, while Miss Gordon remained at the orphanage of Antilyas. In Piraeus, in Greece, he presented the ambulance ordered by the committee back in Adelaide “as a gift from the people of South Australia.”¹⁹ From Greece he made his way to Istanbul, then to the republic of Armenia now within the Soviet Union, before visiting Gallipoli and returning to Australia.

Cresswell was a prominent witness to the continuing sufferings of the Armenian and Greek refugees. Through his tour he was able to report on the running of the orphanage at Antilyas as well as the distribution of goods sent from Australia “for the sake of sweet charity.” All the while, back in Australia, relief committees

¹⁵ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 195-209.

¹⁶ Cresswell was an example of what was called a ‘late vocation’. On coming into the ministry he was aged 43. ‘His first pastorate was in Keith ... From 1912 to 1919 he was minister of College Park Congregational Church and became chairman of the Congregational Union of South Australia in 1917-18. At the request of the London Mission Society, he spent a period as a missionary in the Cook Islands in 1920. He then returned to South Australia to become minister of the Highgate Congregational Church’. Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 210.

¹⁷ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 211-212.

¹⁸ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 214

¹⁹ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 218.

continued to make appeals in order to “grapple with the problem of supporting a vast number of orphans.” The South Australian committee even published its own monthly magazine, the *Armenian*.²⁰

The contemporary link between this work and the Uniting Church has subsequently been made more transparent in the documentary film, *The Golden Chain of Mercy*. It begins with the Last Post being played on Anzac Day, 25 April 2015, in Sydney: there are scenes of wreathes being laid and of elderly veterans marching through the streets. The setting then switches seamlessly to Yerevan, the day before, 24 April, which is the day set aside to observe Armenian Genocide Memorial Day. Tributes of red and white flowers. The narrator, Vernon Wells, describes the mass deportations and the loss of life occasioned by the government of the Young Turks in the Ottoman empire. The two days are “hardly mentioned in the same breath,” but they are “deeply interconnected.”

The film assumes this background. It makes use of a number of Australian-based historians and scholars of genocide studies to explore what transpired. Deborah Mayersen describes how the events of 1915-1923 were preceded by the Hamidian massacres / “terror” of 1894-1896.²¹ The death toll was around 100,000. Of particular interest is the concern for what is the best strategy to pursue. Is it to seek to reform the system from within or mount armed resistance? Mayersen describes how clergy were targeted in a bid to convert them to Islam. The task of describing the impact of the rise of the Young Turks was given to Panayiotis Diamadis whose specialist area of research is the genocide of the Pontian Greeks.²² Stanley reports on the arrest of the 250 intellectuals on the eve of the Gallipoli landing, leading into eyewitness accounts from Anzac prisoners-of-war. Andrekos Varnava is adamant that what ensues should be defined as genocide: “the intention of the death marches to nowhere” was to kill. Varnava elsewhere clarifies why it is genocide and not ethnic cleansing.²³ The difference lies between physical destruction and forced displacement. Across the Tasman, Maria Armoudian cites examples of how the news media covered the unfolding “annihilation” of the Armenians, even in outlets in small towns.²⁴ Joy Damousi concentrates attention on the humanitarian work of middle-class, well-educated, progressive women; that is set alongside a sensitivity to the news coming out of the Middle East which has been honed by the trauma of loss and grief.²⁵

The film includes several narratives surrounding individuals who played a part in the relief. In addition to Wirt, Cresswell and Glanville *The Golden Chain of Mercy* refers to the work of Isobel Hutton, an Australian Red Cross nurse who served Aleppo; Stanley Savage (at one-time a Baptist Sunday school teacher) who deployed a small force to protect thousands of fleeing Assyrian refugees from Urmia; Hilda King, John and Lydia Knudsen (from Christchurch in New Zealand) who oversaw work at the Antilyas orphanage, and Mary Bryce who drew parallels between Indigenous experience in Australia and that of the Armenians. These accounts both bear witness to the response of what happened as well as providing a plurality of perspectives.

²⁰ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 220-222.

²¹ Deborah Mayersen, ‘Armenian Resistance to the Hamidian Massacre’, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 16:2 (2022-2023), 68-88.

²² David W.G. Treloar and Panayiotis Diamadis, *Genocide to Restoration: The Photographs of George Devine Treloar*, (Athens: Unity in Philia, 2025).

²³ Andrekos Varnava, ‘Distinguishing Between Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire, (1914-1923) and Why This Matters’, *Griffith Law Review*, 34:2 (2025), 160-177.

²⁴ Maria Armoudian and Katherine Smits, ‘How Soon We Forget: National Myth-Making and Recognition of the Armenian Genocide’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 27:1 (2025), 91-112.

²⁵ Joy Damousi, ‘Humanitarianism in the Interwar Years’: How Australians Responded to the Child Refugees of the Armenian Genocide and the Greek-Turkish Exchange’, *History Australia* 12:1 (2015), 95-115.

The Fall of the Ottomans

The Golden Chain of Mercy is one film among three. The other two are about the relief campaigns that emerged in Europe, in particular the young female missionaries from the Scandinavian countries, and the United States, respectively. The title of the first film is *Map of Salvation* and the second is *The American Good Samaritans*. The Australasian response was novel inasmuch as this was the first time that a humanitarian venture was made in response to an American rather than an English initiative. The emergent tendency in writing on the Armenian genocide in this country is to focus on the Australian relief response and address diasporic concerns for a proper recognition of their forbears' stories and experience. The resolutions of the Uniting Church and the holding of commemorative services fall within that experience – but it is not the only way in which to frame the Armenian “tragedy.” Its original setting lay within the Ottoman empire, its deepening decline and the course of the great war and its legacy.

The outbreak of war has presented a conundrum: whose side would the Ottomans be on? If they were in alliance with the Germans, what might that then mean for those Armenians if their homelands became the theatre for war between the Russians and the Turks? There were Armenian populations on both sides of the border. Back in the late nineteenth century Armenian revolutionary movements had arisen. Their numbers may not have been large; they may not have had widespread support but this history, their existence, possessed the capacity for the Armenians – as a Christian minority – to be regarded with some suspicion. That risk was exacerbated when the primary leader of Sunni Muslims, Sheikh ul-Islam, declared the war to be a jihad, a holy war, in November 1914.

For an accessible understanding of this war-time context, the Uniting Church's apprehension of the Armenian genocide can benefit from a reading of Eugene Rogan's work on *The Fall of the Ottomans*.²⁶ Rogan is Professor of Middle East Studies in the University of Oxford. In this scenario the “annihilation” of the Armenians comes about as a consequence of the Ottomans facing invasion on three fronts – in the south, east and the Dardanelles. The governing Young Turks set about organizing their defence on the basis of “total war.” The army in the east was in disarray due to the onslaught of the Russians and disease. It was becoming evident that the soldiers in the east were deepening their hostility to the Armenians on the grounds of suspected disloyalty. The setbacks of the nineteenth century in the Balkan states had already led to the deportation of Greeks. The Armenians were perceived to be a much greater risk because it was feared they aspired after an independent homeland within the Ottoman empire brought about by the assistance of outside allies. They were deemed to be “the enemy within.” It appeared as if the Armenians were concentrated into three areas in particular where the Ottomans were most concerned for their security. It would appear that following defeat in the Caucasus at the hands of the Russians, the Young Turks began to contemplate more “extreme methods.” The ensuing deportations, the death marches, and acts of indiscriminate killing led one priest, Grigoris Balakian, to name what was happening as “the Armenian Golgotha.”²⁷

²⁶ The relevant chapter of Rogan's is ‘The Annihilation of the Armenians’, pp. 169-184.

²⁷ Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918*, (first published in 1922: New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

Rogan is under no illusions about the intent behind the annihilation. He argues that a “two-track approach” was put into place. The passage and implementation of open deportation decrees was set alongside more secret orders to carry out an “atrocious slaughter.”²⁸ Rogan argues there was a set pattern: he writes of how

a set number of days after deportation notices were posted, Armenians were driven from their homes by gendarmes with fixed bayonets. Males aged twelve and older was separated from their female relations and killed. In smaller villages, the men were often killed within sight or hearing of their horrified womenfolk, but in larger towns they were marched away to where their murder would not be witnessed, particularly by foreigners. After the Armenian men had been separated from them, the women and children were escorted out of town under armed guard. According to survivors’ accounts, some of these caravans faced robbery and wholesale massacre; others were marched from town to town, with the sick, infirm, and the elderly killed as they fell behind. The ultimate destination for survivors were desert settlements in Syria and Iraq: Dayr-al Zur and Mosul were towns reached by perilous treks cross open desert.²⁹

Rogan illustrates the plight of numerous individuals, including Balakian. The question that arises is whether “the mass murder of Armenians between 1915 and 1918 was an unintentional consequence of war or a deliberate policy of extermination.”³⁰ Rogan believes it to have been “the first modern genocide.”³¹

Recognizing Genocide

It was a momentous decision for the Uniting Church to recognize the Armenian genocide. The last chapter of Babkenian and Stanley’s history is an epilogue dedicated to friends who tell the truth. The difficulty needing to be negotiated is the legacy of Gallipoli as well as the migration of both Turks and Armenians to Australia. The construction of the Anzac myth and the post-war reconciliation with Turkey has made it difficult for the federal Australian government to describe formally the Armenian massacres and death marches as genocide. There is little popular incentive to examine critically the authenticity and apparent sincerity of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s celebrated comment to do with “Johnnies and Mehments” lying together in “the soil of a friendly country.” His words of tribute are now to be found on many Gallipoli memorials, but it is highly doubtful that Atatürk ever said them. It is likely to come as a shock to the general Australian population that some reputable historians now believe it to be an invention which had its origins in a Brisbane suburb in 1978.³² This inability of the federal government not to publicly acknowledge the “annihilation” as a genocide would have struck church leaders, humanitarian workers and ordinary members of the Australian public of the period between 1915 and 1923 as very odd.

For the Uniting Church to declare its recognitions situates it at odds with those who deny that a genocide took place. Babkenian and Stanley concede that

²⁸ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 173-174.

²⁹ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 174.

³⁰ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 183.

³¹ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 184.

³² See Mark McKenna, ‘An Anzac Myth’, *The Monthly*, 21 April 2016; Paul Daley, ‘Ataturk’s “Johnnies and Mehments” words about the Anzacs are shrouded in doubt’, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/20/ataturks-johnnies-and-mehments-words-about-the-anzacs-are-shrouded-in-doubt>

[i]t's true that there is no single document – the incriminating records have probably been destroyed. There are no 'Wannsee Conference minutes of the kind outlining detailed plans for the Nazi Holocaust.'³³

Rogan names "the architects."³⁴

As things stand neither the Turkish nor Australian government are prepared to acknowledge the Armenian genocide. At the time of writing there are thirty-four governments that have recognized what transpired as a genocide. Their number includes Germany, France, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia and the United States. Only three countries – Turkiye, Azerbaijan and Pakistan – have explicitly denied such. Stanley relates how he was summoned by the Turkish ambassador who sought to have him not use the term. Other entities and leaders who have done so include the World Council of Churches and Pope Francis. Whether the Uniting Church seeks to follow through further on its overture to the federal government for official recognition is a moot point.

Both Babkenian and Stanley are not committed to the necessity of some legislative decision by a group of politicians. Nor are they convinced by the argument that, were the Turkish authorities to acknowledge the genocide, then that admission would lead to claims for reparations. Their base position is that it is 'important' to recognize "the truth of what happened in the Ottoman empire during the Great War than [it is] to maintain a tactful silence for fear of offending Australia's Turkish friends."³⁵

The impact of this politics of recognition (or not) on the descendants of survivors is the subject of Kritikakos' research into memory and inherited trauma (sometimes handed on in silences). How is this played out in the affected diasporic communities in Australia where the memory may not have often been registered in public? Those memories remain. They do so despite the "narrative of reconciliation and mutual respect between former enemies [that] has become central to Australia's relationship with Turkey."³⁶

What, then, is the cost of this myth of national identity? Does it mean that the memories of affected communities is banished – Kritikakos suggests, "the suffocation of remembrance?" The enduring issue that Kritikakos is seeking to address had to do with "what happens when a people's suffering is persistently silenced or overlooked?"³⁷ If that is so, then it raises the consideration of "in a multicultural society whose memories deserve to be remembered," especially if there is a "competition of memory."

Kritikakos provides a thorough description of how a form of activism has led to campaigns for recognition at state and federal level. The irony that presents itself is the sharp difference between the responses of Australians at the time and political reluctance of the present. It is as if the acts of compassion that marked the relief fund, the public meetings, the despatch of humanitarian has all been forgotten. The "national

³³ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 280.

³⁴ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 63.

³⁵ Babkenian and Stanley, *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, 283.

³⁶ Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Australia*, 2.

³⁷ Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Australia*, 5

memory” has seemingly “erased those acts of compassion.”³⁸ It has opted to favour an idea of reconciliation between former enemies, but ignored the narratives of those whom Kritikakos imagines might constitute the witnesses and victims of a “Christian genocide.”³⁹

The Resolution of 2015 Revisited

The kind of research that Kritikakos has done is germane to how we understand what the Uniting Church might need to heed in the wake of recognizing genocide. Is a resolution enough, especially if it was not followed through in subsequent years until very recently? Through interviews the “generations after,” Kritikakos mapped the “cultural trauma” that comes about “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness.”⁴⁰

The resolution that the Assembly adopted in 2015 anticipated that there would be appropriate educational resources made available. Such an initiative enables a diasporic community to remember and give their account of what happened. It allows the wider church to hear that story and thus not be ignorant of why its Assembly has passed such a resolution. There is more value than this act of attentive listening, however. The educational resources that have now been developed by the Friends of the Middle East allow members of the Uniting Church to recapture an understanding of what motivated the fund raising and the compassion that lay behind the orphanage at Antilyas, the cargo of the *Hobson's Bay*, and the way in which churches held Armenia Sundays. Through the ministries of Wirth, Cresswell, Fergusson and many others, the forebears of the Uniting Church played their part in being a “link” in “the golden chain of mercy” to a far-off people.

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Clive Pearson is a former Principal of United Theological College and Head of School for the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University. He has published extensively in the areas of public, cross cultural and diasporic theologies as well as the theology of climate change. He has supervised over 30 postgraduate degrees. Until recently he was the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Public Theology*; he has delivered public lectures on ecumenism and climate change at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon.

³⁸ Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Australia*, 221

³⁹ Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Australia*, 183. Kritikakos is aware of the risks of weaving the experience of the three communities – Armenian, Abyssinian and Greek into a ‘collective’ experience. It runs the risk of ignoring the particular, the distinctive.

⁴⁰ Kritikakos, *Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocide Recognition in Twenty-First Australia*, 10. Here Kritikakos is citing Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma’, in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka, eds, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1-3.

A Holy Dream, A Bloody War

inise vakabua foi'akau

Abstract

This article is a personal reflection on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land on September 2023, a journey interrupted by the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on 7 October 2023. Framed by the tension between a lifelong “holy dream” and the realities of a “bloody war,” the article explores how pilgrimage, sacred geography, and biblical imagination are reshaped when experienced within an active conflict zone. The reflection moves from reverence and spiritual encounter during the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) to fear, uncertainty, and repatriation as violence unfolded around Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. Writing as a native Fijian wo-man, a Candidate for the Ministry of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia, I reflect on the ways in which inherited biblical imaginations are challenged by lived realities of those who inhabit the land today. Conversations with local people, experiences of military mobilisation and lockdown, and subsequent engagement with historical and theological scholarship reveal the Holy Land as both a sacred landscape and a contested political space marked by competing narratives, displacement, suffering, and enduring hope. The article argues that Christian pilgrimage cannot remain detached from these contemporary realities but must engage them with theological humility, historical awareness, and a commitment to justice and peace. Situated within the witness of the Uniting Church in Australia and informed by decolonial and contextual theological perspectives, this reflection invites readers to reconsider what it means to encounter God in a land where biblical memory and present human suffering coexist.

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With my head bowed, I acknowledge and pay my respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to their elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. I am a *marama iTaukei*, a native Fijian wo-man of *Yavusa Tio*,¹ of the chiefly village Nailaga in Ba along the Ba River in Fiji. My mother's tribe is *Nawaqaivanua vei ira na Gone ni Yavusa Tunu* from Vutia, in Rewa Province in central Fiji, a traditional warrior to her chief. I live and write on land I am not native to, on the country of Burramattagal people of Darug nation.

A Dream

In Aboriginal knowledge systems, dreaming² is not merely a series of dreams experienced during sleep or an exercise of imagination. Rather, it is a living reality that grounds ways of knowing, being, and belonging, connecting people with ancestors, country, law, kinship, and spirituality³.

¹ *yavusa* is the native Fijian tribal unit. *Tio* is oyster in Ba dialect. *Tio* is totem to the tribal unit of *Yavusa Tio*

² “Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness,” *Ungunmerr-Baumann, Miriam-Rose* accessed 10.08.2026, <https://www.scribd.com/document/368472589/Dadirri-Inner-Deep-Listening-M-R-Ungunmerr-Baumann-Ref>

³ “Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,” *World Views Environment Culture Religions*, accessed 13.07.2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233563150_Some_Thoughts_about_the_Philosophical_Underpinnings_of_Aboriginal_Worldviews

Some native Fijians claim a spiritual and ancestral connection to the Holy Land, Israel. Within certain strands of Fijian oral tradition and Christian interpretation, it has been suggested that Fijians may be connected to the dispersed or “lost” tribes of Israel.⁴ Others associate migration narratives from Tanganyika in East-Central Africa to the South Pacific with the scattering of these tribes.⁵ While such claims hold significance within some communities and faith traditions, they are not supported by mainstream historical or archaeological scholarship. Nevertheless, these narratives have contributed to a sense of connection with Israel among some native Fijians.

There is also a historical connection reinforced through Fiji’s long-standing participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions in the Middle East. Following the establishment of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 1978, Fiji contributed troops to the peacekeeping mission and has maintained a significant presence through successive deployments over several decades.⁶ In addition, personnel from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) have served with the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in Golan Heights.⁷ These peacekeeping commitments have given many Fijians direct experience of places associated with the biblical world, contributing to enduring social, religious, and cultural connections between Fiji, the Holy Land, and the wider Middle East.

Growing up in Suva – Fiji, stories of church choirs travelling on pilgrimage to the Holy Land was common. My late mother, an educator and broadcaster, and my youngest brother were among the many Fijians who travelled on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and to visit family serving in Lebanon. In anticipation of their return, I listened attentively to my mother’s accounts of the journey. She spoke of the Holy Land with profound reverence, recalling that upon arriving in Tel Aviv she knelt to kiss the ground – a gesture reminiscent of Pope John Paul II during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2000.⁸ She described an overwhelming awareness of God’s presence as the aircraft descended towards the runway, a sense of awe that she was approaching a landscape rendered sacred through the biblical narrative and centuries of faithful witness. Her stories became formative in shaping my own imagination, nurturing what emerged as my “holy dream”: a deep longing to walk the landscapes, to encounter places where biblical narratives are situated, and to participate in the enduring tradition of pilgrimage through which generations of believers have sought a tangible experience of God’s presence.

As I prepared to enter ministry formation in the Uniting Church in Australia, my desire to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land deepened. Such a journey was not a requirement for formation, but a long personal aspiration. During this period, I noticed a poster at United Theological College advertising a 2023 study tour to the Holy Land. By the time I made enquiries, registrations had closed. Further enquiries led

⁴ “The Lost Tribes of Israel – and the Genesis of Christianity in Fiji: Missionary Notions of Fijian Origin from 1835 to Cession and Beyond,” *Oceania* 25 no.3 (2015): 250–270, accessed 17.06.2026, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ocea.5106>

⁵ “The Lost Tribes of Israel – and the Genesis of Christianity in Fiji”

⁶ “Fijian troops conclude UNIFIL mission,” United Nations, accessed 13.06.2026, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/en/news/fijian-troops-conclude-unifil-mission-0>

⁷ “Fiji Peacekeepers Shine in UNDOF Mission in the Golan Heights,” Fiji Global News, 19 September, 2025, accessed 13.06.2026, <https://fijiglobalnews.com/fiji-peacekeepers-shine-in-undof-mission-in-the-golan-heights/>

⁸ “Pope Endorses Arafat’s Quest for Statehood,” Los Angeles Times, 23 March 2000, accessed 17.06.2026, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-mar-23-mn-11859-story.html>

me to a group of Fijian women in Sydney who were organising a pilgrimage to Israel. What had long been a holy dream was now beginning to take shape as reality.

Farewelled

My usual preparations for international travel were almost non-existent for this trip. I paid little attention to the details I would ordinarily consider before travelling – weather forecasts, political developments, current events, exchange rates, and even aspects of the itinerary. Perhaps consumed by the busyness of life, or with the excitement of finally realising a long-held dream.

Our tour group was formally commissioned and farewelled at my local church. During that gathering I had a conversation with one of the ministers, the exchange appeared unremarkable; yet, only weeks later, those words would return to me with unexpected significance.

Depart

We departed Sydney on the morning of 26 September 2023. Arriving at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, our first destination was the coastal city of Netanya. It was late, yet the music that drifted from the beachfront to our hotel rooms made me wander towards the shoreline for my first feel of the eastern Mediterranean. The experience was surreal. To the south lay Joppa, the ancient port made known from the story of Jonah and apostle Peter, and beyond it, Gaza. Places that had long existed in my imagination through biblical text, and contemporary news formed the landscape before me.

With the Mediterranean stretching before us, what struck me was the vibrancy of ordinary life. On an otherwise unremarkable Tuesday evening, the promenade was alive with people walking, talking, swimming, and gathering around the beachside cafés as music filled the air. There was an unmistakable sense of peace and normality that contrasted with the region's long and contested history. In those first hours, the Holy Land appeared no different from other countries I had visited – a welcoming, vibrant, and at ease – offering little indication of how profoundly the days ahead would alter both the journey and my understanding of the place.

Sukkot

As a Sydney-based Fijian pilgrimage group, one of the central events of our pilgrimage⁹ was the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*), hosted annually by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ). *Sukkot* is one of the three major biblical pilgrimage festivals, commemorating Israel's dwelling in temporary shelters during the forty years of wilderness wandering following the Exodus from Egypt, while also celebrating the autumn harvest and God's continuing provision.¹⁰ Since 1980, ICEJ has welcomed thousands of Christian

⁹ "Feast of Tabernacle 2023." International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, accessed 13.06.2026, <https://www.icej.org/event/icej-feast-of-tabernacles-2023/> Organised by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), the 2023 Feast of Tabernacles attracted thousands of pilgrims from around the world, including Fiji. Our ecumenical Sydney-based Fijian pilgrimage group partnered with one of the Fiji groups.

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 16:13–15; Leviticus 23:33–43

pilgrims from around the world to Jerusalem for its annual Feast of Tabernacles, interpreting the festival as an expression of Christian solidarity with Israel and as an anticipation of the prophetic vision of all nations gathering in Jerusalem to worship God.¹¹

During the opening days of the festival, we joined thousands of pilgrims representing nearly eighty nations in intercultural celebrations along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Through worship, music, prayer, and fellowship, people from diverse cultures and traditions gathered in a shared expression of Christian faith. The pilgrimage then continued in Jerusalem, nightly celebrations were held at the Pais Arena with worship, biblical teaching and the symbolic 'Roll Call of Nations'. The atmosphere was uplifting and deeply spiritual.

In addition to participating in Sukkot, we visited significant historical and archaeological sites. These included Caesarea Maritima, now in ruins was the magnificent city built by Herod the Great; Rosh Hanikra, with its spectacular sea grottoes and remnants of the railway that once connected Cairo, Haifa, and Beirut during the Second World War; Tzipori, an archaeological site renowned for its intricate mosaics and layers of settlement history; and the remarkable Keshet Cave, known for its natural rock arch and breathtaking views across the Galilee. We also journeyed through a few biblical sites: Mount Tabor, traditionally associated with the Transfiguration of Jesus; Nazareth Village, which offers a reconstruction of life in first-century Galilee; Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene; the Mount of Beatitudes, overlooking the Sea of Galilee where Jesus is believed to have delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

One particularly memorable experience was sailing across the Sea of Galilee in a traditional wooden boat. As we crossed the lake at dusk, the setting sun illuminated one side of the vessel while the moon rose over the opposite horizon, creating a moment of profound beauty and contemplation. The experience invited reflection on the Gospel narratives in which the Sea of Galilee serves not merely a geographical setting but as a significant theological landscape in the ministry of Jesus. Upon reaching the opposite shore, we shared a meal of locally prepared Galilean fish, recalling the enduring association of the lake with the fishing community that feature prominently in the Gospel tradition.¹²

Other significant moments included experiencing baptism in the Jordan River; at the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives; placing written prayers from families in the ancient stones of the Western Wall; walking the Via Dolorosa deeply reflecting at the Stations of the Cross; to be in the traditional site of the Upper Room; and sharing a meal together as Sukkot celebrations drew to a close.

In many of these sites, our group paused to sing and pray. Whether overlooking the Sea of Galilee, standing beside the Jordan River, or walking the ancient streets of Jerusalem, the biblical narratives became inseparable from the physical landscape. *"All one had to do was to think of a text, and the authentic spot could be provided"*.¹³ The Holy Land was no longer simply a place encountered through scriptures and tradition, it had become a loved space where faith, history, memory and pilgrimage converged. At the time,

¹¹ See Zechariah. 14:16–19

¹² See Matthew 4:18–22 [calling of first disciples], Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41, Luke 8:22–25 [Jesus calms the storm], John 21:1–14 [breakfast by the Sea of Galilee].

¹³ Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* (British Museum Press, 1995), 85.

it seemed this sacred landscape embodied the peace and hope it proclaimed. Only later that perception be profoundly challenged.

7.10.2023

Prior to our travel on the morning of Saturday(Sabbath) 7th October 2023, for a two-day tour to Jordan, we were advised us not to carry items that overtly identified us as Christians: including Bibles, Christian literature, or religious merchandise. Precautions as such reflected the practical realities of crossing an international border in a region shaped by complex political, religious, and security considerations. We travelled from Jerusalem towards the Allenby Bridge/King Hussein Bridge, the crossing between the West Bank and Jordan.

It seemed to be an ordinary morning. We had spent the previous days immersed in the sacred landscapes of biblical text, moving between places that for years had shaped our faith and imagination. The Jordanian staff at the hotel where we stayed in Jerusalem had shared stories of their homeland, speaking warmly of its history, culture, and hospitality. Their accounts heightened our anticipation as we looked forward to crossing the border, and to experience Jordan.

At the border we were refused entry, only to realise the scale of events unfolding in Israel and Gaza. Reports began to emerge that Hamas militants had launched an unprecedented cross-border attack from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. Initially, the information was fragmented and difficult to comprehend. News alerts accumulated and conversations among travellers became questions of safety and uncertainty, it was increasingly evident that we were witnessing the beginning of a major regional conflict.¹⁴

The land we had come to encounter as pilgrims was suddenly fractured. Places that had existed in our imagination as sacred biblical landscapes became repeated locations in news bulletins and emergency alerts. Gaza, which only days earlier had seemed a geographical reference as we stood on the shores of the Mediterranean, had become the epicentre of a conflict unfolding before the eyes of the world.

In a matter of hours, our pilgrimage moved from celebration to vigilance, from certainty to uncertainty. The Holy Land that had inspired a lifelong dream now confronting with the realities of violence, fear and human suffering.

The pilgrimage was no longer simply about visiting sacred places. It became an encounter with the fragility of peace and a reminder that the lands revered as holy are also landscapes marked by recurring conflict, displacement, bereavement and hope.¹⁵ Emerging slowly yet clearly were the juxtapositions of faith and suffering, memory and violence, sacredness and political conflict as tension unfolded.

We returned to Jerusalem, to the same Jordanian hotel we had departed from. For the next couple of days, we remained confined to the hotel as the security situation tightened. Air raid sirens became recurring,

¹⁴ "Israel/Palestine: Devastating Civilian Toll as Parties Flout Legal Obligations," GlobalSecurity.org, 9 October, 2023, accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2023/10/mil-231009-hrw01.htm>.

¹⁵ Coleman and Elser, 1995, 5.

directing attention to the skies with vapour trails of intercepted missiles. Apps pinged frequent alerts of the locations of rocket impacts – sometimes within 15 to 20 kilometres of our hotel, at other times further away. What was unfolding lay far beyond our experience, comprehension, or control.

Bloody War

During the subsequent two-day lockdown, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel was “at war”.¹⁶ As an international traveller, this announcement carried practical implications, as travel insurance policies with exclusions for acts of war or armed conflict were affected. Pilgrims in other accommodation reported being directed repeatedly to bomb shelters in response to incoming rocket alerts. Our group was spared these repeated evacuations, a circumstance for which I was deeply grateful, as claustrophobia would likely be exacerbated by prolonged confinement in such shelters. Instead, our group gathered regularly in the basement where we prayed, cared for one another, and drank kava. These frequent gatherings became a source of spiritual sustenance, amid growing uncertainty.

This standstill gave space for me to follow news reports and historical analyses in a belated effort to make sense of the political and religious complexities of the region. Frustratedly, I had arrived at a selective knowing of the historical, theological, and geopolitical forces that shaped this land. I was confronted with the interrelationship between ICEJ¹⁷, strands of Christian Zionism, the history of British¹⁸ and American¹⁹ involvement in the region, the emergence and influence of groups such as Hamas²⁰ and Hezbollah²¹, and the diverse religious, political, and cultural identities within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The complexity of these intersecting histories defied simplistic explanation.

As the conflict unfolded, I found myself grappling with growing unease, grief, and moral disquiet. The conversations I had with the minister and others before our departure gradually made sense as the realities of war became clearer. In retrospect, the conversations shared with the Jordanian hotel staff, who travelled regularly between Jordan and Jerusalem for work, and the apprehension expressed by our driver, Mohammed, who had accompanied our group throughout the preceding twelve days.

As reports from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza continued to emerge, they revealed the devastating human consequences of the conflict: the loss of civilian lives, the taking of hostages, the displacement of communities, and the extensive humanitarian impact of the ensuing military campaign in Gaza. These accounts deepened my awareness that behind the political narratives were ordinary people whose lives had been irrevocably altered by violence and war.

¹⁶ “We are at war,” Times of Israel, 7 October, 2023, accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/we-are-at-war-netanyahu-says-after-hamas-launches-devastating-surprise-attack/>.

¹⁷ “Christian Zionism – The Land Promise: A Divine Covenant Unfolding,” International Christian Embassy Jerusalem accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.icej.org/understand-israel/biblical-teachings/christian-zionism-the-land-promise-a-divine-covenant-unfolding/>

¹⁸ Mitri Raheb. *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Orbis Books, 2023), 27

¹⁹ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine* 28.

²⁰ Beverley Milton-Edwards, and Stephen Farrell. *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), vi.

²¹ See Clive Pearson, “David, Goliath and the Gospel” elsewhere in this Issue.

The earlier experience of profound spirituality – marked by worship, praise, and a deep sense of the sacred – now exists in tension with realities that I did not fully apprehend. Subsequent reading and reflection have drawn my attention to the separation barrier in the West Bank, the displacement of Palestinian communities, disputes over land and housing, ongoing restrictions affecting movement and access to resources²², and the broader humanitarian and human rights concerns of oppression of livelihoods in the occupied Palestinian territories for decades. The continuing devastation in the Gaza Strip and the immense suffering experienced by civilians²³ have challenged my understanding of the land I had encountered primarily through the lens of biblical faith.

Moving Further North

On the morning of Monday, 9 October 2023, we were instructed to have breakfast before travelling approximately 180 kilometres north to Tiberias. By this stage, my overriding desire was simply to leave Israel. The three-hour journey from Jerusalem took us past Ben Gurion Airport, military checkpoints, armoured vehicles, and both visible and camouflaged tanks that had become increasingly common following the mobilisation of the Israel Défense Forces. We passed service stations and roadside facilities where young soldiers, many carrying assault rifles, stationed as part of heightened national security measures. Above us, white trails lingered across the sky – later explained as the paths of rockets and interceptions associated with Israel's Iron Dome air defence system, which had been deployed extensively to intercept incoming projectiles during the conflict.²⁴

Not long after leaving Jerusalem, we received news that a repatriation flight to Fiji had been arranged for the following day, with only a limited number of seats available. My travel companion, my sister and I bought tickets, and continued north with the remainder of the group. At the north, we were approximately 60 kilometres from Israel's border with Lebanon. Having recently travelled through northern Israel, our guide had pointed out the proximity of Hezbollah positions across the border, the reports of escalating regional tensions heightened an already profound sense of uncertainty.²⁵

The Final Leg

That night in our hotel in Tiberias, I slept very little. My body trembled as I struggled with what I believed was either the onset of an infection or a physical response to the cumulative stress and uncertainty of the preceding days. Although I could not distinguish between illness and the physiological effects of acute stress, I remained prayerful, asking God for strength and sufficient health for trip back to Ben Gurion Airport.

²² "Israel and the occupied territories: After two months of aid blockage, humanitarian response in Gaza on verge of total collapse," International Committee of the Red Cross, accessed 14.05.2026, "<https://www.icrc.org/en/news-release/israel-and-occupied-territories-after-two-months-aid-blockage-humanitarian-response-verge-collapse>."

²³ "UNRWA Situation Report #194 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem," United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-194-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>.

²⁴ "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – reported impact 2023," United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed 14.07.2023, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-3-december-2023-2359>.

²⁵ "The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah," The Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/coming-conflict-hezbollah>.

At dawn, the hotel reception arranged a taxi for my sister and I to travel south to Ben Gurion Airport, while the remainder of our group continued the pilgrimage. The taxi ride cost approximately USD \$500 – a considerable and unexpected expense. Yet, in that moment, the financial cost seemed secondary to the overwhelming desire to leave the country at war. It marked the final stage of a pilgrimage that had begun as the fulfilment of a lifelong holy dream but had been irrevocably transformed by violence and uncertainty. This bloody war.

Reflection

The memories of 7th October remain vivid: the images of young people fleeing in terror, the wounded, the dead, and those taken hostage. Equally, the ongoing suffering of civilians in Gaza, where widespread destruction, repeated displacement, and the severe restriction of access to basic human need: food, water, healthcare, sanitation, and secure shelter have created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.²⁶ These experiences have also compelled me to grapple with the enduring realities of Israeli control over the occupied Palestinian territories, longstanding concerns regarding violations of international humanitarian law, and the legal and ethical questions raised by the ongoing proceedings before the International Court of Justice concerning genocide.²⁷

As an Australian-Fijian traveller to Israel, my experience challenged the assumed inherited imagination. I discovered that the Holy Land cannot be understood solely through the lens of biblical geography or devotional spirituality. Rather, it is a living landscape where sacred memory coexists at different levels.²⁸ This experience has not diminished my reverence for the biblical witness; instead, it has expanded my understanding of what it means to read biblical text in dialogue with lived experiences of those who inhabit the land today.²⁹

I recognise that my experience has enabled me to perceive realities that some fellow Fijians, may not (willingly) see. Prior to the pilgrimage, I largely understood the Holy Land through biblical stories and the testimonies of returning pilgrims. Only after witnessing the outbreak of war did I begin to recognise the perspectives of Palestinian Christians, the diversity within Judaism itself, the tension of reading biblical text and contemporary Israel, the contested nature of Christian Zionism³⁰, and the profound humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict. My perspective transformed, I still do not fully understand the complexities of the Middle East and its political players, but this pilgrimage has exposed my limitations of a devotional imagination that had not previously engaged with the social, historical, and political realities of the land.

Since the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war, the Uniting Church in Australia has consistently lamented the violence, condemned the targeting of civilians, called for the release of hostages, advocated for an immediate and sustained ceasefire, urged unhindered humanitarian access, and affirmed that any lasting

²⁶ "Occupied Palestinian Territory," United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.unocha.org/occupied-palestinian-territory>.

²⁷ "Order of 26 January 2024," International Court of Justice, accessed 14.07.2026, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203447>.

²⁸ Caplan, Neil. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories* 3rd ed. (Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 3-19.

²⁹ Tessler, Mark. *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* 3rd ed. (Indiana University Press, 2024), 130-131.

³⁰ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 30.

peace must be grounded in international law and the equal dignity of all people.³¹ These statements have provided an important ecclesial framework within which I continue to reflect on pilgrimage, discipleship, and God's call to justice and peace in the Holy Land.

inise vakabua foi'akau, of Fijian heritage, crossed the moana with her family and now lives, worships, and serves on the country of Burramattagal people of the Darug Nation. Attentive to her intersectionality, she is a wife, mother, candidate for the Ministry of the Word, with formative roots in the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma. As a pilgrim, she navigates the complexities of ethnocultural identity, faith, and church, and continuing to wrestle with biblical texts through the lens of a native Fijian and diasporic woman.

³¹ "Statements, Articles and Resources on Palestine and Israel," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, accessed 14.07.2026, <https://uniting.church/palestine-and-israel/>.

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 – 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.

Is the Basis of Union in Error Regarding John Wesley's Sermons?

Glen O'Brien

Abstract

This article argues that there is a dating error in Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union which states that 'the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).' There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime beginning from 1746, but there is no 1793 edition. In the Model Deed of 1763, the 'Forty-Four Standard Sermons' were declared to be authoritative standards for Methodist preaching. It is most likely that '1793' was an error and that '1763' was the intended date, given the definitive status of the Model Deed. The existence of this textual gloss forms the basis here for a brief provocation on the need for a critical evaluation of Wesley's sermons for the Uniting Church.

Introduction

The status of John Wesley's sermons in the Uniting Church is somewhat like a vestigial organ. It exists but is no longer operational in any really meaningful way. Paragraph 10 of the Uniting Church's Basis of Union states that 'the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).'¹ This was very important for Methodists at the time of union, especially since Methodist ministers were put on notice at their ordination that they would not preach any doctrines contrary to what was contained in them or in Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. Ordinands today do not study these sources, and Ministers of the Word do not feel under obligation to align their teaching with them. The historic attachment to them, even among Methodists, may have been somewhat totemic in any case. Because Wesley's sermons have long been in the public domain, they are readily available online, though these are often simply facsimiles of nineteenth-century editions, lacking any critical notes or scholarly introductions. I insist on students using the current critical edition but in the era of online learning and the proliferation of eBooks, such a rule is difficult to enforce. The *Forty-Four Sermons*, dealing as they do with what might be considered outdated soteriological themes, are perhaps not the most interesting of Wesley's sermons for today's readers. In any case, they constitute only about one third of Wesley's available published sermons. Sermons such as 'A Catholic Spirit' continue to appeal to ecumenically minded Christians and eschatological sermons such as 'The New Creation' and 'The General Deliverance' contain rich material for those with eco-theological interests.² Anita Monro is currently engaged in research on Wesley's *Standard*

¹ *Basis of Union*, para 10.

² John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit,' in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2: Sermons II* (34-70), edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 79-95; Sermon 60, 'The General Deliverance' in Wesley, *Works* vol. 2, 436-50; Sermon 63, 'The General Spread of the Gospel' in Wesley, *Works*, vol. 2, 485-99; Sermon 64, 'The New Creation' in Wesley, *Works* vol. 2, 500-510.

Sermons and finds them to indicate unresolved tensions between Reformed and Evangelical streams within the Uniting Church.³ This ambivalence around the status of the *Sermons* is highlighted by what appears to a dating error in Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union. The demonstration of this error here will be used as a springboard to a brief provocation on the need for a critical evaluation of Wesleyan source materials for today's Uniting Church.

Identifying the Error

There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime, beginning from 1746, but there is no 1793 edition. Archive copies of drafts of the *Basis of Union* show that the date of 1793 first occurs as a hand written gloss in a typewritten March 1968 draft. There is no date included in the later May 1968 draft, but the September 1968 draft includes the 1793 date.⁴ In the Model Deed of 1763, Wesley's 'four volumes' of sermons and his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* were declared to be authoritative standards for Methodist preaching.⁵ It is likely, given the definitive status of the Model Deed, that the reference to a '1793' edition in the *Basis* is an error and that '1763' was the intended date. The 'four volumes' referred to in the Model Deed are the ironically titled, 'Sermons on Several Occasions,' a formula usually reserved for sermons preached at court or other distinguished places, rather than in the fields and marketplaces where Wesley normally preached to ordinary people. These forty-four came to be referred to by Methodists as the 'Standard Sermons'. There had been earlier editions with fewer sermons before 1746 and there would be later collections that varied in both number and in content. American Methodists came to subscribe to a collection of fifty-three sermons and there are 151 sermons in the current edition of the *Works*.⁶ Many of the later sermons are far more interesting than the Forty-four but are rarely encountered by casual readers. British Methodism (the stream from which Australian Methodism derives) in the Chapel Model Deed of 1832, engaged in a complex debate about which edition of the sermons (different editions had slightly different contents) should be seen as definitive and settled on the Forty-four. After seeking legal counsel to determine the matter in 1914, this was reaffirmed.⁷

In order to support my claim about the error, I have re-read Albert Outler's discussion of the various editions of Wesley's sermons in the 'Introduction' to *The Works of John Wesley vol. 1* (in the current critical edition of the *Works*) which may be taken as an authoritative treatment.⁸ There is no reference there to any 1793 edition of the Standard Sermons.

³ Anita Monro, 'Competing Appeals to Authority: John Wesley, the Basis of Union and the Nature of Faith,' forthcoming in *Creeeds, Confessions and Contexts*, edited by Paul Goh and Geoff Thompson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2026).

⁴ Information provided by Damian Palmer of United Theological College, in a comment on my Facebook post of 9 October 2025.

⁵ 'The Large Minutes, A and B (1753–1763):' In *The Works of John Wesley vol. 10 The Methodist Societies. The Methodist Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 869–70. The text of the Model Deed is also found in, 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev Mr. Wesley and Others; from the Year 1744 to the Year 1789.' In *The Works of John Wesley, vol. VIII: Addresses, Essays, Letters* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 330–31.

⁶ Contained in the first four volumes of the *Works*, all edited by Albert C. Outler and published by Abingdon Press between 1984 and 1987.

⁷ John Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), xix–xxi.

⁸ Albert C. Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 1, Sermons I: 1–33* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1–100.

I have in my library (as I am sure many UCA ministers do) the Epworth Press edition of *Sermons on Several Occasions* which was first published in 1944. My copy is the 12th impression of 1975 (very close to the time of union).⁹ This was likely to have been the edition on which probationers were examined at that time. Its title page states that it consists of 'forty-four discourses, published in four volumes, in the years 1746, 1748, 1750, and 1760 (fourth edition 1787); to which reference is made in the Trust-Deeds of the Methodist chapels, as constituting, with Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, the standard doctrines of the Methodist Connexion.'¹⁰ No mention is made of any 1793 edition here or in John Lawson's *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (first published in 1946) which was used by probationers in preparing for examinations.¹¹

Generative AI searches 'hallucinated' some misleading information, including the spurious statement that a 1793 edition of Wesley's Sermons was published posthumously, a claim for which there is no verifiable data in any published sources of which I am aware. It is likely to be a rather lazy 'AI slop' extrapolation from the fact that Wesley died in 1791 so any purported 1793 edition must have been 'published anonymously.' A rather better AI result provided by a prompt from Rod Benson, after the AI's 'thinking time' of 1 minute and 6 seconds (rather long for a response to a prompt by Generative AI), came up with nothing definitive. 'The best-supported explanation is that it is a misdating that crept into the drafting of the Basis of Union (or an early background paper) and then became conventional in UCA usage. The historically accurate anchors would be 1787 (4th ed.) or 1796–99 (5th ed.), not 1793.'¹²

No 1793 edition of John Wesley's Sermons exists. Even if it did, it would be inexplicable why Methodists in 1977 would have appealed to this as a standard rather than the 1763 edition established in the Model Deed and later legally verified by the British Methodist Conference. I am convinced that the 1793 date given in the Basis of Union is an inadvertent error, possibly a '9' replacing an intended '6'. Whose hand made the amendment remains unknown. That no one noticed the error at the time may be put down to the admittedly bigger issues that were on the minds of the architects of the Uniting Church.

Before considering the place that Wesley's sermons might have for the Uniting Church's present discourse, it is necessary to explore their precedent function in Methodism, including their legal status and their broad content.

The Authority and Use of the Sermons

The idea that a corpus of sermons could serve a norming function for preaching existed in Anglicanism before Wesley. He often referred in defense of key aspects of his Protestant theology, including justification by faith and the relation between faith and good works, to Thomas Cranmer's 'Edwardian Homilies' of 1547.¹³ Wesley's lay preachers had no formal education and were without the benefit of theological degrees

⁹ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1975). The dust jacket carries the title, *John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons*, while the title page has *Sermons on Several Occasions*.

¹⁰ Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, title page.

¹¹ Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons*.

¹² Information provided by Rod Benson in a comment on my Facebook post of 9 October 2025.

¹³ The 1547 volume of Homilies was followed by 1563, 1567 and 1571 editions during the Elizabethan Settlement under Archbishop Matthew Parker. Gerald Bray, ed. *The Books of Homilies: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015).

or homiletical training. Some kind of preaching model and theological guardrail was necessary, though it did not entirely prevent from appearing the kind of theological novelties that intense periods of religious revival inevitably produce.

The standard set by the Model Deed of 1763 which established the Sermons and the Notes as authoritative sources, obtained right down to the time Australian Methodists entered the Uniting Church in 1977. Ministerial candidates in Australian Methodism were required to inform the Superintendent Minister that they had read and approved the Sermons, to pass an exam on both the Sermons and the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, and to promise that if their views became contrary to these sources that they would 'quietly retire from the ministry.' At ordination, they were once again interrogated as to their adherence to these standards and were subject annually to the question of the District Synod, whether they still believed and taught 'our doctrines.'¹⁴ It does not appear to be the case that such stringent expectations were ever really enforced but they constituted a strong cultural affirmation of the value of Wesleyan source materials, something which has now entirely disappeared from the Uniting Church.

The standard sought was more theological than stylistic, since ministers were not asked to preach the way Wesley preached but to ensure that they preached the same doctrines. It is very likely that Wesley himself adopted a style when preaching that was very different from the cool, formal logic of the published sermons. There are many topics in his record of sermons preached that never found their way into publication. He preached without notes sometimes for over an hour. Once he was familiar with the developed theme of an often-repeated sermon he would formulate it into an essay for publication.¹⁵ Of course, by 1977 (and long before) many Methodists were, quite properly, addressing matters in their sermons different from those which exercised Wesley, yet they continued to be guided by their overall themes, such as the universal availability of divine grace, the centrality of love, and the transformative power of personal and social holiness.

The Sermons Today

Anita Monro is currently engaged with summaries of the Standard Sermons, revisiting the evangelical faith she encountered as a child and exploring at greater depth source materials that shaped the Methodism of her childhood. In her summary of Wesley's Sermon 16, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount 1' (the first of Wesley's thirteen sermons on the Sermon on the Mount) she issues a trigger warning:

This material contains explicit evangelical Christian content, including strong statements of belief, calls to conversion, and language that may assume or promote a particular religious worldview. Readers who have experienced religious pressure, spiritual trauma, or coercive faith environments may find some sections distressing, intrusive, or emotionally activating. Proceed with care and pause if you feel uncomfortable.¹⁶

¹⁴ Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Wesley's Standard Sermons*. 2 vols (London: Epworth, 1921), 18.

¹⁵ Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 87–88.

¹⁶ Anita Monro, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount 1: John Wesley – Sermon 16 – A Summary,' *Rainforest Ruminations* <https://anitamonro.substack.com/p/upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain> 3 March 2026, accessed 4 March 2026.

Such a warning might suggest that the evangelical theology in Wesley's sermons is so problematic as no longer to be helpful for today's Uniting Church constituency. As a counter-example, the United Methodist Church, having finally settled its half-century-long sexuality debates is currently undergoing a remarkable renewal of its Wesleyan ethos in its efforts to embrace its new Queer-affirming position.¹⁷ While the traditionalists who went on to form the schismatic Global Methodist Church often appealed to John Wesley in their rejection of LGBTQI+ inclusion, those who remained behind did the same from a progressive stance.¹⁸ Ashley Boggan has reclaimed John Wesley's decision to submit to being 'more vile' in his decision to engage in field preaching by developing material for a newfound 'Wesleyan Vile-tality' which includes a radical Queer-affirming Methodism.¹⁹ The Nazarene scholar, Keegan Osinski, has drawn on a representative number of Wesley's sermons to construct an affirming Wesleyan theology.²⁰ Clearly it is possible to derive quite distinct approaches from identical source materials. Deep exploration of Wesley's sermons and an appropriation of their key ideas is possible without simply reinstating the eighteenth-century ideas that underlay them.

One early twentieth-century edition that was very influential was Edward H. Sugden's (1854-1935) critical edition of 1921.²¹ Sugden was the first Master of Queen's College, University of Melbourne, and his work shows what can be done to take Wesleyan source materials and ask how they might be read in light of the operative theology of Methodists of a later age.²² While Sugden's exegetical observations are now, of course, quite dated, it is interesting to note how often he takes issue with Wesley's interpretive decisions, in light of evolutionary science and the liberal-evangelical theology of his own time.²³ On the other hand, he strongly supported Wesley's idea of 'entire sanctification' on the basis of prevailing psychological ideas.²⁴ In reference to Pope Pius' claim in the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi gregis*, that theological development ended with Thomas Aquinas, Sugden rejected the idea that Methodist theology could not go beyond John Wesley. Such an idea borders on 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit [who] did not close His [sic] work in 1791 when Wesley died. The Church that finalized its doctrine at any point in its history has signed its own death warrant.'²⁵ Sugden's approach remains a model of what can be done through a critical approach to Wesley's sermons that, not content simply to reiterate or distil their contents, engages with them in light of contemporary scholarship and the present needs of the church.

As for the dating error which is the cause of this provocation, given the constitutional authority of the *Basis of Union*, there may be no remedy available, and we will simply have to live with it. It is interesting to wonder why, over the almost sixty years between the 1968 draft of the *Basis* and now, nobody ever noticed the error. Could it be symptomatic, perhaps of a general neglect of Wesley studies in the Uniting Church? The official Methodist standards having been appropriately name-checked, the UCA moved on to its more pressing work of embodying its ecumenical future. The need for a critical evaluation of Wesley's sermons (and other

¹⁷ 'GCAH Announces New Center for LGBTQ+ United Methodist Heritage, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/gcah-announces-new-center-for-lgbtq-united-methodist-heritage/> 2 May 2024, accessed 4 March 2026.

¹⁸ Glen O'Brien, 'John Wesley's Catholic Spirit and United Methodist Schism,' *Holiness: An International Journal of Wesleyan Theology* 10:1 (April 2025): 20–30.

¹⁹ Ashley Boggan, *Wesleyan Vile-tality: Reclaiming the Heart of Methodist Identity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2025).

²⁰ Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021).

²¹ Sugden, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*.

²² For a collection of essays on Sugden, see Renate Howe, ed. *The Master: The Life and Work of Edward H. Sugden* (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2007).

²³ Glen O'Brien, 'Reading Wesley's Sermons in Edwardian Melbourne,' in Howe, *The Master*, 109–124.

²⁴ O'Brien, 'Reading Wesley's Sermons,' 118–20.

²⁵ Sugden, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, vol. 1, 181.

writings) for the UCA is long overdue. Ecumenically oriented churches whose progressivism has emerged from their evangelical origins (such as The United Methodist Church and The Methodist Church of Great Britain) have set a precedent for the appropriation of Wesleyan thought to address present concerns. The UCA is in a position to do the same but can only do so through an intentional attempt to discern whether such source material continues to function as a Continuing Witness in its life.²⁶

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²⁶ In 2024, the 17th Assembly adopted *The Belhar Confession* (1986), *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) and *Laudato si'* (2015) as formally recognised by the UCA as documents of 'Continuing Witness' with study materials prepared for the use of presbyteries and congregations. "Assembly Recognises Continuing Witness," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, <https://uniting.church/assembly-recognises-continuing-witness/> 16 July 2024, accessed 4 May 2026.



Covenanting Conversions

Rosemary Dewerse

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who am I? Who has been shaping me?

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

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

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

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

An invitation to change

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

² This is my acknowledgement.

³ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”

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

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

A theological expansion: Emmanuel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸ My Celtic heritage brought alive.

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

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

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

Theological expansion: The Kin[g]dom of God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A very brief note on the purpose of Jesus Christ

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

¹⁶ In conversation, August 2025.

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

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

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

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

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

A Missiological rupture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²³ “Brutal” is the word Uncle Ken uses.

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

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

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

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

²⁸ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”

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

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

Provoking expansions

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

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

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²⁹ Uniting Church in Australia, “Covenanting Statement.”

Book Forum: Garry Worete Deverell's *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology*

This issue's Book Forum engages the 2023 book, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* by trawoolway man and leading Indigenous theologian, Garry Worete Deverell.¹ This is Deverell's second book on Indigenous theology following his 2018 book, *Gondwana Theology: A trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith*.² *Contemplating Country* presents some of Deverell's further reflections on the notion of Country, decolonised treatments of some key Christian doctrines, and the persistence of colonial imaginations in the Australian Churches and their theologies. Deverell writes that the book's twelve chapters and Epilogue "present my attempts, within with a variety of settings and conversations, to give voice to the ever-new, ever-dynamic voice of the divine in these lands."³ The three respondents are Adam Couchman, Rebecca Lindsay and Naomi Wolfe. The Forum concludes with Deverell's own response to the three respondents. (Note that all quotations from *Contemplating Country* across the Forum are indicated by in-text page numbers.)

Two Trees: An Overly-generous Metaphor?

Adam Couchman

I was meandering along the path, a bright, sunny autumn day on unceded Yagera and Turbal Country. Foldup chairs in hand, approaching a place to sit, when I saw two trees standing tall, side by side. Two Ficus trees, Google tells me later on; my limited arboreal knowledge improved just that little bit. What struck me instantly wasn't their branches, their physical strength, or the gentle, mottled shade they provided over the surrounding area. Instead, it was the way their roots had interwoven one across the other. As I stood, momentarily taking in this unusual sight, I followed the long-tangled roots back from their individual ends to the source at the base of each trunk. How did they get this way? How did the roots know when to go over and when to go under?

With a bit of time, it was possible to trace the route each tree-tentacle had taken, recalling the mazes I would complete on restaurant placemats as a kid. Considering that both trees were about the same size, and their roots were one over the other, not dominated by one tree who had come late to the party and overrun the other, I figured that these two trees must have been planted at the same time. Twins sharing their environment who had managed to work out that growing together was the best way for them to exist in the world; how they would flourish, bloom, and thrive. Wanting to capture this moment I took a photo and then continued my journey, set up my chairs, and sat down to watch the game.

¹ Garry Worete Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

² Garry Worete Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

³ Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, xix.



This environmental marvel brought to mind Garry Deverell's use of the "two trees" metaphor in *Contemplating Country*. Adapting Paul's metaphor from Romans 11 where the apostle considers the relationship between Jewish and Gentile peoples, Deverell uses this typology to consider the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologies and colonial forms of Christianity. The relationship between the two trees is considered in four different ways.

- i One colonial plant
- ii Two plants entwined – an indigenous stump with colonial grafts
- iii Two plants entwined – a colonial stump with indigenous grafts.
- iv Two plants. An Indigenous tree and a colonial tree, growing side by side.⁴

Deverell wrestles with the ongoing relationship between Indigenous theologies and those that have been imported from other lands. How have they related to one another in the past? How do they continue to do so now? The typology is helpful, given its biblical precedent, yet raises a number of questions for me.

Are the two trees really incommensurable, given one of them is an introduced species: a kind of prickly pear choking out the native species, stealing its nutrients, suffocating them, making it near impossible for the native plants to survive? Does the typology itself need some nuance; given we aren't comparing apples

⁴ For this typology, see *Contemplating Country*, 12–16.

with apples, but quandongs with a bulldozer. Deverell points to the brutality with which Christianity was introduced here.

The colonial churches, and/or prominent members of those churches, both enabled and enacted the massacres, the removals, the enslavement, the incarcerations, the “reeducation,” and the wholesale destruction of Indigenous agriculture, language, kinship systems, cosmologies and spiritualities. The churches did this, but their shame at having done so has rendered them silent, especially insofar as the church speaks through its theological performance. (3-4)

Given this, I wonder if Deverell’s use of this metaphor is far too generous to colonial forms of Christianity. Perhaps this generosity points less to colonial brutality and more to Deverell himself. That generosity reflects Indigenous theologies and those peoples who continue to care for Country, and therefore Christ as Country, by grace-fully welcoming the very people who continuously rejected them over and over again. And yet that welcome persists.

Still, the metaphor might help in other ways, since Country shows remarkable ways of overcoming adversity. Could the comparison be found in the shoot of grass growing amongst the concrete; dividing the seemingly impenetrable construction, over time, with irrepressible persistence? Perhaps it’s in the natural growth that overruns an abandoned building; reclaiming the space stolen in the past, slowly redesigning an unnatural landscape, transforming it into something new. Or, to give some permission for more intentionality to be incorporated into our thinking, can the architectural “greening” of spaces help? Those new constructions that seek to blend the natural landscape with the artificial. I fear my colonial mindset is beginning to reveal itself.

Retaining Deverell’s “two trees” metaphor, and returning to the location of my photo above, the broader location offers a long-term vision of what might be and what might become of those type three and four theologies, given time and persistence. Immediately behind the two trees is a creek, once choked by the pollution of settler residents treating it like a rubbish dump. After ongoing efforts to rehabilitate the life source for both trees and broader environment alike, the health of the water source is visibly improving. There is work to be done, no doubt, but its recovery offers another small glimmer of hope to the world around it. The trees themselves contribute to this recovery. They continue to draw water from this water source. What other choice do they have? Yet, they also act as nature’s filtration and bodyguard, offering back to the creek protection from erosion when the storm waters rage through. Two trees partnering with the world around them, as their ancestors have done before them, to protect and improve land, water, and sky.

On the other side of the path, from where I stood to take the original photo, are local netball courts. Week in and week out, families congregate at this site to participate in ritual. It was why I was there that day. Every Saturday, the sounds of whistles, laughter, and a thousand “if you needs,” echo around this community space until, at the end of it all, the gathered community becomes the scattered community; sent back to their homes, schools, and workplaces, to the mundanity of everyday life. Until the next week, when the peel of the buzzer calls us all back to do it all again.

On one side of the trees, a suffering waterway slowly rebuilding itself, recovering from attempts at destruction, life that has thrived in that location for millennia gradually finding its home again. On the other side, slabs of concrete, floodlights, toilet blocks, and canteen, all imposed upon Country to support a game imported from the motherland. In a society that worships the gods of sport, here is a local parish.



In between it all, two trees stand tall; reaching to the sky like two priests invoking the Spirit(s) to descend upon Country and community gathered around them. Authentically being themselves yet quietly signalling to the world around the possibility of a different existence; two seemingly separate lifeforms living in symbiotic partnership. No one dominating the other. No one choking the other. No one more important than the other. Hope, unity, possibility.

Perhaps the “two trees” is the right metaphor after all.

For Deverell, the typology is not just theoretical, it is personal. Every day, he lives out the hope this theology offers to the churches in this land now called Australia.

I love the church and I love the Bible. I also love country. I love them all. I am in a vowed or religious relationship with each of them. I am bound to each of them in ways that could not be undone even if I sought, by some heroic act of the imagination, to do so. For each dwells, irrevocably, in both my history and my body. Each has inhabited and become part of me, such

that the boundaries between Bible, church, country, and my personal self, are impossible to delineate. (xviii)

Deverell extends a generous invitation to the rest of us, as privileged readers of his work, to sit and listen, under the shade of both trees, drawing upon the living waters of Country, and there to hear the voice of Christ in Country, and respectfully join in the songs of the ancestors.

Perhaps the visitors might eventually learn our song, and appreciate it for what it is, in its own integrity, rather than for what it can do to embellish the song of the visitors. Perhaps Bible and church might even learn to sign with us and add their voices in ways that harmonize with country. Perhaps they might then, finally, cease to be merely visitors. Maybe then, they will really belong. (xix)

Here, Christ in Country calls out to us “here if you need!”
We do need. More than ever before.

Conversations Around the Campfire

Rebecca Lindsay

Garry Deverell's *Contemplating Country* is infused with Country.⁵ Deverell begins with Country, and the book explores the “incurable” obsession with Country he identifies among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He invites the Bible and Church to a campfire, to sit with and listen deeply to the stories, songs, and wisdom held in *place* across Australia (see xvii–xix). Given this, I begin by locating my reflection in place, drawing on Deverell's model of Acknowledgement that engages with the specificity of location (see 82–83). I live on Gadigal and Bidjigal Country and offer my thanks and respect to elders past and present for their care of this unceded land. This is where wattangaree (banksia) grows amidst the now critically endangered Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub.⁶ Not too far from where I write, the waves crash like thunder at Maroubra Beach and, when the season is right, burri burri (humpback whales) pass by on their journey along the coastline. I sit under a contemporary artwork that tells the story of local Kamay (Botany Bay) fishing.⁷ The signs of colonisation sit alongside me: the sports centre wall holding the artwork, roads, chatter in English, a leafblower. I write explicitly as someone who is non-Indigenous: a settler descendant and colonial inheritor who has benefited from the kinds of exploitation of Country that Deverell outlines. As a Christian, an ordained Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), and a biblical scholar, I read *Contemplating Country* to listen for how I might understand the responsibilities of these identities on unceded Country, in colonised space. I find Deverell a conversation partner who brings sharp critique alongside generous invitation.

⁵ I capitalise Country as a sign of respect following the protocol found in many First Nations writings.

⁶ “Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub,” IndigiGrow, 2024. <https://indigigrow.com.au/eastern-suburbs-banksia-scrub>.

⁷ “Heffron Centre artworks shine a light on local Aboriginal history and tradition,” Randwick City Council, 2023. <https://www.randwick.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news/news-items/2023/april/heffron-centre-artworks-shine-a-light-on-local-aboriginal-history-and-tradition>

I first read this book when it was published in 2023. Returning to my notes from the time, I see that I highlighted Deverell's observation that he "assumes that whatever the damage done by colonists to country and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and livelihood, there yet remains something that is good and of lasting value in the 'gospel' they brought with them over the seas" (xvii). I notice that my initial reading of the book was full of optimism, looking for how Deverell weaves his Christian faith with trawlwoolway epistemology and curious about what he would name as good and valuable in the Christian story. The possibility of hope I notice in *Contemplating Country*, is the possibility of hearing God's voice in and *through* place that is sovereign Indigenous country rather than colonised space (50).⁸ Such hope is not about a distant future, but about the possibility of transformation *now*, a transformation that requires settlers, like me, to un-learn ways of living which privilege human creatures and which abuse the earth.⁹ Deverell's writing provides ways in to such un-learning through theology and liturgy, including the analogy he presents between how Christians understand Christ and how Indigenous peoples understand Country (see 21–36). He also offers ways in to this through concrete action that churches might undertake, such as returning property gifted by the Crown and ongoing financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see 124–125).

Rereading *Contemplating Country* in 2026, however, is painful. The book now bears witness within its text to the ongoing and tenacious hold that racism and colonialism have on the church and state in Australia. In 2023, when the book was published, the School of Indigenous Theology had been established at the University of Divinity, offering tertiary level theological education curated and shaped by Indigenous scholars (see 1–2). Deverell names the significance of this school for the formation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theological imaginations and for the Australian church. In addition, the Albanese government had committed to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, with Deverell linking the establishment of a Voice to parliament with hearing the sovereign voices of Country (see 21–22). I read now in the aftermath of the resounding rejection of this Voice in the October 2023 referendum. And I read now after the July 2024 disestablishment of the School of Indigenous Theology, along with the closure of vocational theological education provider Wontulp-Bi-Buya. As someone located within a theological institution of the UCA which is also part of a public university, I feel this sharply. There continues to be no permanent Aboriginal theologian on this (or any) theological faculty and so the critique of *Contemplating Country* moves directly into the heart of my own work of teaching and research (2). While I read excited by the ideas Deverell opens up, I concurrently read with discomfort, because I wonder where other voices like Deverell's will find welcome and formation. And I wonder how Australian theology can recognise ongoing racism and colonialism, both contrary to good news of a God who dwells among the marginalised, without centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices?

Deverell begins *Contemplating Country* with two key assumptions. The first is Christian complicity in the damage of the (ongoing) colonial project. The second is that Indigenous wisdom embodies understandings of God, humanity, and place that Christian theological traditions ought to take note of. Neither of these assumptions are strangers in Uniting Church theology. In 1986, for example, Rev Dr Gondarra wrote that

⁸ My notebook shows that that I followed *Contemplating Country* with a rereading of his interlocutor: Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony*. (University of Queensland Press, 2021), Ch 6.

⁹ For example, Deverell's engagement with Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman's *daidirri* and with Paul's concept of *kenosis*. Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 46–53, 121–27.

“we Aboriginal leaders (or Christian leaders) are called to plant Christ in this Aboriginal Australian ‘fertile soil,’ rather than transplant our western forms of Christianity”, noting his understanding that God “is our God who has lived with us in history.”¹⁰ The UCA often points to the covenantal relationship between itself and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and revision to the Preamble to the church’s constitution, both of which acknowledge the role of the UCA in colonisation. Yet, Deverell’s two assumptions still seem challenging within the UCA. One of the questions this raises, then, is what is needed for the church to move from provisional knowing to embodied practice?

The answer to this question centres around power and control: Where is God found? How is God revealed? Who contributes to and interprets Christian tradition? Deverell argues that non-Indigenous theologies seek to control how God is understood. He asks, “How are settler Christians – they who have empowered and enriched themselves at the expense of Indigenous people – going to let that power go?” (123). Contemplating power and control lead to the question of what constitutes a sacred text and which texts might bear witness to God for Christians. For Deverell, the “primary ‘text’” is Country (34). The question I hear in this is where am I, as a non-Indigenous Christian, willing to acknowledge resonance of Christ, even when this is outside my own understanding and outside of the biblical texts.

As a biblical scholar, I do find provocative Deverell’s identification of “texts” as “possibly the least important part of the whole mix,” noting that this comment is made in relation to Aboriginal liturgical Christology (34). I resonate with Deverell as he highlights the messiness of the biblical collection. The biblical texts are formed as oral traditions (re)shaped through changing historical contexts and in dialogue with each other. Deverell reminds me of this and of the multiplicity of voices collected together across time and diverse contexts in the stories of the Bible (see 35). This multiplicity is also present in biblical interpretation, which does not have one, singular lineage. Alongside Deverell, biblical scholars from other emplaced contexts name a similar challenge to white/western/settler imaginaries whose interpretive frameworks seek to lay boundaries around orthodoxy.¹¹ Accompanied by these others, I hear in Deverell a critique and reminder to settler biblical interpreters (and theologians) that their (our) voice is only one interpretive voice among many. This is furthered through Deverell laying out the multiplicity of Aboriginal approaches to engaging biblical texts and theologies, even as he identifies colonial thinking within some of these approaches (see 12–16). Deverell writes,

I prefer to let stories and traditions sit side by side like acquaintances around that campfire I talked about in the introduction to this volume. If we sit there long enough, if we return to each other at the campfire again and again, if we listen carefully to the songs that are most close and dear and sing them out of the depths of our vulnerability, we might find that we love each other: not despite the polyvalence of our songs but because of that polyvalence (120).

Polyvalent interpretation, however, only goes so far. Deverell points repeatedly to the importance of justice as an outworking of theology and biblical interpretation. Who “we” read the Bible with and how “we” see

¹⁰ Rev Dr Gondarra, *Series of Reflections on Aboriginal Theology*. (Bethel Presbytery, Northern Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1986), 14, 21.

¹¹ Examples include the work of Jione Havea, Kwok Pui Lan, Chin Ming Stephen Lim, and Monical Jyostna Melanchthon.

ourselves reflected in the texts depends on the standpoint from which “we” read.¹² This reading location matters. Deverell challenges his readers to consider the impact of race, class, and other elements of identity on where we read texts from and to consider who we then read *for*. It seems clear to me that Deverell does not want to be *the* voice of Indigenous theology. But he names clearly the challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologians in finding welcome, space, and audience for theology that begins with Indigenous epistemology, with *Country*. There is a challenge here for my own teaching and writing, as well as for the wider UCA. In a time of revisiting how our denominational theological colleges are structured, what attention will we give to theological formation that is authentically grown and led by First Nations members of the church?

The invitation for the church to sit at the campfire and listen, as named by Deverell, has been long and persistent. In seeking that church and theology might hear the voices of Country, he follows others such as Rev Dr Gondarra, Charles Harris, Denise Champion, and Anne Pattel-Gray. My own experience of sitting at the campfire includes often getting it wrong. In an earlier volume of *Uniting Church Studies*, I engaged with Deverell’s work on the revised Preamble.¹³ In this article, I engaged chapter 9 of *Contemplating Country* using the concept of colonising innocence, essentially ways that colonial thinking gets into everything, reinscribing colonial hierarchies even into movements that seek to think and act differently.¹⁴ After its publication, Deverell and I shared lunch and he pointed out to me some of the ways that my writing did the very thing I sought to critique. Towards the end of *Contemplating Country*, Deverell observes that

To be frank, the settler churches don’t know what they don’t know, and what they think they know is proving quite inadequate in the face of the damage they’ve done since they arrived here. We can help with that (126).

I’d like to hope that I, and we, can accept that help; that settler Christians might listen with humility and curiosity, renouncing supremacy and acknowledging wisdom embodied in place over thousands of years. It seems to me that sitting around the campfire listening to stories is just the place we might expect Christ to be present, not in a romanticised way, but in a deep, painful, listening towards just actions that embody the songs and stories that are shared.

From Visiting to Belonging: Country, Theology, and the Gift of Listening in Garry Deverell’s *Contemplating Country*

Naomi Wolfe

There are only a small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologians writing in Australia today. Among them, Garry Worete Deverell stands as one of the most influential, sustained, and creative voices. For more than two decades he has invited churches, theological colleges, and Christian communities to

¹² For example, in interpreting Matthew 20:1–16. See Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 128–33.

¹³ See Rebecca Lindsay, “Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: Between Celebration and Critique” *Uniting Church Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2024): 31–42.

¹⁴ See Alissa Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence: Complicity and Critical Encounters” in *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage*, ed. Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark and Ravi de Costa. (Springer, 2016): 85–102.

think differently about God, Country, scripture, justice, and belonging. Through his teaching, preaching, activism, and writing, Deverell has helped create space for Aboriginal theology to emerge as a recognised and vital conversation within Australian Christianity. This has been a challenge for Deverell as much as for those listening to him.

Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology continues that work and builds upon his early book, *Gondwana Theology*. Deverell brings together a collection of essays addressing Christology, the Trinity, scripture, ecology, reconciliation, colonialism, and church life. Yet to describe the book simply in terms of its topics risks missing its deeper significance. This is not only a book about theology. It is a book about what becomes possible when theology begins from Country rather than from a distant idea of Europe; when Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing are considered not as objects of theological reflection but as sources of theological wisdom in their own right.

The book arrives at a significant time in Australian theological life. Across churches, universities, and theological colleges there is increasing discussion of reconciliation, truth-telling, Indigenous self-determination, and decolonisation. Yet too often these conversations remain confined to strategic plans, policy documents, or symbolic gestures that seem to flourish and die under whims of compliance, interest, and commitment. Deverell offers something different by demonstrating what theology itself can look like when it is undertaken from Indigenous locations, histories, and relationships. In doing so, he contributes to a growing body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theological scholarship and practice that is reshaping and renewing how theology is imagined and practised in Australia.

One of the book's most important contributions is its claim that Country is not only a background to theological reflection but a theological category in its own right. For Deverell, Country is alive, relational, storied, and sacred. Country teaches. Country forms identity. Country calls people into responsibilities of care and reciprocity with the human and the non-human. Through the book, Deverell returns frequently to the conviction that Country is adept of revealing truths about God, humanity, and creation. This approach challenges assumptions deeply embedded within many Western theological traditions, where theology has often benefited abstraction, universality, and detachment from place and relationship.

The importance of this should not be underestimated. Deverell is not simply adding Indigenous examples to an existing theological framework. Rather, he is inviting readers to re-examine where theological knowledge comes from and how it is formed. In the book's introduction he describes Country, church, and scripture gathering around a campfire, learning to listen to one another. It is a powerful image that captures the spirit of the whole book. Rather than establishing a hierarchy between these sources of wisdom, he seeks a conversation in which each can be heard, and each can contribute to a deeper understanding of divine presence and purpose.

This commitment shapes every chapter. Whether discussing the Trinity, Christ, ecological responsibility, or reconciliation, Deverell always returns to themes of relationship, belonging, responsibility, and care. The chapter on Christ as Country is particularly significant for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Here he advances one of the most original contributions of contemporary Aboriginal theology by exploring how Christ might be understood through Indigenous understandings of place, kinship, and relationality. Christ is

not considered as an abstract doctrinal concept, but as one who gathers, nourishes, sustains, and reconciles relationships in ways analogous to Country itself. The result is neither a rejection of Christian traditions nor a simple contextualisation of European theology. Instead, it is a genuinely Aboriginal theological reflection that emerges from the encounter between Indigenous knowledge traditions and Christian faith.

The significance of *Contemplating Country* becomes even clearer when situated within the wider development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theology in Australia. Deverell's work stands alongside that of scholars such as Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray, Chris Budden, Uncle Graham Paulson, Aunty Denise Champion, Uncle Ray Minniecon, and Aunty Lee Miena Skye, all of whom have sought to articulate Christian faith from Indigenous perspectives and there are others such as myself who are also on the journey of decolonising faith and belief.

Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray has long argued that Aboriginal theology must start with Aboriginal voices, experiences, and ways of knowing. Her work revealed the ways Australian colonial assumptions have shaped theological education and church life while insisting that Indigenous peoples are not simply recipients of theology but makers of theology. Deverell's work builds upon this foundation. Like Pattel-Gray, he challenges the assumption that Western theology is culturally neutral. Yet he also moves further than this by demonstrating what theology looks like when Country itself becomes an active conversation partner. Similarly, Chris Budden's *Following Jesus in Invaded Space* challenged Australian Christians to acknowledge that discipleship occurs on land marked by invasion, dispossession, and ongoing colonial relationships. Budden argued that Christian faith of non-Indigenous peoples in Australia can no longer avoid challenging these realities. Deverell extends this conversation by asking what might be possible when churches move beyond acknowledgement towards genuine learning from Aboriginal relationships with Country, community, and creation.

A particularly important conversation partner for this volume is Mark G. Brett's *Indigenous Rights and the Legacies of the Bible: From Moses to Mabo*. Brett establishes that the Bible has never had a singular legacy in colonial contexts. It has been used to justify dispossession and cultural destruction, yet it has also provided resources for Indigenous resistance, survival, and the articulation of rights. Rather than rejecting scripture, Brett invites readers to engage critically with its complex and contested inheritances.

A similar tension lies at the heart of Deverell's project. He is acutely aware of the role churches have played in the colonisation of Aboriginal peoples. Throughout the book he names the violence, dispossession, and theological assumptions that come with the colonial project. Yet, like Brett, he refuses to conclude that Christianity is thus irredeemably colonial. Instead, he asks what happens when scripture is read from Country, through Indigenous histories, relationships, and experiences. In doing so, he demonstrates that the question is not whether Indigenous peoples can encounter the Bible, but how the Bible itself might be heard differently when encountered through Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Read together, Brett and Deverell point towards an emerging Australian theological conversation in which Indigenous peoples are no longer positioned as subjects of theological reflection but as theologians, interpreters, and custodians of wisdom. Both insist that Indigenous knowledge traditions have much to contribute to contemporary Christian thought and that the future of theology in Australia depends upon making space for, and taking these traditions seriously.

I believe that this book is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Deverell gifts to us a powerful affirmation that Indigenous cultures, histories, and spiritual traditions are not obstacles to Christian faith but sources of theological insight. For many Aboriginal Christians who continue to navigate the legacies of missionisation, assimilation, and ecclesial paternalism, this affirmation remains deeply significant. The book shows that Aboriginal identity and Christian discipleship need not exist in tension. Rather, Indigenous ways of understanding Country, kinship, and responsibility can deepen and enrich Christian faith.

At the same time, the book speaks powerfully to non-Indigenous readers. For descendants of long-term settlers, *Contemplating Country* offers both a challenge and an invitation. It asks them to confront the realities of colonisation and the involvement of churches in that history. Yet it also offers a pathway towards more honest and respectful relationships that are grounded in listening, humility, and shared responsibility. For more recent migrants, many of whom bring their own histories of colonisation, displacement, or marginalisation, this book provides an important introduction to the First Peoples of the lands on which they now live and worship. It encourages newcomers to understand belonging not as ownership but as relationship.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that it refuses simplistic oppositions between Indigenous and Western traditions. While some readers may approach the volume expecting a clear rejection of Christianity or Western theology, they will find something much more nuanced. Deverell does not shy away from critiques of the colonial forms of Christianity and the assumptions that have accompanied them. Yet his work is also infused by a deep love for scripture and the church. He writes not as someone seeking to abandon Christian faith but as someone yearning and seeking to reimagine it more faithfully within the context of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australia.

For this reason, *Contemplating Country* should be read not only as a challenge to Western theology but also as a gift to it. Aboriginal theology offers insights that Western traditions have often neglected: attentiveness to place, relational accountability, ecological responsibility, kinship, reciprocity, and the recognition that knowledge is formed within community rather than possessed by isolated individuals. These are not exclusively Aboriginal concerns, but Aboriginal traditions often hold them with a depth and understanding that Western theological traditions have struggled to sustain.

For those involved in theological education, the implications are significant. Deverell's work reminds us that decolonisation is not simply about adding Aboriginal content to existing curricula or structures. It demands deeper questions about what forms knowledge, whose knowledge is recognised, and what forms of wisdom theological education gets to cultivate. His work challenges institutions to move beyond inclusion towards transformation.

Ultimately, *Contemplating Country* is a book about belonging. It asks whether Christianity in Australia will continue to imagine itself as a visitor who refuses to learn the language of the land on which it stands, or whether it might finally learn to listen. Deverell does not suggest any easy answers. Instead, he models the difficult and ongoing work of bringing Country, scripture, church, and community into conversation. He is not asking the reader to do anything that he isn't doing himself.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers, this book offers affirmation, challenge, and theological possibility. For settlers, it offers an invitation to truth-telling and deeper listening. For migrants, it provides a pathway towards understanding and respectful belonging. For the churches, it offers both prophetic critique and profound hope.

More than anything, *Contemplating Country* reminds us that theology in Australia cannot be separated from Country. Deverell's continuing work lies in helping the church imagine what becomes possible when it finally begins there.

I read this book not simply as a reviewer but as a fellow Aboriginal theologian. As a trawlwoolway woman who has spent many years working in theological education, I recognise in Deverell's writing many of the tensions, hopes, and questions that have shaped our community, and my own journey. His commitment to bringing Country, scripture, and church into conversation resonates deeply with my own conviction that theology in Australia must begin by listening to the lands and peoples upon which our churches stand. I am particularly grateful for the way Deverell refuses both the rejection of Christianity and the uncritical acceptance of its colonial forms. Instead, he models the difficult work of holding Aboriginal identity, Christian faith, justice, and belonging together – and at times it is brutally difficult. At a time when many institutions are speaking about reconciliation and decolonisation, *Contemplating Country* offers something more substantial: an example of what Aboriginal theology actually looks like when it is allowed to speak in its own voice. For that reason, this book is not only an important contribution to Australian theology; it is also a source of encouragement for those of us seeking to help shape a more honest, relational, and Country-centred future for the church.

Milaythina Niyakara: country as a source for theological imagination

Garry Worete Deverell

I thank the editors of this edition of *Uniting Church Studies* for affording me the opportunity to contribute, in the company of esteemed colleagues, to this review of my 2023 volume, *Contemplating Country*. I am grateful to Naomi Wolfe for recognising that *Contemplating Country* is primarily concerned with

what becomes possible when theology begins from Country rather than from a distant idea of Europe; when Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing are considered not as objects of theological reflection but as sources of theological wisdom in their own right.

For that is indeed what I was trying to do, and in two senses. I first wanted to take seriously the irrefutable fact that Australian theological thinking continues to be dominated by an imagination that comes from post-reformation europe. In contrast to pre-reformation theological tradition – which routinely saw the non-human world as a sacred text with at least as much authority as Bible and church tradition – european theology of the colonial era did away with that sensibility. From Calvin onwards, and with increasing

intensity, the voice of the Spirit was confined to that found in bible and church council. But her voice in the vast cosmic biosphere beyond these categories was either ignored or demonized. It is the contention of my theological project that this was a misstep that goes far beyond abstract methodological consequence. It is a misstep that has produced catastrophic real-world consequences, not least for Australia. For we now find ourselves, native and settler alike, at the brink of environmental apocalypse. And Aboriginal peoples continue to bear the sins of settler colonists in the form of disproportionate rates of suicide, imprisonment, unwellness, poverty, unemployment, and so on. All because Christian Australia refused to hear the voice and call of the Spirit in the non-human world.

More positively I wanted to propose that any Australian reclamation of the spiritual voice of the non-human world would need to listen to Aboriginal wisdom traditions. For Aboriginal wisdom traditions enjoy spiritual seniority in this place. These traditions have been developed through a long and persistently attentive engagement with the ways in which life/spirit unfolds and reinscribes itself in the uniqueness of this country's ecosystems. My specific contribution, in the book we are reviewing, is to call Christian theology to listen to the Spirit who speaks within the narratives of life, death, and resurrection not only of bible and church, but also of this *place*. In trawloolway terms, this is an encouragement towards *niyakara milaythina*, a theological imagination with the contemplation of place, of country, at its centre. The book seeks to positively describe some of what country seeks to teach, and to create analogies from this teaching into the more dominant forms of settler theology. For I am certainly not wanting to throw away everything, willy nilly, that settlers bring with them. Rather, I am seeking to sort the yams from the weeds and find sources of theological sustenance which are able to support the moral and spiritual wellness of country and people, native and settler, both.

One should never conclude, of course, that I am content to elaborate an 'Aboriginal' theology as a mere adjunct to settler theology. I am grateful to Bec Lindsay for noticing that my project is more radical than that, calling for a root-and-branch refiguring of Christian theology as a whole, a refiguring that invites settler theology to renounce its conscious and unconscious claims to epistemic supremacy in this place. I do, indeed, want to destabilise the hierarchies of both knowledge and institutional power that settler theologians continue to practice and take for granted. Bec responds to this desire with her own, quite moving, prayer or intention:

I'd like to hope that . . . settler Christians might listen with humility and curiosity, renouncing supremacy and acknowledging wisdom embodied in place over thousands of years.

For it remains the case, as Bec acknowledges in her essay, that there is no place in the theological schools and institutions of this country for the making and teaching of Christian theologies generated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. At best, we get to be guest lecturers to share titbits of knowledge that are taken to be permanently adjacent to 'real', meaning settler, theology and therefore an optional extra. At worst, our knowledges are appropriated by settler theologians and taught within their own, settler, frameworks. Naomi understands me very well when she says,

Deverell's work reminds us that decolonisation is not simply about adding Aboriginal content to existing curricula or structures. It demands deeper questions about what forms knowledge,

whose knowledge is recognised, and what forms of wisdom theological education gets to cultivate. His work challenges institutions to move beyond inclusion towards transformation.

Yes indeed. Not adding, transforming. Root and branch.

Which leads me, finally, to Adam Couchman's fascinating meditation on trees, soil and roots. I read his contribution not so much as a critique, but as a poetic response seeking to mirror the dominance of story and metaphor in my theological writing. Here he works his way through the root, tree and soil metaphor that I employ, with apologies to St Paul, in chapter 1 of *Contemplating Country*. Here Adam does not seek to hide his questions, his lack of knowing, from us. He shares with the reader something of the pilgrimage he is on as he wonders out loud. I love this. Settler theology which is comfortable with its vulnerability in the face of mystery, and with its provisionality in the face of epistemic polyvalence, is precisely the kind of theology which might be capable of sitting with us at the campfire, on country, to learn some new songs. My rejoinder to Adam, offered in all humility, is that the Spirit may not 'descend' from above when invoked by his priestly trees: not *only* from above, that is. The Spirit may also 'ascend' from the earth below, from landscape, from the mycelium networks of terranean interconnection that make us, for all our difference, one.

Adam Couchman is Academic Dean at St Francis College and a lecturer, teaching theology and liturgy. His PhD in 2024 on Jesus as a worshipper in the light of the creeds was recently published in under the title *Liturgia Dei: Worshiping the Worshipping God*. Beyond liturgical theology, his research interests have also included Salvation Army sacramentality, Gregory of Nyssa, and Christian holiness. He previously served for seventeen years as an Officer in The Salvation Army.

Naomi Wolfe is a historian and theologian whose teaching and research focus on Indigenous and ancient histories. She is Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Divinity and an academic at Australian Catholic University for nearly three decades. A trawloolway Aboriginal woman of Jewish German and Irish heritage, Naomi lives and works on Wurundjeri Country in Melbourne. Her research explores decolonising curriculum, Indigenous pedagogies and theology, cross-cultural formation, Second Temple history, and collaborative learning.

Rebecca Lindsay lives with her family on Gadigal and Bidjigal land in Sydney where she is a member of Hope Uniting Church. She is a lecturer in Old Testament Studies at United Theological College. Bec's research explores the intersections between biblical interpretation and life in settler colonial Australia. Her book *Reading Ruth in Settler Colonial Australia* is available through SBL Press.

Garry Worete Deverell is a trawloolway man from northern trawwerner/Tasmania and an Anglican priest. He serves on the boards of both Six Rivers Aboriginal Corporation and the National Indigenous Ecumenical Council. He loves to walk on country, communing with his ancestors and learning from feathered, scaled and furred cousins.



Reviews

Theology After Gaza: A Global Anthology,

Mitri Raheb and Graham McGeoch (Editors),
Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2025 (ISBN:
9798385233649 (paperback), 9798385233656
(hardcover), 9798385233663 (ebook)).

Derek McDougall

This is an important book. With an estimated 75,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza in the Israeli response to the Hamas attacks of 7 October, 2023, out of a total population of about 2 million (May 2026), this conflict is one of the most horrific episodes in modern history, a veritable genocide. Gaza cries out for theological interpretation. *Theology After Gaza* provides such an interpretation from a primarily Christian perspective.

The major theme in the book is the call for justice for Palestinians. There are five sections and 19 chapters overall, not counting the Introduction and Afterword. The sections cover orientation issues (the position of the Christian minority in Gaza; Palestine as a decolonisation issue), theological orientation, intersectionality between the theological perspective and other issues, more specifically “Church” issues, and questions of resistance. There is a strong majority of authors from the Global South, including Palestinians; some of these authors are based in Western countries, especially the United States (US).

With justice for the Palestinians the major theme of the book, one of the most important chapters is chapter 3 on “Theology After Gaza: Political Context and Theological Challenge” by Mitri Raheb, a prominent Palestinian liberation theologian. Raheb writes of the way in which theology has been used by Zionism as a form of settler colonialism (through Christian Zionism), also drawing attention to the

theme of the Warrior God as conveyed especially in the book of Joshua. The Warrior God theology has been used by Israel but also by Hamas in the attack of 7 October 2023. Raheb’s plea is that theology be decolonised: “Theology after Gaza must expose global Israel, engage in the transnational solidarity of global Palestine, and highlight this struggle as the ethical and theological challenge of our time” (58).

Nearly all chapters develop the theme of justice for the Palestinians. In the context of developing a liberation theology of solidarity with the Palestinians, Sarojini Nadar advocates a “preferential option” for Palestinians (chapter 4). In the context of resistance struggles more generally, Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez argues for the agency of the Palestinians (and others) through “combative hope” (chapter 16).

While the emphasis in the book is on Christian theological perspectives, there is also some attention to Islamic and Jewish perspectives. Kawtar Najib argues for an “Islamic return to justice”, emphasising the need to combat anti-Palestinian racism (chapter 10). Chapter 11 (by Hatem Bazian) is primarily an attack on the Abraham Accords, and especially the role of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in cooperating with Israel. This “Muslim Zionism” was subsequently highlighted with the revelation that the UAE had secretly joined the US-Israeli attack on Iran that began on 28 February, 2026.

Atalia Omer, a Jewish American at the University of Notre Dame, offers a valuable Jewish perspective, arguing for a reparative approach in Palestine that would involve Jews making a “decolonial” move and decolonising Judaism. This is similar to the argument of the revisionist Israeli historian Ilan Pappé in *Israel on the Brink* (Oneworld, 2026) that

Jews in Palestine should simply live alongside other communities in Palestine (most notably the Palestinians of course) but without claiming special rights for themselves.

There are many other issues covered in this book, each of which deserves to be addressed but this cannot be done in a single review. While the book focuses on the Palestinians as one people, there is some discussion of the position of Palestinian Christians, beginning with chapter 1 by Raheb. Edward Said, perhaps the most famous of Palestinian intellectuals, was a Christian. Among Palestinians, Christians are a minority (down to 1-2 percent of Palestinians from more than ten percent during the British Mandate in Palestine), and in Gaza very much so, with most Gazan Christians being Greek Orthodox. Raheb writes that “The ongoing genocide in Gaza will end Christianity in the Gaza Strip” (16). In chapter 12 Yousef Kamal AlKhouri uses the term “ecclesiocide” to describe the fate of the Church in Gaza.

While *Theology After Gaza* is not intended as a work of historical analysis, the historical context is important. At times I thought there was some oversimplification. It is clearly the case that British imperialism enabled Zionism, with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 as a key development and then the brutal suppression of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 as a culminating point. However, the British approach began to change in the context of the Revolt, with the realisation that military suppression was not sustainable on a long term basis. The book refers to the report of the Peel Commission in July 1937 as first advocating partition (24-25), but the subsequent White Paper in May 1939 argued for independence for (one) Palestine after ten years with Jews and Arabs having equal rights, with (limited) immigration allowed for the next five years and after that no extension unless consent from the Arabs was forthcoming. Israel celebrates Orde Wingate (an ardent Christian Zionist) as the most

zealous of the British officers leading operations in the 1936-1939 Revolt, but the changing political context should also be recognised. By the 1940s the more militant Zionists were engaging in terrorist acts against the British. Britain by this point wanted accommodation between the Zionists and the Arabs of Palestine, viewing the Zionists as the aggressive force. It was too late.

Global South perspectives are foremost in this book but there is not universal support among the Christians of the Global South for Palestinian liberation theology. Evangelical Christianity is strong in many parts of the Global South, and it often supports Christian Zionism. This is clear among the Pacific island countries, for example. When the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of a two state solution on 12 September 2025 (New York Declaration), five of the ten states voting against (including Israel and the US) were Pacific island countries: Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea and Tonga, with Fiji and Samoa abstaining. Fiji has joined Papua New Guinea in moving its Israel embassy to Jerusalem.

In arguing for a theology focused on justice for Palestinians, Raheb sees self-determination as the key; the exercise of this right should extend to the Palestinian diaspora, rather than being confined to Palestinians living in historic Palestine (24, 31). Self-determination is more important than prescribing statehood in some form.

In the Afterword Elijah R. Zehyoue advocates non-violence as the best means for advancing Palestinian goals, using the example of Martin Luther King in the US. Clearly a peaceful strategy is preferable but under international law there is a right of armed resistance to illegal occupation (not extending to attacks on civilians). How much suffering must be endured before reaching “last resort”?

In any event the Palestinians are not alone. The global Palestine movement, using peaceful means, is a demonstration of solidarity. This book, with its strong representation from the Global South, also shows the strength of that movement in the US. While no doubt a particularly articulate expression of that movement in the context of Christian theology, the book is also indicative of shifting sentiment in the US in favour of justice for Palestinians and ending support for Israel. Such a shift will not be at the expense of the Jews of Palestine but will facilitate “paths of justice and reconciliation between [the] two brotherly peoples”, the attainment of which is among the great “ethical-political challenge[s] for human civilization”.

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Standing Under the Cross: Essays on Bonhoeffer's Theology,

Michael Mawson, *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics*, London: T & T Clarke, 2023 (ISBN: 9780567709516).

Dianne Rayson

The theology and life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) continues to captivate, inspire, and instruct new generations of leaders and theologians, Christians and agnostics alike. This book is an excellent contribution to the ongoing discourse around Bonhoeffer who has never been more popular, and I would argue, never so important.

Michael Mawson has been a long-time student of Bonhoeffer's writing. This book represents his ongoing interest and dialogue with Bonhoeffer over two decades. It is a collection of essays blending systematic theology with engagement of contemporary theologians and issues, written over a long period. As such, it represents what many of us in Bonhoeffer studies refer to as ‘thinking with and beyond Bonhoeffer’. This is a methodology that encourages creative engagement with a theological giant in order to consider issues of our own contemporary contexts and has given rise to using Bonhoeffer to address issues of nationalism, climate change, cyber security and so on. As Mawson describes, he has attempted to ‘move on’ from Bonhoeffer but “continually found myself returning to [him], reading him in new ways and discovering new insights” (1). Mawson and I co-convoked the 2024 International Bonhoeffer Congress in Sydney with the theme, ‘Crisis and Hope: Reading Bonhoeffer for Today’. The subsequent book gathered together cutting edge Bonhoefferian scholarship addressing contemporary issues from all parts of the world, highlighting voices oft neglected in theological scholarship (and indeed, in the church).¹ This is an important aspect of Bonhoeffer studies, that traditional scholarship is making space for emerging voices and positions.

In this collection, Mawson describes the various contexts he has lived and the very direct lessons he learnt from Bonhoeffer at different times and in different locations. It is a personal positioning that is appealing, keeping the theology real. Mawson then has a launch chapter positioning Bonhoefferian scholarship and its relevance to us today. The rest of the book is divided into three parts. The first, ‘The Form of the Word’ collects four of Mawson's earlier essays on Bonhoeffer's

¹ Michael Mawson and Dianne Rayson, eds., *Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Challenges: Crisis and Hope*, *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics* (T & T Clarke, 2025).

engagement with scripture as the Word. These chapters are loosely systematic in style but with all of Mawson's work, very accessible and readable. His work is also steered toward the practical aspects of the Christian life and for the edification of the church. This is why Mawson is an important theologian for us today: spirituality, discipleship, and Christian transformation are at the heart of his theological project.

Part 2 collects essays on 'The Vulnerabilities of Bodily Life', canvassing disability, biotechnology, and lifespan extension. Mawson does this in conversation with various scholars, notably Gerard McKenny and Karl Barth. Throughout this section, Mawson builds the case for Bonhoeffer's understanding of the human person as being relational: the "human being as a 'being in relation' with the concrete other" (74). This is at the core of Bonhoeffer's theology, that sociality, or relationality, is what defines the human. As much as trinitarian theology has helped salvage the dignity of the disabled body and as such, has assisted the church in responding to people with different needs, Mawson claims that Bonhoeffer's creaturely anthropology provides better basis for relational theology. Trinitarianism only goes so far and risks de-bodilying or at least downplaying the concrete bodies of humans in their various forms. This is what Bonhoeffer is able to amend. Whereas theologians have utilised *imago Dei* to move from a capacity-based understanding of what it means to be human toward a relational one, and notwithstanding the ethical implications that this has encouraged, Mawson critiques this move for its limitations. He writes,

My concern with this approach is that grounding relational personhood in a social conception of the Trinity can start to obfuscate or downplay the more distinctively human or creaturely nature of human personhood. To put this differently, my concern is that modelling

a relational anthropology on trinitarian relations and persons – human beings as relational through being drawn into the intra-trinitarian relations – militates against a more fundamental distinction between God as creator and human beings as creatures (81).

In contrast, Bonhoeffer provides an account of human beings as "created by God in relation to one another" (84) as articulated in *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3* from 1933. Here Bonhoeffer, instead of relying on the relationality between the persons of the Trinity, "insist[s] on the limited and necessarily creaturely nature of human relationality" (84). Mawson then continues to develop Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology toward an ethic.

This is important work. Bringing Bonhoeffer to bear on theologising around disability is crucial, as is the outworking of ethical actions that rely on Bonhoeffer's notions of 'responsibility' and 'vicarious representative action', two ideas that underpin all of Bonhoeffer's ethics. Mawson argues for the concrete action of acting in the interests of the person before us. As with all Bonhoeffer's ethics, the abstract must give way to the concrete. This, I think, is part of the appeal of Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics: it remains firmly grounded in the reality that one encounters and this is why he is such a useful dialogue partner for our contemporary settings with our own concerns.

In Part 3 Mawson turns to community, and in Bonhoefferian terms this is 'community of the cross'. This section engages Moltmann of 'divine passability' discussing the suffering of God and the parallels with Bonhoeffer's own work ('only the suffering God can help' being the classic summary). The chapter on pneumatology and ecclesiology engages Robert Jenson and Reinhard Hütter on the church as both sinful and holy in

the context of church scandal. A further chapter on ‘why Bonhoeffer is not an Anabaptist’ disputes John Howard Yoder’s claim for Bonhoeffer’s Anabaptist approach. This might be the most niche essay but highlights the tendency in recent years of creating a Bonhoeffer in our own image. The use of Bonhoeffer in right wing politics in the USA is a current example. Finally, the section ends with a chapter on Bonhoeffer’s Christology in dialogue with James Cone and race.

The scope of this collection reflects both Bonhoeffer’s applicability and being able to reach into all corners of contemporary life. It also speaks to Mawson’s familiarity and deep immersion into Bonhoeffer’s entire corpus of work. It is a rare volume that is able to take a complete overview of Bonhoeffer’s theology and ethics and yet engage with such a range of authors and issues. I heartily recommend this book for those who have heard of Bonhoeffer but not read his work, as well as serious students wanting to be challenged to think ‘with and beyond Bonhoeffer’ from a very reputable author.

Dianne Rayson is Secretary of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section, a Bonhoeffer scholar and ecotheologian. Recently at Pasifika Communities University, Fiji she is about to take up the role of Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at John Coleridge Patteson University (formerly Bishop Patteson Theological College) in the Solomon Islands. Her books include *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene* and *Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Challenges: Crisis and Hope* (ed. with Mawson).

Imagination in an Age of Crisis:

Soundings from the Arts and Theology,

Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden (Editors),
Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2022
(ISBN: 978-1-6667-0688-8)

Stephen Pickard

This book is weighty in many respects: 350 pages; contributions from 34 authors; multiple disciplinary fields covering literature, sculpture, poems, art works, short autobiographical reflections, essays; music and song; philosophy and theology of the imagination and art. The list of areas covered by the generic term ‘the arts’ is expansive; and individual treatments of material are diverse. The contributors come from a broad spectrum of society, cultures, religious traditions, art practitioners and academics.

The brief Forward by the Cambridge theologian Ben Quash locates the primary mode of theology undertaken in the book as *celebratory* (or following Schleiermacher ‘poetic’ theology) to be differentiated from *communicative* and *critical* theology. He notes that the essays and artistic interventions have both a global reach yet draw upon many writers with “deep roots in Australian contexts” which gives a certain groundedness, an edge without sacrificing a wider relevance to the contributions.

Three themes undergird the contributions to this volume: imagination, crisis and the arts. The overarching theme of ‘the imagination’ points to a subject rich, elusive and so fundamental to human creativity and identity. To add to the mix the context of ‘crisis’ invites scrutiny and commentary. Reviewing such a volume presents a challenge. I have chosen to consider this volume under its three primary themes: imagination, crisis, and the arts. At the outset it is well to note that had it not been for COVID 19 and the cancellation in 2020 of a major conference on the arts and theology in Australia

this present book may have taken a very different shape and texture.

Trevor Hart's 'Why Imagination Matters' offers a careful analysis and appreciation of the significance of the imagination for being human. He refers to "the remarkable power of human imagination as such to form, re-form, and transform our shared reality" (50). Though he notes Terry Eagleton's warning that "imagination is not an unequivocal good" (49). Indeed, the imagination is "forever in the active service of either good or evil"; "the engine of the very best (as well as the very worst) things of which human beings are capable of" (50). Which is the reason, in part at least, for the cautious and sometimes disparaging ways in which the imagination has been treated, particularly in the Christian tradition. The Christian mystical tradition was both alive to the dangers of an unfettered imagination and also, it's great power for good. The English mystical writer William Law refused to make too sharp a distinction between reason and the imagination arguing that the latter was not a distinct faculty from our reason, "but only reason acting upon our own ideas". In truth there is a veritable industry of thought and writing on the imagination and Hart offers the reader a programmatic essay on the central theme that informs the many contributions to the book. Importantly Hart points to imagination's "own final need of conscription by God in the service of God's coming kingdom" (50); an orientation that can be traced throughout the diverse offerings in this volume.

What then are we to make of the deployment of the imagination in the arts and theology in an age of crisis? Jason Goroncy asks: "What contribution do the arts make in a world facing the impacts of, for example, globalism, colonialism, capitalism, militarism, climate change, pandemics, and the evolutions, often violent, of culture?" (18). The diverse contributions offer a road map in times

of crisis for appreciating the imagination's role and power in the arts to repair, restore and renew human community. Goroncy's "Daring Imagination" asks the pertinent question: "What kind of time is it?" (1). And following his recitation of the manifold ills, dangers and disturbances of our age he states that, "We imagine or we perish" (1). Goroncy explores the problematic status of imagining in times of disruption and disturbance. Perhaps imagining through the arts is a luxury we can ill afford; perhaps it represents an aesthetic escape. It begs the question: What are art and artists for? Notwithstanding Goroncy's inquiry into the suspicions regarding art's capabilities and limits for rebuilding community in times of fracture and confusion, he concludes that "without imagination there can be no future in which human life flourishes" (14). So, it seems the project of the volume is necessary after all! It is a must-read chapter which prepares the reader for the richness that follows in the remarkable array of contributions.

Space does not permit anywhere near an adequate overview of the variety and depth of the contributions. Just a sample: poems by Hart, Foulcher, Wieman and others; poetry in times of eco trauma; an extended reflection on the theme of the imagination and the sacred in Australian Literature; theology in conversation with the films of Rolf de Heer with David Gulpilil; the wonder of song; textless music for times of crisis; painting as a contemplative act in a time of pandemic; statues and political protest (a reflection on the objects of our loyalties and the power of inanimate objects); personal reflections on being an artist with fibromyalgia; reflections on an indigenous artwork; essays on the artist (George Gittoes) as prophet; a reflection on the healing power of black folk rituals. And so much more.

This book contains a wealth of wisdom and nourishment for the soul in testing times. It exposes the great power and potential of the arts in dialogue

with theology and philosophy to illuminate what is happening in society and human life. More often such work does not provide answers but rather asks questions, identifies persistent problems and enables us to probe some of the great mysteries of our life together. Perhaps it is this latter area wherein the gift of the arts lies. This volume is testament to the importance of such a gift in our times. This is a book to be digested slowly and thoughtfully and returned to often.

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