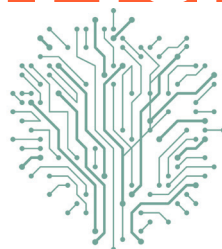


Autumn 2021

Change

Ruminations



SALT BUSH
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

Ruminations is brought to you as part of **Saltbush – Uniting the Scattered Community**. The Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT oversees this work as an encouragement to all rural Christian communities and their leaders, irrespective of size or location. You are invited to share this issue of Ruminations with others.

Editors: Mark Faulkner
Geoff Wellington
Tim Jensen
Monique Mumby



Uniting the Scattered Community

PO Box 221 Canberra City, 2601

0477 720 151

saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au

<https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/>

Please consider donating to support Saltbush – Uniting the Scattered Community and through it Ruminations. Information on financially supporting can be found on the back cover.

All articles and images in this publication have been used by permission or purchase. Please get permission before reprinting.

What's in this issue of Ruminations?

Editor's Introduction	2
A word from the Moderator	4
Change: is not a four-lettered word	5
A conversation with	8
Our stories	12
Experiencing the Word	20
News from Saltbush	26

Contributors

Rev. Dr. Sarah Agnew is the Minister of Wesley Uniting Church in Canberra. Sarah is a theological storyteller and poet and explores her faith and Christology through these gifts.

Allan and Gill Aynsley have a lifelong history on the land, they live in Crookwell and have been part of both Crookwell Uniting Church and Bowral Uniting Church in the Southern highlands.

Shelley Forrest is a member of the Uniting Church in Broken Hill and also an active member of the Saltbush community.

Rev. Phil Matthews is currently in the Frontier Services Patrol of Barwon as a Bush Chaplain. Phil lives in Narrabri, has an earthy theology and view of the church and is planning to retire in August.

Rev. Peter Overton is the Presbytery Minister for Far North Coast Presbytery. Peter brings a passion and energy for the church and for grounded mission as part of change. Peter lives in Kyogle, northern NSW.

Editor's Introduction

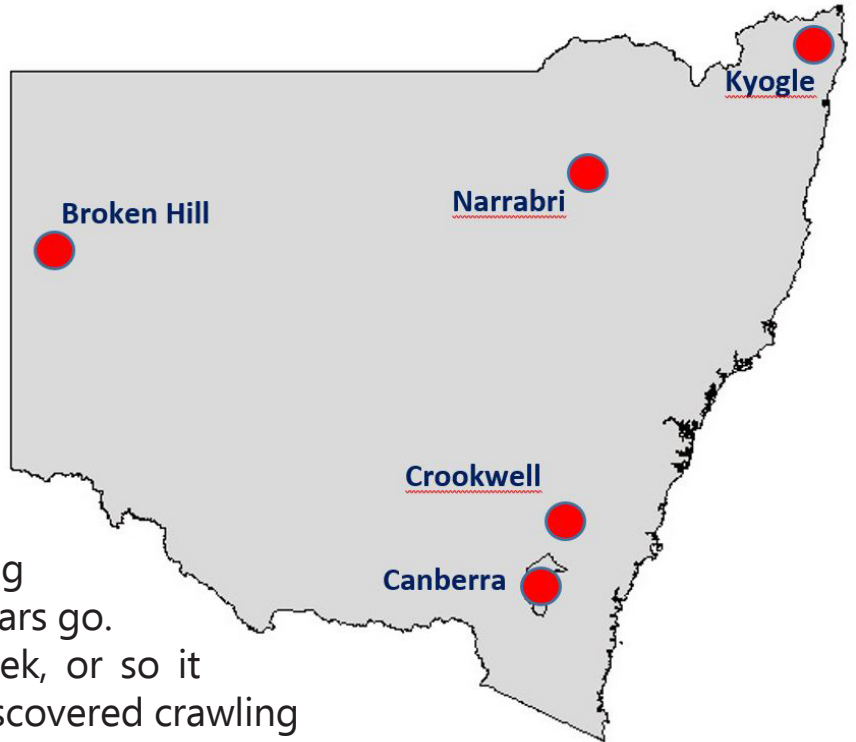
Welcome to your autumn edition of Ruminations with the theme of ...

Change

The curious thing about human beings is that we crave things to be settled, fixed and known but on the other hand we know that for life to flourish things must change.

I have had the privilege of becoming a grandfather this last year and of course it reminds me of our own children being born and growing up so fast, where did all those years go.

Young Ezra changes by the week, or so it seems to us. At six months he discovered crawling and with the passing of another month he is threatening to walk before too long. Recent pictures of him out the front door and heading for the steps to the yard maybe alarming for his parents but of course that is what happens for babies, they grow up and change.



In the western world post the Second World War for most people, not all but most people things settled down. The great dream of house ownership, rising employment, travel, leisure time and family life behind the picket fence has become the expected norm. The Church has been no different post war either, lots of "young men" and then "women" responded to the call to ministry. Seemingly every congregation had a minister and a full Sunday school.

But really all that is a myth, a story the church tells it's self of comfortable and settled times. Perhaps as a society we needed that to recover from such turbulent times that two world wars and a depression brought. The reality is that not only do humans need to grow and change in order to flourish and thrive so do organisations and communities and societies. Australia and the world is not the same as it was, thank goodness.

All of us change, all the time, the pace of change may possibly be speeding up, or that's what people say but I'm not so sure about that. My father grew up before motor cars were a thing really, rode to school on a horse in bare feet. I was born into a house with no electricity and the only hot water we had was from a chip heater or from the copper. Today the majority of people wouldn't live in such conditions, things have changed and mostly for the better.

Things have always changed at a pace, how we respond to such change is up to us. In our Ruminations magazine Saltbush explores "Change" and how we respond to it. There are some great reflections and personal stories from across the land this time.

Our Moderator sends greetings and a challenge to embrace transformational change offered by the risen Christ. Rev Dr Sarah Agnew in her amazing way of storytelling and poetry explores the theological and spiritual ideas about the futility of resisting change. Allan & Gill Aynsley re-count their times of change on the farm and their faith journey in all of that. Shelly Forrest from Broken Hill tells a personal faith journey with God and how it has changed her life. Rev Peter Overton talks to us about the changing nature of the church and how we are not in Kanas anymore. Rev Phil Matthews who has experienced so much of change across his life time encourages us to take the risk and step out in faith. Finally Rev Tim Jensen talks of changing cars and Kierkegaard of understanding life backwards but living it forwards – you'll have to read that one for yourself.

There is no doubt that change is all around us all of the time and at this particular time in our society and in the church we are faced with big choices. Sometimes we fear those changes and the expected losses they bring and sometimes we need to risk the unknown and step out in faith and assurance that God is with us whatever the future brings.

May these stories and reflections on change bring you hope and daring for the future as together we journey with God who goes before us in every way.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'E. A.', located in the bottom right corner of the page.

A word from the Moderator

Rev. Simon Hansford | Moderator of the Synod of NSW & ACT

Greeting to everyone from the Synod!

I have begun to travel around again in the last few months, which is splendid. I have had the opportunity to wander through several regional and rural presbyteries, from the central west, to the far north coast and south to the Illawarra. There is more to come, indeed.

A few weekends back, I attended the Macquarie Darling and Parramatta Nepean Presbyteries at the same time, because I zoomed from the Dubbo Congregation Office. It's not how it used to be, is it?

Where we are now is urging us towards possibility – worship, discipleship, gathering – and we have to avoid the temptation of nostalgia. We are discovering resources for this new path, materials for the task in hand and capacity within ourselves. Our congregation that we thought might never change has had to make some decisions, some have been hard, but many are creative and exciting.

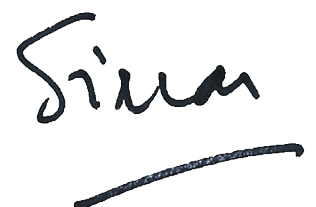
Rural communities and congregations have had to adapt to circumstances many times in the last four decades and more. Do we believe that Jesus is calling us to survive, or to grow? Do we believe that discipleship is about getting across the line, or about growing into the future into which God is calling us?

Are we able to take these words from the Basis of Union seriously, or are they simply well-crafted prose?

"... the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way."

We worship a God who changes everything. We follow Jesus, who transforms us at every step and stumble. We have the Spirit of the crucified, risen Christ, who inspires us to new acts of mercy and hope.

Let's trust God for these times, as we always have. Let us also expect that the God who is with us, will arrive before us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Simon". Below the name is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that serves as a flourish or underline.

Blessings on your faith journeys.

Change: is not a four-letter word

Rev. Tim Jensen | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

I once had a Ford Xb ute, six-cylinder cross-flow engine with extractors. It was pulled out of the desert country around Tennant Creek and the bloke who sold it to me did a great job on the body and interior. An excellent car to drive the big distances in the Northern Territory and could handle the loads I piled in the back with ease. I drove from Darwin to Sydney and it didn't miss a beat. Then I started University in Brisbane, a six-cylinder ute was too expensive to run on a student's income. So, I had to change my car. But my heart ruled my head and I bought a 1973 VW type 3 wagon. I had grown up with VW's, I learnt how to drive in my Dad's Beetle, it held a strong emotional attachment and for some reason I thought they were bullet proof. Well, I think I spent more time having the car towed than driving. I was well known to RACQ.

The problem for me is that I knew I had to change but change was coloured so much by the past or at least how I interpreted the past. I held on to an emotional wistful nostalgia that did me little favours in making the right decision. (When I talked recently of the VW Beetle with my Dad, he reminded me that he would spend most weekends fixing something on the car so that he could get to work on Monday, a fact my romantic rose coloured glasses overlooked!)

We often do this; we acknowledge change is inevitable but when making decisions on how we change we try and re-introduce the past into the present. For many the past is looked upon with reverence and we want to return to the way we used to do things. It worked then why shouldn't it work now?

This doesn't mean we diminish our past experiences, they offer us a lot of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Maybe these values are what we need to honour when it comes to the challenges that change brings. To quote the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard "Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards."

With this in mind I am reminded by Jesus' many confrontations with the Pharisees. Jesus doesn't deny the traditions of the past, in fact he embodies them "Do not think that I have come to abolish Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Matthew 5:17. The problem for Jesus is that the way the law was used by the religious elite to keep power, reinforcing a barrier between people and God. The Torah holds a lot of wisdom, knowledge and understanding but needed to be released from the grip of the religious gate-keepers to allow God to be in relationship with God's people. Change had to come for this happen

but this meant letting go of everything that was no longer a reflection of the love of God and the desire of God to be in relationship, no matter how strong its tradition or emotional pull.

Talking of change then is problematic if not dangerous, something that was not lost on Jesus, he continued to speak of the Kingdom of God despite its deeply subversive message. Ultimately it was the ruling force that occupied Israel that needed to silence this trouble maker.

This continues today, those who speak out for change where there is injustice, inequality, discrimination, bigotry and lies are often maligned.

Change then comes from a place of great necessity, we don't change for the sake of change or at least it doesn't make a great deal of sense if we do. We change because it is necessary to do so and particularly in the life of the church when our Christian practice does not align with what we believe are the Kingdom of God imperatives of hospitality, love, compassion, peace, mercy and hope. And you could probably include so many more.

Many Christian leaders and thinkers have brought about change in the life of their Church to reflect more of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus. One of the most enduring stories comes out of East Germany when it was still behind the Berlin Wall. From 1980 the Church of St. Nicholas, in Leipzig with only a small congregation of worshippers, began to host Monday night "Prayers for Peace" meetings. Under Pastor Christian Führer, these meetings, which would begin with people reciting the beatitudes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount — "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God" soon became a regular meeting where believers were joined by anyone interested in discussing environmental care, disarmament and the right to travel freely.

Momentum built over time. Those gathered would end the meeting by marching together through the streets calling for change. By 1988, 600 people would meet on a Monday. This swelled to 4,000 in September 1989. By mid-October 300,000 people turned out on the streets of Leipzig. It became the inspiration for the escalated popular opposition around the country that put so much pressure on the East German regime. These were vital ingredients in what eventually bringing down the wall. (Simon Smart, ABC Religion and Ethics, 2019).

If we are to look a little closer to home then we have Rev. John Flynn who is attributed for the changes he brought to the people of the outback with the "mantle of safety" which has eventuated in the Royal Flying Doctors and the continuing efforts of Frontier Services in the Uniting Church amongst many other activities that assist people living in remote areas of the country.

Change will always bring us the challenges of having to lay aside long held beliefs, emotional attachments and a desire to return to what we interpreted as being good. Those things we lay aside do need to be honoured as they have been important to us in those times but it the wisdom and understanding that we have gain from these experiences that we take with us into the future. Most importantly it is knowing that as we do the Spirit of God is calling us to be a closer reflection of the purposes of God and that of God's Kingdom, which will always mean....change.

Tim



(not my ute but totally the same..sigh)

A conversation with...



Rev. Phil Matthews about change, retirement, church and the missional relationship!

Rev. Phil Matthews retires in August from his final placement as the Frontier Services Bush Chaplain in the Barwon Patrol (out of Narrabri)

Mark: Phil, how would you say you personally find change in your life?

Phil: I find it renewing. When I was a kid in England, I stayed in the same house for 15 years, same school. When I came to Australia I started moving around, I worked on farms which took me to 2 or 3 different places, so I got used to moving and changing, moving and changing. So, when my church life started my first placement was the Parish on the Way. It was funded by the wider church and the mission plan for that was that you had to have a renewal every 3 years. So, I had to change my ministry regularly, not my style, but my focus on what I was doing, and I was very true to that.

I went from working within the community, to then working in the schools, working within Campbelltown, different housing commission areas and things like that. So, there was constant change going on and then I changed from there and went to Halliday's Point and Nabiac, which was straight 180 church, pulpit, furniture and that was a real big change. But even within that position I took on a role as the Presbytery Zone Minister, so again I changed what I was doing. I was working with the two congregations, but also working with and helping and talking to people in other churches and help them grow and look at mission plans and stuff like that. And then up to here in Narrabri with the patrol and later Frontier Services, and even this is change, it just changes every day, you don't know what you're going to come up against every time you go out to people.

We've been through drought, a little bit of flood, more drought and then now we've had some good rain. Just when I think everything is settling down nice I've had a suicide and a death in the same family, different branches of it, but both 18 year olds in the same village, and just going up and having to deal with absolutely shattered people, that these young lives gone. So, you're roaming between that and then all of a sudden I go and do Presbytery work and local work here.

So, my whole thing is about being fluid. In just 7 months or less now I suppose I'm going to change again, I'm going to be a retired person. First of all, I have to

change to become a husband again. I want to be a husband again, with a wife, and all that sort of stuff. Its' just change, constant change, and I love it and I don't get tired of it. I just think if I didn't have it I would just get stale and grumpy.

Mark: So, what change have you seen over your life that you find disturbing or encouraging?

Phil: I think some change is for the worst at the moment, going back to this nationalism, the one nation party type stuff, and stuff that was going on in America with more and more people becoming that way inclined. Even in Australia we are losing our focus on being a mate and being a good community, we're losing that. Selfishness and that change of going back to self. It's always been below the surface, but I think now more than ever. Look at the nations that now all losing their democracy, there is all this push by the military to take over everything and to make it the way they want. The loss of freedom for so many people and we have fought so hard and long to give people freedom. It's great to be a supporter of a team, but when you become fanatical about one side then you stop looking for change there is no way to change your mind because you're rigid. And this is the only way to go, and I think that's a sad thing for us. The good things are those things we did change and the things we did move ahead. There are some churches that are openly talking about the alternative ways of being church and alternative communities and reaching out to them in a loving way not in a judgemental way like they used to. I think that's a good thing.

Mark: Let's talk about change in terms of the church. We always talk about change in the church, we've been hearing it for decades, but what do you see happening in this area in the church?

Phil: I think we're lost; there's a lot of things not changing. There's change, but we're moving, we've got people moving the same way.

We're not looking. We need to look at what are the fundamental things that encourage change in our church, bring people into, not into our church, into God's kingdom, because our church is only a building. We've gone back to the synagogue days where the church is the place, and here's the church and it's the building, and we need a bigger steeple and we need a louder PA. Its' nothing to do with the people. We are leaving people out of the picture and we're leaving out the fact that we can have church on the side of the road with 4 people in the bush and God is there with us. It's not a numbers game it's a connection, it's a relationship. It's a relationship where we are, through love and connectiveness, grow this relationship with those who weren't normally coming to us.

That's what I love about this job. I am free to go out and sit with individuals. Scattered Communities, that's where I'm at, 3 or 4 here, 4 or 5 there, whatever, and I meet with these people and have conversations. And God always comes

up because I'm a Minister, there is always something about what would God say about you doing this. And I'd say he'd be happy, he's already here sitting with us and I make jokes and I use humour and people hear those things, and eventually after a while the relationship grows.

Mark: Do you think we understand the significance of the relationships above the numbers game and the mission talk and the striving for bigger?

Phil: No. Sadly, I don't think we've got it. Even regarding relationships within the congregational setting, if we're very frank and honest is there good relationships within every church? Are people connected, does everyone pray for each other, do they think about each other when they're not there. We still keep thinking that a relationship means we are the ones and everybody comes to our church.

We can ignore or we consume and one of the things I've learnt you gotta go along at their pace. I always ask if it's alright to come and let me know when you need me to leave. That gives them, I think, I've said this one several times, I only have power over my car. That's the only place because when I step out into their properties and stuff like that, even their community it's theirs, not mine. The schools are theirs not mine. I think that's one of the things that hold us back is we have to have our ground. I know it feels safer in one respect to do stuff with your own church but if we're trying to reach out into our community, that's what our vision statement is, then we have to go out, to get brave enough to go the sporting clubs, do this, do that. Open ourselves to sponsor a soccer team or something like, with their jersey's. Do something that's different but real.

**“There are those
God moments in
every day...”**

Mark: What do you see is the future of the church in terms of our struggle to change? Are you hopeful?

Phil: I'm really hopeful that somebody, somewhere will suddenly say "yes".

I'm not just blowing smoke at you, but I think Saltbush and the stuff you are doing is good. I've heard people say... "wow that's really great what they're doing, isn't it? It was a real struggle to start with, but now it's going, oh it sounds really good". And I said to them, why don't you start using their stuff, why don't you start sitting in on it, why don't you join that circle. They sigh, and go aw, yea maybe, and you kind of go, well if you want to be part of something you gotta make a step over the line and let go of something.

Now there's some of them that would but you know there's others, I guess, they're not desperate enough yet, they're still living in hope that someone will turn up. One church was really happy that 2 people turned up and now their church is really lively again, and that's good, but two people will probably pass away in the next 12-18 months.

Mark: And maybe, things can happen, new things can happen, change can happen, but we have to give up something for that to happen don't we.

Phil: That's right, we have to be prepared to let go of something. We have to move from where we are, where we've been, and where we stayed, we have to cross that threshold, whether it's the threshold of the church and move out into the community or is the threshold of our rigour that we set up as our protection.

I remember the church in the city where I was at, in Southwest area, and the main church there was a mission church. And I went back the Christmas before last, and they were singing the same choruses that they were singing when I left 40 years ago. When Lyn and I got married we left, and they were singing the same stuff, at the same time and everything. The church worship was at the same time, in the same format, in the same building, and the same songs.

Mark: That's right, and if we're unable to sacrifice give up something in order to live, then you know, as Jesus said a seed just remains a seed.

Phil: It has to die to flourish into something new. You have to be prepared to take that risk. And it is scary, I mean, how do you think it felt when I first started at Rose Meadow, going into the community for the first time you know, speaking to people. You just don't know how you're going to be accepted and you still don't know. I can ring farmers and get told to get knotted, you know, and worse, but they don't, you know, that they'll say OK yeah yeah.

We've got to learn that, we've gotta learn to be, not flippant, but we can learn not to be precious. We get precious as the church and I think that's what we've gotta stop being this precious.

Mark: So you know Phil, as you are now heading into a big change for you and concluding your placement out of Narrabri, into the Bush and Pilliga area up at north and western NSW, what's your word?

Phil: I think, be yourself, trust God, let go, and be prepared to be surprised. I think, to me that's it, that's straight from the heart, I only just thought of it, It's not written down, but that would be it, because that's what happens to me every day. I am surprised, there's always something that happens. There are those God moments in every day and you don't script it, you can't script it, it just happens. In might be in him, it might be in tenderness it might be in sadness, but there's a God moment.

Our stories...



Allan and Gill Aynsley
Fullerton, NSW

I, Allan was born in 1941 and can relate to the Slim Dusty song, "Looking forward, looking back". Ever since I was a small boy, I always wanted to be a farmer. I couldn't wait to finish school and work on the land.

How agriculture has changed in that time. I remember harnessing 3 draught horses to disc the paddock and sending the milk to the factory in ten gallon cans.

I knew I had chosen a hard life style, and the wages would not be high. I remember an old farmer telling me that I would only see the rooster in the pen up on his perch, because he would be there when I went to work and there when I came home.

I have experienced droughts, floods, extremely cold weather, amazingly fertile seasons, good times and hard times.

One of those hard times was the 1982/3 drought when I was dairying with two other partners and we were forced to sell. The added pressure cost my first marriage of 20yrs. It was a very hard time in my life, and I believe my faith pulled me through those tough times.

Gill and I were married in 1983, combining our families – 5 wonderful daughters of mine, and one great son of Gill's. We currently have 18 grandchildren and 7 great grandchildren. Life is forever changing.

The challenges of course are always there.

Gill and I started doing farm contract work (shearing, horse breaking, contract fencing, mustering etc), and we developed a relationship of 'backing each other up', which has developed in all aspects of our lives, and led us to buy our own small farm about 25yrs ago, as well as managing other properties in the area for twenty years before we retired 2 yrs ago.

'Church life' has always been something we have 'shared' too. Since we were married we have always held some Church Council role either at Bowral or Crookwell. Allan has been a lay preacher for over 40yrs, and recently qualified as a marriage celebrant. This has enabled him to conduct 3 weddings including one

for his eldest granddaughter in Perth, and also baptise 2 of his great grandchildren.

Living and working the land is a wonderfully rewarding experience. Farmers have an extra blessing of being close to God in relying on the rain, sun and seasons to plant, sow and reap the harvest.

We have had many amazing experiences, but maybe the greatest was going to Cambodia in 2005/8 and 10 to work with some people in agriculture in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. We shared their lives for a while, saw them plant rice by hand and plough with bullocks. It is a very fertile country and holds a special place in our hearts, especially the people.

The modern computerised agricultural equipment in the wealthy world is hard to believe, but is not available for so many countries in need.

So how do we look forward up the track?

We know we live in a sunburnt country and a land of droughts and flooding rains. We look to learn how to manage the land God has entrusted to us, to learn from those who have gone before us, and always be seeking the best way to change, and share.

I often think of what Jesus said to Philip and Nathanael in John 1: 46 – 51 when He invited them to follow him. He didn't promise it would be easy. He did promise if they followed Him they would see heaven open. You will see the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man.

With all the changes we see, the Word of God never changes.



We're not in Kansas anymore

Rev. Peter Overton | Pastoral Transition Minister & Resource Minister for Richmond and Upper Clarence

My parents were Salvation Army Officers, and every Sunday Night whilst they were in Officer Training college in the late 1940's they would take the Salvation Army band and preach on the streets of Melbourne; crowds would gather to sing the songs of the faith and hear the Good News. People would be waiting for them, and others passing by would join. It was a Sunday night community in the Melbourne CBD.

Today we have Buskers in towns and cities across Australia with their songs/poetry/Art/Story and offering plates, but no War Cry's to sell, and as I watch I see a group of people that could be described as spiritual, but not religious.

A Minister of the Uniting Church in Central Queensland in the 1970's had a knock at the door of the Manse one Monday morning. It was the Mayor of the town, and he needed to have a conversation with the Ministers of the town. It was over a proposed Sunday night sports function. He was seeking their approval, given it was Sunday.

Blow horn was a gentleman who travelled by train every morning to Brisbane. He was dressed, with a suitcase containing his Blow-horn, tracts and Bible. Each day he would set up where people would be walking past. Often he would be elevated on steps, so that the message could be heard by as many people as possible. This was the late 1980's and every day rain or shine he would be there, as faithful as the Sun rising each morning. People would just walk by, and he would share one of his messages of repentance, heaven and hell. He died, and would you believe no one replaced him.

In the Wizard of Oz, the young heroines known world literally crashes during a cyclone that up ends her house and lands her near a bewildering place called 'Munchkinland'. As Dorothy surveys the strange new territory she says to her dog:

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore"

This aptly summarizes the place the Church finds itself in today. We are no longer at the centre of our culture, we are on the periphery. No model works in our culture anymore. No slick program will bring the young people back into our church. By young I mean the under 50's. Sadly for many years we as Churches in the western world have done the same thing over and over again expecting different results. We are not in Kansas anymore.

What was Kansas?

1. Church at Centre of the community
2. Minister full time
3. Minister as Leader and provider of religious good and services.
4. Minister as the one who delivered Worship, Sacraments and key provider of Pastoral care.
5. People were attracted to the Church; Sunday school was the place where values would be instilled and cultivated.
6. Each Church of 80 to 100 could afford a full-time Minister.

Change is a given in our post modern context. It is everywhere and impacting everyone. In church culture “build it and they will come” is no longer the generic model to build a Church.

What we have done time and time again (me as a leader in particular) is think that we can repackage the same thing over and over again, thinking we can get a different result. Albert Einstein defined this as a “definition of insanity”. Doing the same thing thinking we will get different results. Sadly this is untrue. We have to face up to the fact that Kansas is no more. This is confronting, challenging and can be wonderfully liberating.

What is the door people need to pass through to join and be part of us in our local congregations?

A church stands on a hill overlooking a city, town or rural centre somewhere in this country or yours. The peaked roof reaches towards the sky and a tasteful, yet compelling cross bursts from the roofline. The symmetrical design is unadorned and yet elegant in its simplicity.



The walls of the building are strong and straight, you can see that much care has been taken to ensure that it continues to look as good as the day on which it was built. There is a fence around the outside of the building and a gate at the front. A broad and well-manicured path leads up to the large front door of the building.

The door is magnificent. One might almost consider that the whole building has been designed with the door in mind. The door is the centre-piece of the church façade. It is directly below the cross – which just as it points upwards towards the sky also points downwards towards the door, underlining its importance in the life of the church.

The door is perfectly symmetrical and constructed of heavy wood. Some days the door stands wide open, welcoming all that might enter. The observer is left

under no illusions, clearly the best and most appropriate way to enter this church is through the door.

However, there are some for whom the door is a barrier. One has had bad experiences with doors in the past and is distrustful of them. One has never had much to do with doors but has the general impression that they are old-fashioned and past. For one, the door holds no interest at all – he is sure that lots of people like the door but it is just not for him. Some have had the experience of the door being closed to them. Some have seen the ugly side of the door and have vowed never to pass through it again. Some, despite its prominent position, don't even seem to notice the door at all.

Many people walk proudly over the threshold into the church. They can't understand how people could have problems with a door. After all, people have been using doors for centuries!! And quite frankly, if people are not willing to do something so simple and basic as walk through the door, then perhaps they would be better off staying outside.

Some who walk through the door are concerned about those that remain outside. There have been discussions of replacing it with a modern automatic sliding door, which might attract more young people into the building. But many feel that a modern automatic sliding door would affect the building's traditional beauty and majesty. And some of the people outside would think that this was just a cynical ploy to conceal what, when all is said and done, is still a door.

Some have suggested that bright lights and neon signs above the door might encourage more people to enter the door. Some think that holding meetings and sing-a-longs just outside the door might encourage people to walk through. Some people have spoken to the people outside, and taken the time to give them detailed directions to the door. Still, they do not enter.

It is difficult for those who are inside. The only way they have ever entered the church is through the door. They have been using doors their whole lives and never had a single problem with them. Many of them refuse to believe that it is the door that is the problem. How can something which has been perfectly serviceable for generations now be a barrier?! It doesn't make sense.

If only there were some other way to enter. If only the windows were left open, if an underground tunnel were connected, if a skylight were easily accessible or if there was some other way to get into that building. If only a great ragged and dirty hole were cut in the side of the church for people to crawl through. Some of the people outside have been searching for another way in. Some have had themselves shot from cannons and dropped from balloons to try to get in, but have missed the building altogether and landed somewhere else that they never

intended to go. For now it seems that things will remain the same. The church is as impressive as ever and plays an important role in the life of the community. And yet there are less and less people who are willing to walk through the door. Those inside have often entered the building since they were children, just as their parents did before them. There are entire families who do not know what the inside of the church looks like.

Everybody feels uneasy about the situation. People agree that things can't go on this way, but nobody seems to know how things could be changed. If only there was some other way to enter the church than through the door.¹

In his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, Christian activist Shane Claiborne says many Christians are hungry for an agenda worthy of their commitment, energy and God-given gifts. "Being a Christian is about choosing Jesus and deciding to do something incredibly something daring with your life."

The Church is on the move!

What do we need to take with us into the future?

What do we need to leave behind?

We could consider changing from:

- From church focus to Christ focus - following Jesus to see what church forms round him.
- From settled church to church as a movement - going where people are rather than waiting for people to come.
- From a culture of guilt to a culture of grace - freeing people to love and be loved while not counting the cost.
- From running congregations to building communities - working towards a relational reformation.
- From isolation to interdependence - encouraging churches to work together.
- From individualism to teamwork - seeing teamwork as essential to all ministry.
- From top down church to upside down church - putting the local church at the centre of the agenda.
- From centralized resources to development resources - releasing funds to encourage local vision.
- From faith as security to faith as risk - looking for new courage to break out of old routines.

We are called to follow; Jesus is ahead of us, he has left the building. At the end of Marks Gospel in the tomb, the unnamed person says:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" Mark 16: 7

¹ McCredden, Danielle *The Door* (edited), Melbourne



God's business is change



Shelley Forrest
Broken Hill Uniting Church

My journey with the Lord did not begin fully until 1977 the year of the Uniting Church union, although I realised that He had His hand on me from the very beginning.

I attended Sunday school, but my family were not involved in church. I found out later that my nana (mum's mother) was a Christian and she became a mentor and friend to me on my faith journey.

I commenced nursing on 25th April 1977 and had only been working three months when I became extremely ill with peritonitis (burst appendix). I was only 17 and close to death. I had friends who were Christians, but I had not accepted Christ as my personal Saviour. After having emergency surgery, I was in and out of hospital and started to believe

or 'perceive' that there were more than doctors and nurses looking after me. I had an unusual out of body experience and believed that I had died. I "awoke from the anaesthetic" and my life was changed. Christ had allowed me to live.

My acceptance of Christ as Lord of my life had begun, however it was while I was visiting a Christian friend at university that I prayed for the "Lord to come into my life and to help me to live life as he wanted me to live - not my way."

I was a child of God. He accepted me for who I was warts and all. As I repented and turned away from those things that stopped me from being faithful, forgiving and accepting, God changed me.

I have often been ridiculed by non-Christian workmates, friends, and family for being a Christian and at times it has been hard to cope. When words such as 'hypocrite' or 'you're a Christian and shouldn't be doing those things' are said they strike deep and are hurtful. Knowing Christ had changed me, sometimes my actions show otherwise. Like many of us, at times I am my own worst enemy. Reading the scriptures and talking to Christian friends that has helped me in this area of self-control. Change is a gradual process, Remember the quote from the hair commercial "it won't happen overnight, but it will happen." God's like that with me. Changing me from the inside.

There have been times in my life when I have stopped some of my Christian activities so I could live life, doing what I wanted to do. This was not completely

due to ridicule or pressure of others; it was that everything seemed too hard. I would look at non-Christian friends and they seemed to be having much more fun. However, the isolation I felt from not being amongst Christian friends was unbearable. I felt very lonely. Thank God, that he knew better than me and gave me a "swift kick up the backside" which I deserved to get moving.

A few years ago, whilst working in a dialysis unit, I had a difficult time with one of my supervisors and the amount of stress in the job was increasing. This caused me to lose confidence in myself, confidence in my performance at work and as a result the patients also lost confidence in me.

I began to question my faith and that of the existence of God? "Why had I taken on this job if this was going to happen? Where was God in all of this? He is supposed to be all seeing and knowing." I was not being a witness for Christ, I was angry, and I was gossiping. Essentially, I could not "see the wood for the trees" and there was no desire to ask God for guidance.

Once again God provided Christian friends and counsellors to talk to, who advised and lent a listening ear. They helped me see that I had not lost faith, just misplaced it for a while. I could have easily lied about the whole situation, but God was still changing me. Being a Christian did help me, and it strengthened my faith because I was able to be honest and upfront regarding the issues with my work performance. Another area was found for me to work, and it is my belief that God provided this opportunity and He still does today.

There are many situations in my life where I have prayed, or others have prayed for me and I have received more than I could ever wish.

Things such as; not being able to have a family, but then being able to talk to others going through a similar experience; Being able to talk openly at work about my faith journey when I used to keep quiet; Being able to tell non-Christian family that I love them and so does God; Being a lay leader in my congregation, a singer and musician when I mostly want to stay in the background. God is in the business of change - and he is certainly doing that in me.

The word of God provides for us in times of trial and tribulation and some of the verses that have helped me are:

2 Corinthians 3: 15-18

Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. **16** But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. **17** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **18** And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate or reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory. which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Experiencing the Word

Sarah Agnew | Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT

Have you noticed that Ecclesiastes 3 is read at New Year, and at funerals, and then, only 3:1–8. At these moments of beginning and ending, we seek comfort, perhaps, in remembering that change is the one of very few constants in life, and that resisting change is futile, or vanity. Here is a reading of Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, the most familiar part of this enigmatic book, through the lens of 'change'. It is not an exhaustive study, more an imaginative wondering. In a book known for its fatalistic cry that 'all is vanity', human effort a chasing after the wind, I search for hope, for optimism. I think I have found some, but I am willing to accept that it might not be the Teachers', it may be that I brought my own. Come wonder with me.

'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven' (Eccl 3:1). Humans must therefore discern what time it is, *now*. Whether we take the pairs in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 at face value or as symbolic, metaphoric, allegoric, humans must discern what time it is, *now*, and determine an appropriate response.



The list starts with birth and death. The literal birth and death of each of us is out of our control, birth especially. Figuratively, however, births, deaths, beginnings, endings, life instigated or terminated – how many situations came to mind for you in the seconds it took to read that sentence? Births and deaths meet us in many ways, every day. We are called on by life to discern whether now is a time for starting something new, or a time for bringing something to an end. Hebrew poetry names two things in order to conjure up for the audience all things between them ('heaven and earth' means 'everything'). So the further question of this first pair might be: are we in a time for sustaining life as it is? Because 'birth and death' doesn't only mean start or finish, it means the breadth of life in between.

Births and deaths are profound moments of change. But the sustaining of life as it is, is not a choice for the static, or stationary: even sustaining life is movement, is change. This list is a reminder of the dynamic nature of life, always changing. Humans must, in each moment, discern what time it is now, what change is taking

place, and how will we respond, for resistance is vanity, is chasing after the wind.

Before we even get to our response, however, *how* does one discern what time it is, now? That may be a question only answered in the living. But if you follow the prose that surrounds this reflection on time in Ecclesiastes, the Teacher may seem to suggest that it doesn't really matter. It seems to some scholars that the Teacher (the name given to the author of this book) has little faith in human capacity to discern the time or season, let alone determine the appropriate response¹. Further, if God has set the times and seasons in motion, to play out as they will, does a human even have a choice to make on their moral, ethical, response to life?

The Teacher is quite persistent in the rest of chapter 3:

- 'whatever God does endures forever', and nothing can be added or taken away (3:14)
- 'that which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is' (3:15)
- 'the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other', thus 'humans have no advantage' (3:19)
- 'all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again' (3:19)
- there is nothing better for humans to do but to enjoy your work; to eat, drink, be merry (3:22, 13)

Is, then, Ecclesiastes fatalistic, pessimistic, at best brutally realistic, as scholars have found the book to be? Or is there more to Ecclesiastes than a negative picture of humanity?

I am going to skip to the end of the list of pairs now: there is:

**'a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace' (3:8).**

This pair of pairs seems to list a positive, a negative, a negative, a positive, with a reversal in which some have found a punchline drawing attention to 'peace'.²

I am more interested in the way the structure establishes a frame for the entire list with 'birth' at the beginning and 'peace' at the end. As Towner observes³, this may be a profoundly hopeful statement that their opposites, 'death' and 'war' do not have the last word, in the end. Ecclesiastes with an element of optimism, then? And allowing for some hope and optimism might shape our reading of the whole with nuance not allowed when treating the book as nothing but 'vanity'.

1 John J. Collins. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. MN: Fortress Press, 2004, 522.

2 W. Sibley Towner. 'The Book of Ecclesiastes', New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume V, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997 (265–360), 306.

3 Towner, 'Ecclesiastes', 306.

Ecclesiastes does return again and again to 'vanity', to the idea that humans may as well eat, drink, and be merry, because what else is there but 'chasing after the wind'? The Teacher does appear to take an intentionally alternative stance to the Hebrew Wisdom presented in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs praises wisdom, and the personified Wisdom. With hope, Proverbs encourages humans to learn, to seek understanding, with faith in their capacity to understand. To learn, to grow, to move with change.

But if all is vanity, a chasing after the wind, why bother learning anything, why seek to grow – why change anything? Is that really what the Teacher intends their audience to take from Ecclesiastes?

I wonder if this meditation on time and season and its glimpse of hope, is a window to the Teacher's purpose. I wonder if Ecclesiastes in fact asks us not to give up self-determination and the attempt to discern a moral response to our current circumstances? Does Ecclesiastes exhort humans to trust in time and season as a gift, to trust in change and look for the sign of life that change inherently is?

Of course Ecclesiastes is pushing back at the Proverbs perspective. But remember I mentioned Hebrew poetry's presentation of two so as to present a whole breadth? What if, together, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes provide balance and breadth in the teaching of wisdom? Both an affirmation to seek wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and also not to think you know it all, because who is God? Only God. The wise see, fools walk in darkness, and all die, in the end. So, eat, drink, enjoy what life has to offer, and for the rest – trust God.

Is this a profound call to trust in the seasons, in the times, in life's dynamic flow, growth, and change as a gift that keeps us alive? Consider 'planting' and 'plucking up', for example. Is 'plucking up' reaping what is sown? They're not opposites, then, are they, but both part of the natural, dynamic, process of change that is life. Both plucking and planting are hopeful, life-sustaining actions.

Or consider 'a time to kill, a time to heal'. It might be that this refers to capital punishment and medical intervention, as some scholars suggest ⁴. Or could 'kill' be slaughter for food? Self-defence or defence of others – taking life to preserve it? I wonder. ⁴

I mentioned the so-called 'reversal' in structure that we find in verse 8, placing peace last in the list, to complete the bookends with 'birth' at the beginning, to hold the collection of pairs between them. For this to be considered a 'reversal', however, we must categorise the elements of the pairs as opposites, as either

4 Towner, 'Ecclesiastes', 305.

good or bad.⁵ And that imposes judgements the Teacher does not include.

If 'love' is good, 'hate' is bad; 'war' is bad, 'peace' is good, the order in which they are listed reverses from one pair to the second. But is this list as simple as pairs of good and bad, opposites between which a spectrum is held? If we are to categorise the items in the list as 'good' and 'bad', the ordering within the pairs changes at several points, which takes the sting out of the supposed 'reversal.' The order does not matter, if the items are not, after all, the point.

Further, before the final two pairs, we have one pair that is ambiguous on the question of good and bad. 'Silence' and 'speaking out' (3:7) can each in their use be helpful or harmful choices: for each of these, most clearly and least controversially of all the items in the list, there is an appropriate time. Does this pair, with the lack of judgement for any item on the list from the Teacher, suggest that a 'good / bad' dichotomy is a false imposition on this passage?

Is the list instead not so much about the alternatives themselves, but a reminder of, and an invitation to trust, the constantly changing circumstances of life as held (not controlled) by God? The movement, the dynamic growth of life requires change, and our response to that change, so why resist? Why not simply live?

The refrains of 'all is vanity' and 'chasing after the wind' might then remind us not of the inability of humans to discern a morally appropriate response, but rather the inability of humans to control the circumstances, to stop the movement of time and season. This is how, the Teacher reminds their audience, God has set life in motion,⁶ with times, seasons, constant change.

You may have come across the sayings, the ones that go something like, yesterday I was clever and sought to change the world, but today I am wise and seek to change myself. The world, life, will always be changing, that is its nature. We cannot resist, for that is vanity, that is the chasing after the wind. We can, however, change ourselves. I think the Teacher might after all hope that humans can discern what time it is now, and respond. We can't stop death, or war, but we can trust that, as all is held within the embrace of God, it is life and peace that have the first and final word. And although we cannot understand how that will be, it is not ours to know. That is God's. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the realistic and perhaps, after all, hopeful, teaching of Ecclesiastes, is the reminder of who is God and the liberation humans experience when we acknowledge it isn't us. Rather than a fatalistic resignation,⁷ could the Teacher be suggesting it is liberating to eat, drink, enjoy life's moments, as they change, and we grow through the changes?

5 As Collins situates them, Introduction, 522.

6 Though Towner (304) finds that the Teacher does not make such a claim for God, I am reading it as an implication of the Teacher's claim, for example, of 'what God does' as enduring for ever.

7 Collins, Introduction, 522-3.

A prayer for New Year, inspired by Ecclesiastes 3

'Present for every season'⁸

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13

as one year ends and a new one begins,
we mark the turning of time and season with thanks and remembering

we give thanks for the lives born this year,
and pray for your presence with parents and carers of children

we remember the people who died this year,
and pray for your presence with the sick and dying

we give thanks for all kinds of seeds planted this year,
for your presence with those who plant and nurture, sow and reap

we remember all that came to an end this year,
in good time or too soon; and we pray for healing and peace

we give thanks for things built – homes, businesses, communities, relationships,
and we pray for your presence with those who build

we remember the things that were dismantled this year,
and we pray for your presence with all who feel bereft

we give thanks for the good times this year,
and for those with whom we laughed, rejoiced, delighted

we remember the times we wept this year,
and those who comforted us, and let us comfort them

we give thanks for the songs, the dances, the poems, of this year,
and for the artists who enrich our community, showing us who we are

we remember the laments of this year,
and we pray for your presence with all who mourn

we give thanks for our bodies, with which we embrace life and each other,
and pray for wholeness and strength for each other and ourselves

we remember the times we've had to hold back this year,
and we pray with hope for our coming together again

we give thanks for curiosity and wonder, for all we've learned this year,
and pray for your presence with teachers in every guise

⁸ Sarah Agnew, <http://praythestory.blogspot.com> 25/12/2020

we remember the things we've had to let go this year,
and pray for courage to endure cocoons so as to grow new wings and fly

we give thanks for the menders, repairers, restorers,
and pray for your presence with wounds and stitches still healing

we remember the rips, tears, breaks of this year,
and we pray for forgiveness all round

we give thanks for silence that has helped us to hear,
we pray for no more of the silence that exacerbates injustice

we give thanks for the stories, wisdom, experience we hold,
and we pray for discernment in using our voice

we give thanks for love, to give and receive,
and we pray for friends for the lonely

we remember the times we've hated this year,
righteous rejection of injustice and unhelpful blaming and shaming

we give thanks for your peace that we do not
fully understand, so must keep learning by living it

we remember the battles we have fought this year,
and pray for your presence as we continue the struggles
of climate change, for Black Lives – which matter –
with responses to the Covid, and with recovery
from fire and flood, storms and drought*

in every season, with every turning,
you are with us, you are listening;
Thank you for your presence
through this year that has ended,
thank you for your presence
into the year just beginning. Amen.

*please adapt these final concerns to specifics of time and place when you pray this prayer

<http://sarahagnew.com.au>

News from Saltbush

Rev. Mark Faulkner | Director of Rural and Remote Ministry Initiatives.

Where are we up to with Saltbush?

Well this is a rare photograph! Most often Geoff, Tim and I prefer to dress down with a bit of red dirt on our boots and our shirt sleeves rolled up. But after postponing the event for months last year, finally at the end of November the Canberra Region



Presbytery ordained Rev. Geoff Wellington as a Deacon and the Synod inducted both Rev. Tim Jensen and Geoff into the placements of Saltbush Scattered Community Ministers. We were thankful for the presence of the Moderator, Rev. Simon Hansford and the Canberra Region Presbytery Chair, Judy McKinlay.

The Saltbush team is a great team to work with, each of us bringing our own gifts, skills and quirks. Saltbush is now part of the Synod Secretariat and we are so very thankful for the ongoing administrative support and encouragement we receive from Monique Mumby who is part of the Secretariat and from those within the wider Synod who make Saltbush happen. The Saltbush team now report to the Synod Associate Secretary, Rev. Bronwyn Murphy, who regularly meets with us, thinks about the road ahead and is an encourager towards genuine change.

2021 will bring for the Saltbush team more of our ongoing work, but also change and new things which has always been the way for Saltbush over the past 3 years.

From 19th.-22nd. April at Galong the Saltbush team will hold the **Saltbush National Gathering** with people attending from the Queensland, VicTas and South Australian Synods. We have been actively meeting with people from other Synods and this is our first opportunity to meet in person.

We are also working with UTC to enable our theological candidates an opportunity to work with Saltbush and experience rural ministry. Our first **Saltbush Scattered Community Gathering** will be in June/July and include people from Uniting

Christian communities in the Riverina alongside our UTC candidates.

Our **Saltbush Online Cafés** continue to attract active groups of people seeking to explore life and faith together. These are open to anyone from anywhere and usually run for 4 or 5 weeks on one theme along with one of the Saltbush Scattered Community Ministers.

Part of our work is in supporting Congregations towards change! Basically encouraging and connecting irrespective of size or location! Thanks to the generous donations from individuals, congregations and clusters we have used all of that money to purchase ten packages of tv/stands/cables/cams so that Uniting Christian Communities can be connected to others, to the Synod and to Saltbush. Along with this we encourage conversation around change, welcoming the stranger and shaping Christian community for the future.

The first of your donation hardware packages went to Nyngan Uniting Church!



The year ahead will bring more change... and challenge. As we continue to work with groups, congregations and Presbyteries we are hoping to see some significant renewing of the way we work and witness as an organisation. A refreshing of our focus back onto the gatherings of Uniting Christian communities and their expression of faith lived out. This is not about size or numbers, outcomes and resources, mission out of a box or saving the church, but around growing the depth of our understanding around Christian community, the missional relationship and who we are in the reality of 21st. Century Australia life.

Remember, you can find way more on Saltbush here and you are always welcome to contact one of your Saltbush Scattered Community Ministers.

<https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/>

Mark .



Please consider financially supporting Saltbush; either as individuals or as a congregation.

Your donation will be directly used for the work of supporting Saltbush and the ways we are working to encourage smaller, rural congregations.

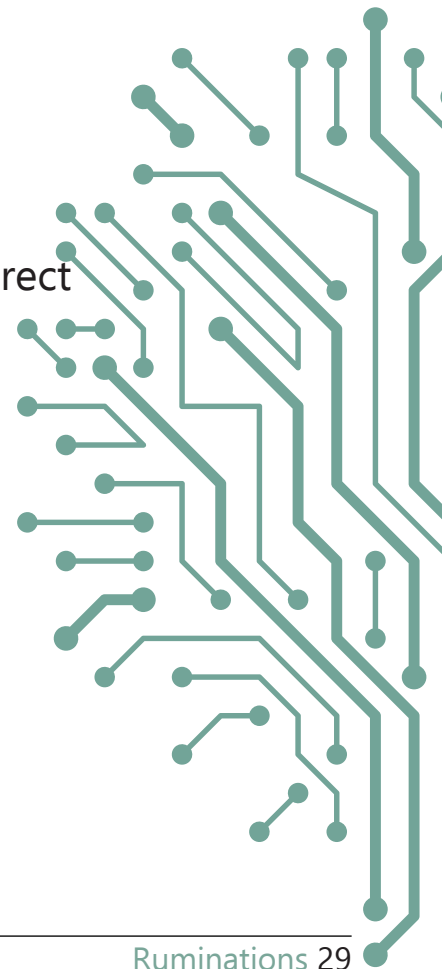
You can donate generally towards Saltbush and this will include the cost of enabling the printing of Ruminations.

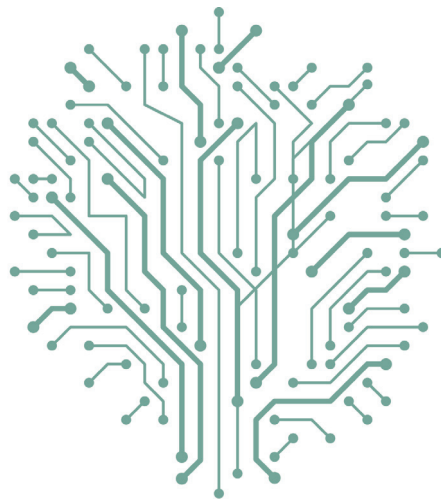
To donate please make a direct transfer:

Bank: Uniting Financial Services
Account Name: Uniting Mission & Education EFT Direct

BSB: 634-634
Account Number: 100035066

Payment Reference: **"Saltbush"**





SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY