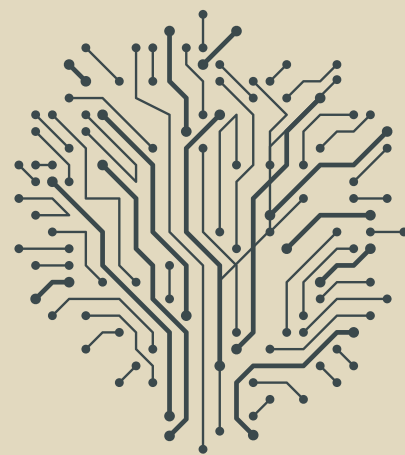


evolutions



SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

SPRING/SUMMER 2021

RENEWING

**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  
Peter Overton  
Monique Potter

Uniting the Scattered Community

PO Box 221 Canberra City, 2601

0477 720 151

[saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au](mailto:saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au)

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

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## Contributors

**Rev. Dr Jason John** - A Uniting Church minister, with a focus on improving the relationship between humans and the rest of the Earth family. Currently working with the Faith Ecology Network, and Bellingen Shire Learning Alliance, and preaching monthly at Gleniffer Community Church.

**Rev. Mel Graham** - Mel is a Uniting Church minister in placement at Dubbo Uniting. She has a passion for the Christian community within the wider community and a willingness to be in ministry on the edge.

**Dr Mick Pope** - Mick Pope is a lecturer in meteorology. He has a PhD in tropical climate from Monash University. Mick recently completed a masters thesis on Genesis, Leviticus, and ecological ethics. He is the author of three books on Christianity and climate change including A Climate of Justice, and All Things New: God's Plan to Renew our World.

**Rev. Sharon Hollis** is the 16th Assembly President. Prior to her installation as President, Sharon was the VIC/Tas Synod Moderator. She is deeply committed to social justice, reconciliation with Australia's First Peoples and the elimination of domestic violence.



# Editor's Introduction - Renewing

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

Welcome friends to this edition of Ruminations with our theme of **Renewing**. The Saltbush team are thankful for the willingness of our writers to bring their thoughts and perspectives on this theme – Jason John, Mel Graham, Mick Pope and Sharon Hollis.

Each of our contributors have, completely independently of each other, reminded us that renewing is a particular occurrence that takes place outside of the ordinary. It is in Sabbath, grief, loss, seeking, honesty, separation and discernment that the seeds of renewing can be planted. Renewing, as our authors tell us, comes with an element of surprise and is a gift to us, even a divine blessing and does not come without work, struggle, effort and yet is a human responsibility.



In that way then renewing is fragile, perhaps easier to avoid and within the seemingly contradictory acts of both practice and absence.

Each edition of Ruminations has a single word theme which we choose as a means of connecting our readers with issues relevant to both life and faith. We deliberately choose our themes to be difficult and challenging while holding onto our sense of hope. Our themes for 2022 are – **Family – Death – Land**.

The difficulty and challenge around our theme of Renewing is found in the tension between our longing for renewing and yet our struggle to both make it happen (practice) and allow (absence) it to happen. We all seek a renewing in one form or another (family – church – relationships – environment – wellbeing – security – happiness – hope – justice.....) and yet we easily



fall into a place where we don't know how to make it happen and won't allow it to happen either.

Rev. Sharon Hollis reminds us of the "neutral zone" as part of the birth of renewing. Again, we are all in this place in diverse and different ways, as is creation and the world in which we live. Sharon writes about the neutral zone; "It's a time of not knowing, of waiting, or praying, of discerning. It's a time to ask questions, to test, to explore, to heal. It's a period of self-examination and resting". (Sabbath!)

It is Dr Mick Pope who has introduced to us the theme of Sabbath, but not just as a theme, but as a truth that is vital as part of the act, the participation, the nurturing of renewal.

Rev. Mel Graham also reminds us that we can actively work against renewal and take up habits, listen to myths, cling to ego centric constructs that we have developed which reject renewal and reject a life lived in full connection with God.

On behalf of the Saltbush team I commend this issue of Ruminations to the fullness of your reading so that it might be a part of your discerning, thinking, praying and resting in your own places and spaces that are searching for **renewing**.

Mark .

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# A word from the Moderator

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

I was struck this morning by the first stanza of the Gospel reading from Mark 9.38-41:

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Like so much of the Gospels, the stories included are the incredibly human ones; stories which are about us, our frailties and our hopes. We can see our own faces, hear our own voices and those of our friends, as seek to follow Jesus on his way.

I can hear myself, see myself, just like John in the gospel story. Like John, we know how things are supposed to work, and this clown is making a mess, a mockery of it all. Acting in Jesus' name? We have a mission plan, and this was never mentioned!

When we pray for renewal, do we have a fixed picture in mind? Do we see more people like us, gathered in the way we always have, or do we trust God for something entirely new?

When we ask "Lord, renew your church", are we asking God to simply tidy everything up, or are we asking for renovation?

The last eighteen months has been a rollicking affair, as we have tumbled from church-as-we-know-it, to something entirely different, then round about and back again. Is it possible there is the hand of God, moving us and changing us in all of this? Can we sense the breath of the Spirit, urging us into new territory, not to visit, but to keep going?

What if smaller congregations are the only option for many churches in the next

decade? What if smaller congregations are God's opportunity? What if we have to change the ways we worship and serve because this season of COVID lasts longer than anyone would like?

Renewal comes when God wills it, not when we plan for it. All our mission plans are as nought, when God acts as God desires. Walter Brueggemann writes in one of his prayers:

*We are – by your freedom and your hiddenness –  
made sure yet again that you are God...  
beyond us, for us, but beyond us,  
not at our beck and call,  
but always in your own way.*

Pray for renewal, please! However, keep your eyes - and hearts – open to how God will answer.

*Simon*



# Renewing around the meal

**Rev. Peter Overton |** Saltbush Scattered Community Minister,  
Far North Coast Region

Spring is a season of renewal, a time of seeing new life in flora and fauna and for us to see our aging python snake emerging from slumber and hopefully enjoying a feast of bandicoots that have been ravaging the garden and lawn. Like the same magpies that swoops the mailperson each spring, and their babies who follow me as I mow the lawn. There is a sense of energy around our community this time of the year. A renewing of life, and perhaps even the birth of new opportunities.

So, have you ever thought of renewing the Church around a meal? In 2009, Saint Lydia's, a Lutheran church in Brooklyn, New York garnered national attention when it began holding a weekly service over dinner. Longing to dispel feelings of isolation often reported among young New Yorkers, founder Emily Scott decided to model her service around the early church practice of having a meal together as Eucharist. This has now become a movement called "Dinner Church"

While every church has its own feel, the concept is the same: connect with others in a language spoken by all—food. the services aim to feel like a dinner party, fostering conversation among men, women, and children who might otherwise never meet.



These churches encompass a range of denominations, both conservative and progressive, and they meet in a variety of settings: in church basements, restaurants, gardens, and art galleries. Found in urban, suburban, and rural areas, they attract wealthy, middle class, and unhoused neighbours. The intergenerational and multi-ethnic congregations create engaging dialogue; the meals become a space where diners can disagree and still maintain close relationship.

Throughout the evening, they read Scripture, sing, and pray, but most importantly, they eat. Central to the process of eating is engaging in dialogue, providing space to respond to the Scripture or sermon.

This new way of doing church, which Saint Lydia's fondly coined a "dinner church," is modelled after the earliest gatherings of Christians as described in Acts 2: "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts," (Acts 2:46).

For the first 300 years, Christianity was done around dinner tables more than any other gathering model. Something very powerful happens when meeting in this manner. By intentionally pulling together a diverse group of people around the shared need to eat, it is impossible to worship without acknowledging the variety of needs and experiences of those around the table.

So, in the season of spring and the challenges over Covid 19 are you open to renewal? Why not open the doors to your churches, halls, homes and playgrounds and expand your table and form community around a meal and a story.

You might change the world like the meal did in the first three centuries of the early Church. Perhaps it's time to welcome the stranger to a place "where everybody knows your name", where people are met and loved as they are.

*"Nothing  
brings us  
together  
like eating  
together"*

**"What the world needs now is love sweet love"**

*Pete*



# In the beginning - renewal



While I am a city boy at heart, most of my formative years were spent in country Victoria, the Goulburn Valley. We weren't farmers, but often rented houses on farmland. I woke up to the sound of cows pulling at grass, smelled their dung. I swam in irrigation channels and climbed trees. I watched green grass turn into hay. My attempts at hay baling were mixed. Life on the land gives you a better sense of the cycle of renewal, although urbanites get a taste with the seasonal dive bombings of magpies.

Growing up and moving away to university was the beginning of a long journey to faith – a spiritual renewal – and beyond to integrating aspects of my life with that. As someone who had always had an interest with nature – now creation – I

have tried to understand how the bible tells us how we are to understand our relationship to the natural world. This includes how we harness it for our food. Having a PhD in meteorology means that must involve understanding climate change through a Christian lens. This in turn drove me to a Masters degree in theology, reading Genesis 1–3 and its relationship to other parts of the Pentateuch (first five books of the bible).

To get the maximum value out of Genesis 1, we need to leave the origins wars behind, and try and go back to when it was written. It is then we obtain value for an agricultural setting. The first clue is that the earth is described as a "formless void" in verse 2. The two Hebrew words translated here *tohu* and *bohu*, are used elsewhere in an agricultural setting. In Isaiah 34, the rulers of Edom are judged for their hostility to Israel and their land is consequently destroyed. We can see how judgment on Edom's rulers is central, but that the impacts are felt by the land itself, by laying out verses 11–17 as follows:

- 11a the land of Edom will be occupied by wild animals
- 11b the land becomes desolate (*tohu*) and empty (*bohu*), unfit for agriculture
- 12 human rulers will be nothing
- 13a the land will be full of weeds, signs of agricultural collapse
- 13b–17 the land will be occupied by wild animals.



You can see how the passage forms a chiasm, named after the Greek letter X. (Chi - X χ) The central idea is in the middle, that the rulers of Edom are being judged. The same words used in Genesis 1:2 is paralleled to agricultural collapse.

So how does Genesis 1 establish agriculture, and how is it related to renewal?

On day one, light is created and separated from darkness to form day and night. This is the creation of time. Space is created on day two, by the separation of the waters above from the waters below by the firmament. On the third day, food is created by separating the waters into one place and the dry ground in another where vegetation can grow. From the earth comes forth sprout—out sprouts, plants seeding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit. There is an emphasis on self—perpetuation and abundance, together with provision for human and animal consumption. Interestingly, the provision of plants for animal consumption in Gen 1:29–30 points beyond the human ordering of agriculture. Instead, we see divine providential care for all creatures, and that human agricultural activity has appropriate bounds, seen also in the blessing to be fruitful and multiply to both humans and non-humans (Gen 1:28 c.f. v.22). Human use of the planet dominates that of all other creatures. This can be seen of the abrogation of non-human creature's right to food.

On day four, the sun, moon, and stars are created. These mark out the seasons (v.14), but that doesn't mean simply the four seasons of the climate. In Leviticus 23, the feasts of the Lord (v.2) include the Sabbath and the seven annual feasts of Passover, Festival of Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Festival of Weeks (Pentecost), Festival of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles. Each of these feasts occurs in either spring or autumn and is tied to agricultural activity. In this respect, Genesis 1 points to agricultural festivals.

On day five, the blessing to be fruitful and multiply is given to the birds and fish. On day six, food is provided for land animals and humans. Eating plants that yield seed, the command to subdue the earth is best seen as agricultural activity. To have dominion does not mean to dominate, lest this robs animals of their food.

Over the top of all of this is the Sabbath. Eight acts of creation are forced into six days of creation. The pinnacle of the creation account is not – as important as the creation of humans and the granting of dominion is – in vv. 26–28. Instead, the first creation story ends in Genesis 2:1–3. No command to keep the Sabbath is given, but the seventh day is blessed – the same word used for the procreation of fish, birds, and humans – and declared holy. Sabbath rest is inclusive of all of creation. It marks its weekly renewal.

The theme of Sabbath is picked up in the book of Leviticus and is attached to agriculture. Chapter 23 indicates that Sabbath is associated with complete rest, and that several festivals of the Lord are also occasions of complete rest. Sabbath obedience is central to Israelite holiness, a deliberate echo of Genesis 2:3. In Leviticus 19:2–3, holiness is imitative of God, and revering parents and keeping the Sabbath is how it is done. Likewise, keeping the Sabbath reverencing the sanctuary bookends what is known as the Holiness Code in Leviticus (19:30; 26:2).

Keeping the Sabbath is not simply religious duty in ways in which we might understand, not playing sport and going to church on Sundays. Thinking back to the days of no Sunday trading brings us closer, the recognition of divine limits on human economic activity. The book of Leviticus also draws out the need for the land to experience rest and renewal. We see this in chapter 25. In the Sabbath year, the land is to observe a Sabbath for the Lord (v.2). There is a sense in which the land is to actively participate in its own rest and renewal. The Israelites had the responsibility to keep Sabbath and permit the land to enjoy this rest (v.4).

Letting the land enjoy rest and renewal in the Sabbath recognises the tight connection between the creation of the world and the creation of Israel. Leviticus stresses the divine ownership of the land over any Israelite claim (Lev 25:23). Creation of the earth by God precedes that of humans just as the Lord has a prior relationship with the land before the arrival of Israel. Humans as the divine image bearers are blessed to multiply, to subdue the land (for agriculture) and have dominion (Gen 1:26–30). Just as the earth and humans were to enjoy the blessings of Sabbath, so the Israelites and the land are to enjoy the Sabbath.





Given the land did not belong to Israel, Israel's enjoyment of the land is contingent on obedience. Leviticus 26 indicates that seasonal rains and the harvest that follows on from them depended on faithfully following the commandments, particularly those regarding temple and Sabbath (vv. 1–13). The alternative was no rain, poor harvests, and eventually exile. Exile could in turn act as a renewal for the land. While Israel is in exile in the land of its enemies, the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths, making up for the times it did not rest on the Sabbaths of the Israelites (Lev 26:34–35). Failure to care for agricultural lands comes at a cost. Given that Sabbath is an expression of Israel's holiness, and Sabbath keeping was for humans and the land, caring well for the land was itself an act of holiness. Being a covenant people, Israel knew no abstractions, but its spiritual experiences were tied to daily life, which was agrarian and in community with the other-than-human.

How does this relate to us in twenty first century Australia? While our society has Christian roots, we are far from ancient Israel as a covenant people. Genesis 1 still applies. Dominion is not domination. Sacred time still applies to humans, animals, and the land itself. Christians can still acknowledge that rest and renewal is both divine blessing and human responsibility.

With a recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we have evidence beyond any reasonable doubt that the climate is changing, and that humans are responsible. Whether you believe God allows this, or wills this, it comes because of human sin and misrule – a lack of granting the earth rest. In 2018, Verity Morgan-Schmidt is the CEO of Farmers for Climate Action noted that:

"My family has been on properties out in Western Australia for over 100 years. We can say this has well and truly moved beyond natural cyclical patterns. The idea that we could be accused of playing politics by accepting reality is a bitter pill to swallow. The science is clear. Climate change is increasing the severity of extreme weather events that include drought."<sup>1</sup>

How then should we respond? Practical theologian Ellen Davis sees Genesis 1 as a liturgical poem of creation.<sup>2</sup> Poems typically have rhythm, and in Genesis 1 this is "God saw ... and it was good." Goodness is a divine perception, and Davis believes that this represents a contemplative strategy for Israel and for us to see the world in the same way. Such contemplation requires use to change our minds, or metanoia, otherwise usually understood as repent.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Cox, "Farmers challenge Nationals' claim drought unrelated to climate change," The Guardian, 11 June, 2018, accessed 6 June, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jun/06/national-party-comments-on-drought-and-climate-a-disservice-to-farmers>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 46.



One more aspect about Genesis 1 is worth noting. Written in an age where other gods fought against each other to bring creation into being. In the Babylonian creation myth, the storm god Marduk conquered the personification of saltwater Tiamat, the many headed dragon. Out of her corpse he formed heaven and earth. Genesis 1 is a response to this. The chaos of the deep (where the Hebrew Tehom is linguistically related to Tiamat) is not a god. Instead, God conquers the forces of chaos to separate heaven and earth. The world around us is not the result of violence, but the loving provision of foods for all creatures.

*We need  
to practice  
Sabbath  
renewal for all  
things now.*

Violence may not characterise creation, but it fills the earth (Gen 6:11) and the Flood reverses the victory of creation – the earth is covered in the deep once more. Quoting that God promised not to repeat act of uncreation is not an argument against sea level rise, where some of, but far from all the earth will be flooded. Chaos is released anytime humans are violent, whether that violence is against each other or the earth. Yet our God is a God of peace, and so peace is coming to all creation. In Revelation 21, God declares all things are being made new – a new Sabbath is coming for all things.

We need to practice Sabbath renewal for all things now. This isn't an inflexible idea. Cows need to be milked on Sunday. I used to write weather forecasts on Sunday. The Sabbath is for doing good (Matt 12:12). The Sabbath was made for us, not vice versa (Mark 2:27). However, our rededication to rest and renewal for all will mean repentance as Davis observes.

Read Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a prayer of praise and repentance, and enter into God's rest.



# Rhi re-knew-ing

Rev. Dr Jason John | Uniting Church Minister

Rhi knew all  
Just out from the city  
Looking schmick and standing tall  
Come to give a consultation  
Do some facilitation  
For a hundred bucks an hour  
In this dry, dusty bit of nation.

Rhi knew a lot  
He knew some things better forgot  
Things others still said a lot  
In their North Sydney office block  
Rhi was different, see  
He stayed a while  
Driving country miles  
'stead of FIFO from the city

Rhi knew a bit  
Knew a lot of what he knew was shit  
Because he had ears to hear  
And eyes to see  
Things were different in the country.

He thought he always knew that  
'cause they all always said that  
But now he re-knew it  
Started making compost out of the old shit

The consultant now consoled in relationship  
He heard  
He saw  
He smelt and touched and tasted  
No opportunity wasted  
Fell in love with the myth of mateship.



# Renewal - a perspective



**Rev. Sharon Hollis**  
President, Uniting Church  
Assembly

When I think about renewal I think about the possible of new beginnings, new opportunities, new ways of being, new ways of understanding oneself and the communities one belongs to. I think about how we navigate change and find hope and new possibilities. I'm thinking about renewal as both something experienced by individuals and communities.

One of the paradoxes I have found about renewal in my own life and in the lives of the communities and people I've ministered with is that when renewal occurs it comes with an element of surprise, is experienced as gift yet rarely comes without a lot of work, struggle and effort and support.

I want to illustrate this with a couple of examples from my own life and ministry of renewal.

After my partner died I didn't think I'd ever be happy again. In the depth of grief, I thought that might be all I would ever know - emptiness, heart brokenness, sadness, despair. Even with the support of excellent friends and family I wasn't sure I would ever know happiness or contentment again. So imagine my surprise when I was having dinner with friends one day and I realised I'd laughed with joy, at first it was just a moment, a brief time without grief. But over time I experienced more of these moments. I knew more times of joy, moments of happiness, relief from tears. Gradually I could see how it might be possible to go back to work, parent my daughters, be a friend, participate in wider family events, think about living in a new home, take a new placement, accept new responsibilities, feel alive and human again.

This renewal of my life didn't just happen by accident although it is a gift of grace. Renewal came because of the hard work of grieving, through the rage, lament, and tears. Renewal came through the effort of counselling, through paying attention to my feelings not pushing them away. Renewal came through the faithful support of friends and family who were willing to journey with me in my pain, who didn't give up on me, even when having me around wasn't easy or fun. Renewal came through the presence of the spirit of God, often seen only in hindsight, known in community, through prayer and sustaining love.



Renewal offered the possibility of a more joyful, more purposeful life than I thought possible in the months after my partner's death. My renewed life isn't the life I imagined for myself before my partner died. It wasn't the life I might have wished for. But a renewed life, renewed hope, and new beginnings have emerged. I am being renewed by God's love and the goodness and support of people who love me and care for me.

When I went to my first placement, a congregation in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne they were very honest with me. We have enough money left for three years. You will likely be our last minister, our congregation will probably close at the end of your time with us. And they were right.

After trying very hard to connect with their community for years before I arrived, and continuing to do this while I was there, after taking part in conversations with neighbouring congregations about merging, after faithful worship for decades, praying together, studying scripture together, building community together this congregation did indeed close three years after I arrived as their last minister.

They faced their closure with courage and wisdom. They developed a set of principles. They wanted to move to a new community of faith together. They wanted to make sure there was something good for the few children in the congregation. They wanted to find a community of faith where they could grow and be nourished in their faith. They wanted a place they could continue to serve. They wanted their manse used for justice. They wanted to celebrate the life of their congregation well. They wanted to be allowed to be sad and hopeful.

This congregation worked through the process of closing. They closed and then they moved together to a new congregation, who welcomed them warmly and sensitively. At first, they all sat together, supporting each other in the new congregation. Over time they made new connections and new friendships and some months they were now sitting throughout the congregation, enjoying new ways to practice their faith, serve God, worship and belong. When we met together a year after closing they were full of joy at what this renewed life as members of this new to them congregation offered. Most of them had found a new role or way to serve and participate. They were liberated.

One of the ideas that I've found that help me make sense of the journey of renewal and the possibility of new beginnings is a theory about transitions developed by William Bridges<sup>1</sup>. Bridges talks about change as the external factors that occur to us, such as death or closing. Transition is the process of doing the spiritual and emotional work of the change so that renewal is possible.

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<sup>1</sup> You can find more information about the Bridges model at [Bridges Transition Model - William Bridges Associates \(wmbridges.com\)](https://www.wmbridges.com)

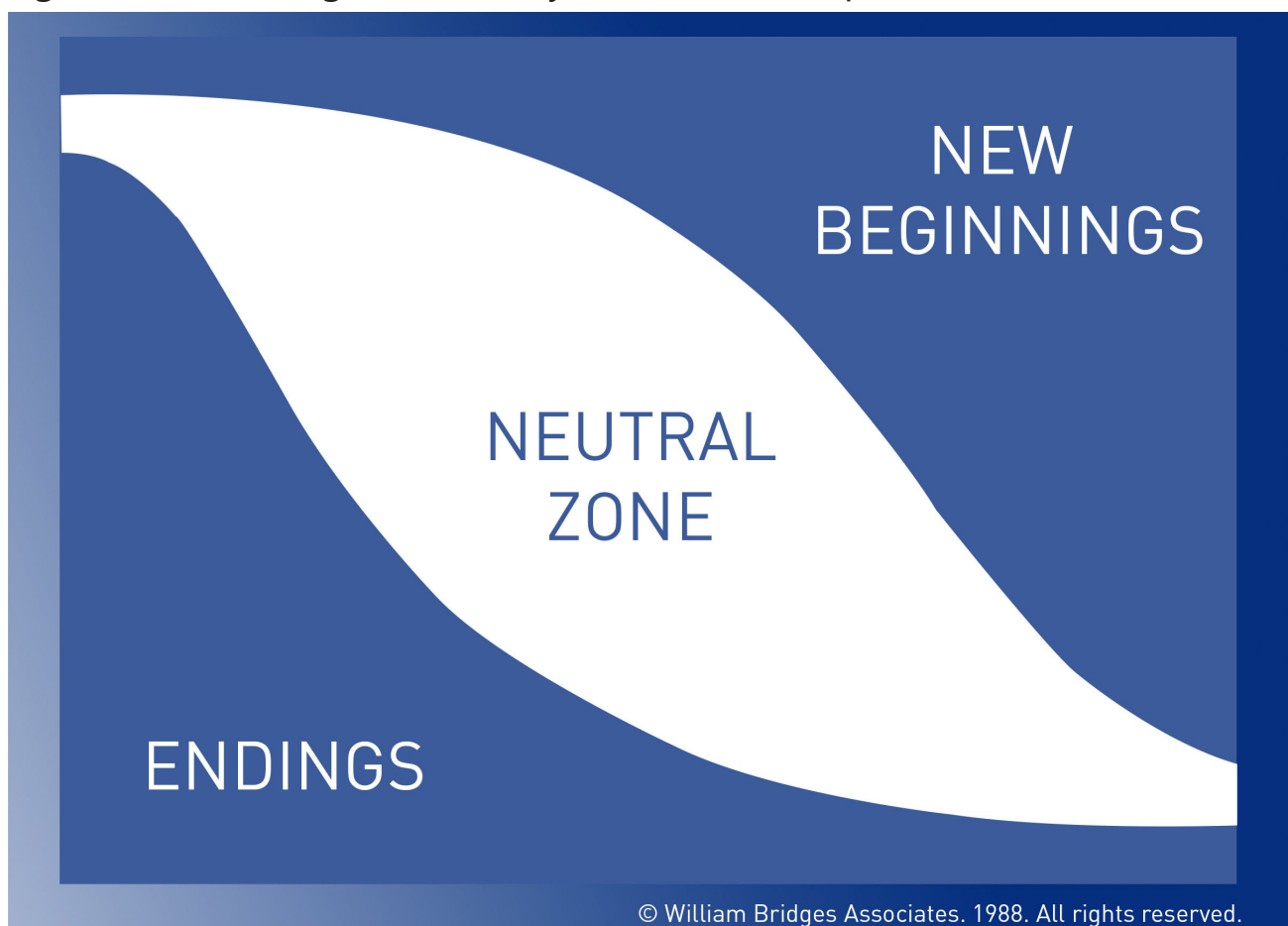
Bridges says that this process of making transition through change has three phases- endings, neutral zone and new beginnings. These phases aren't linear, they overlap, different people and communities move through the process at different paces.

For Bridges a person or community must accept as fully as they can the ending. This means not rushing through grief, not seeking false new starts that try to pretend that the ending hasn't happened.

Then comes the neutral zone. It sounds passive but it's not. It's a time of not knowing, of waiting, of praying, of discerning. It's a time to ask questions, to test, to explore, to heal. It's a period of self-examination and resting. It's both difficult and creative, painful and hopeful.

Then comes new beginnings. They arise from the work of the neutral zone. Like the new beginning, the renewal has roots in the events of the ending they are fresh and free to be new because the old has ended. It is new wine in new wine skins.

Bridges used this diagram as a way to visualise the process.



So in my life I had to do the hard work of finding a way to live in new ways after my partner's death. I had to accept not just that his life had ended but that the life and future I had imagined and planned had also ended. In the neutral zone of intense grief, I needed to attend to the hard work of grieving, of counselling,

Spring/Summer 2021

of making sense of what I believed about death and life, hope and lament, grace and mercy. The neutral zone is hard work and this hard work has to be done if new beginnings are to emerge. If I wasn't willing to do this good, hard, holy work I think I might have rushed to try to soothe my grief rather than living in it and with it until it has done enough work that a new life emerges slowly as a gift of grace.

My first congregation had to accept that their own congregation was closing. They did this by planning for their closing and by celebrating its life. They didn't begin to plan for the future until they came to the point of ending, of accepting that there was no future for the congregation. Then they entered the neutral zone of having no answers and barely any questions. They waited, they prayed and slowly they probed, explored, tested their principles, tested future options and finally found a way towards a new beginning. They settled on a congregation to join and gently gradually joined and joined in. A year later they were glad they had made the move and they were actively contributing in new ways to the life of their new community of faith.

The hard work of the neutral zone is sustained by practices of faith that both helps us take something from what is ending and open us up to the possibility of a new beginning. For me after the death of my partner it was the community of faith whose practices held me, whose songs soothed me, whose proclamation reminded me of the hope of the gospel and the goodness of God. I think it was similar things that held my first congregation through their transition from being a congregation to belong to a new community of faith.

The Assembly has begun the work of considering what a renewal of the of life the Uniting Church might involve as we face squarely our challenges, ponder possible ways forward and hope for newness of life. It is called Act2 and we want you to contribute to the project by providing your thoughts and insights to the challenges and opportunities we have identified. You can find more information on Act2 including a discussion paper and feedback form at [The UCA Act2 Project - Uniting Church Australia](https://uniting.church/act2_introduction/) (https://uniting.church/act2\_introduction/).

This theory of transition is not a Christian one. I believe that for Christian communities and individual people of faith a theory such as this can help us understand the process of renewal and how we can to be active participants in God's process to make all things new. It can prepare us for the hard work of being open to the Spirit, of discerning God's guidance and embracing God's new thing.

What faith gives in times when I'm longing and looking for renewal are the spiritual practices and gifts of discernment to know what to end, wisdom about how to look for the movement of the spirit in the neutral zone and the vision of God's way to guide my discernment of what renewal in the way of the cross will be like.



# Scarcity is not the reality of God's universe, abundance is



**Rev. Mel Graham**  
Uniting Church Minister

"I have dream" good people of the Saltbush Community, yes my hope is that you will share the Good News of Jesus Christ with someone who doesn't know (yet) how great and loving our God is. Bold dream I know, asking too much... maybe, but asking too late, no not ever. We are called just as we are to witness our faith. Telling your truth could be easier than you think. I know the prospect of sharing what you know about Jesus and your life can be frightening, especially in hostile environments but not impossible. Before you decide it's too hard, can I ask you to arm yourselves with Hope and see your renewal at the table of plenty.

A definition of **Renewal** is the act of starting again or starting to do something again or a process in which something improves or is improved after being in a bad condition. Renewal is also about something lost, dead, or destroyed being in the process of growing again or being replaced.

- What would your definition of the renewal of our church and congregations be?
- What would your 2021 Spring Christian spirituality renewal look like I wonder?
- How would we interact with our community differently if we took up the invitation up to live our faith in Jesus Christ, by seeking to look out for those who have it the hardest, those who have the least, or in ministering, caring for those points of pain in our wider communities?
- What would the renewal of the healing of the 1st National people and all people who followed look like now?
- What would it take for us all to see ourselves working towards healthier communities, just as Jesus did?
- What would it take to not see our churches as a burdensome problem unable to rise again, but as groups of awesome people loved by God with the capacity to serve, to have fun, to have hope, to grow, to renew.? To put into action your intelligence, humour, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, awe and meet the challenge of renewal and transform our circumstances. For we who believe in a transforming God, will transform, defy our challenges of being

elderly or young and be known for the life in service to family and church and community?

- Should not our lives speak of an enduring spirit; inspire others to be curious about choosing a faithful happy life, a generous and kindly life; to carry forward that precious gift of quenchless hopefulness?
- Will you take that step forward and share your faith?

Our Bible speaks of our God, Creator of all that is, being interested in Renewal.

Deuteronomy 32:2 (NRSV) *<sup>2</sup>May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth.*

Isaiah 43:18-19 (NRSV) *<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.* Revelation 21:5, Isaiah 65:17, Ephesians 2:15, Ephesians 4:24, Hebrews 8:13.

There are many references in the bible to renewal in and new growth of the vegetation variety. For example, 1 Corinthians 3:6, 1 Corinthians 3:7, Ephesians 4:16 and all the many references to seeds growing, new seasons, new day, the Lord's day. I think it's safe to say that **renewal is life** and God's people and creation are continually asked to be present to the new day.

Just take a look at a verse from Proverbs 27:25-27 (NRSV) *<sup>25</sup>When the grass is gone, and new growth appears, and the herbage of the mountains is gathered <sup>26</sup>the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field; <sup>27</sup>there will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and nourishment for your servant-girls..."*

What if we rephrased this passage...When the Church we knew is gone, and new growth in numbers of the followers of Jesus appears, and the herbage, I mean the gifts and graces of the people in the many regions is gathered, God will provide our way forward, has already given us what we need for our next steps and will provide the nourishment for even the least of these. So don't fear, trust in God because God's got your back.

Through all the seasons and changes of our lives God's people are continually asked to renew themselves, there are three occasions in the church calendar every year that spark renewal, they are of course Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Each with their own narrative and significant reminder on of who God is and our sense of identity as God's people. From that these times of celebrating renewal we hear our call to being, and action, reflection in practising our faith. This is a focused

view of and alongside it to transformation. Transformation from darkness to light, from fear to hope, from death to life, from knowing your faith to sharing your faith, from individuals to community. Our Lord Jesus lives and so should our faith through all its seasons.

Although my favourite is Christmas, there is one that stands out from the other seasons because it speaks clearly in narrative from death to life: the season of Easter. At that time we celebrate with unbridled joy the presence of the risen and living Christ in our midst. No matter where we have been, or where we find ourselves today, we are bold to gather in joy knowing that our living is tied up with that of Christ who lives forever. Then at each Communion Service that follows we remember the story together, the narrative of hope, of transformation, of renewal, of abundance and belonging.

With joy we gather at this the communion table of abundance to be a sacred community: to be the people called by God into new and everlasting life. We celebrate the joyous opportunity to share good news with all the world: that Christ's resurrection is for all people, that God's love is for all people, that this table is about the people in relationship with God.

We remember and share this simple meal, taking bread and wine and infusing them with new life, taking ordinary things and making them extraordinary in their new use, their renewal of us. *"So come, you who hunger and thirst for a deeper faith, for a better life, for a fairer world. Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables, now invites us to be guests at his. We come to this table, knowing our need for it."*





Resurrection and renewal are a pattern of life we see baked into all of creation. Resurrection and renewal teaches us to hold loosely to what we know and keeps keep us open, in each moment, to fully receive and give whole-hearted, unconditional Love.

There are, however, habits we have developed of rejecting renewal and rejecting a life lived in full connection with God...stories and messages we've picked up along the way that keep us locked in small-minded thinking, limiting beliefs and sharing a myth of scarcity (eg for example... our church is dying).

These stories keep our breathing shallow, our fists clenched and keep the "love of God" feeling more like a bumper sticker and less like the moment-by-moment experience of freedom and hope it has the power to be. We could even see Lent as the season of self-examination that poses the question: how are we rejecting resurrection and renewal?

With our new set of eyes to see, there are two alternatives for us, the followers of Jesus:

1. there is the structure of scarcity, the idea of debt and duty; or
2. the biblical idea, which is that of a table. A table that is set by God in the wilderness and it's a table of abundance.

Now at this table of abundance the food never ends, it never stops, the gifts never cease, and so many stories in the New Testament and Old Testament - are just about that.

- The manner in the wilderness
- God caring for and offering provision for the prophets, when God's people are wondering in the desert
- The caring for the people even when they are in Exile
- Lament and gratitude come together in the Psalms in a beautiful and amazing way

*"...we are  
all giving  
gifts to each  
other all the  
time."*

And then of course the Jesus stories, like the feeding of the 4000 and the feeding of the 5000. It's not just about a miracle, not just about Jesus snapping His finger and having a whole bunch of fish show up, that story is about Jesus being the channel of God's Holy abundance. So when we think that there is not enough food, 5000 to feed and only 5 fishes and 2 loaves of bread, there are in reality gifts to be had and experienced both given and received. Therefore with God, scarcity is not the reality of the universe, this is God's creation. Can you hear my friends, in God's presence, abundance is always a reality.

As we seek renewal for our church beyond shutdowns, can we not understand this Table of Plenty and not scarcity better? It will change the way you see your life.

Sometimes we see gratitude as a feeling, like when someone gives you something nice, you feel good about that, because we all like getting gifts. But the truth of the matter is that we are all giving gifts to each other all the time. Can you see others in that light? Every single day of our lives there is a gift, because we are alive, because there is breath, water to drink, there is friendship to be had and if we are willing, we are conscious of this beautiful, amazing world. Part of being renewed is your connection to this beautiful, amazing world. We are surrounded by gifts and even if you have the worst day possible (we've all had some of them) you have a gift because you are alive.

Renewing how we see this life, and the purposes of God, can transform our outcomes as a church and as the people of God. Can you and when we change to see that the reality is that we live in giftedness? We change from thinking we have nothing or not enough to grow our churches, to knowing we do. From thinking we have nothing or not enough left inside, to feeling we have enough and even more than enough. This is life transforming, freeing, and a renewal of our purpose and meaning. I think that is amazing.

Then when we own that place of abundance, those feelings call us into an ethos, it calls us into an action, into a way of life, into doing something. You feel alive, renewed, you can breathe and have hope for tomorrow, but.... now the question is... "well what do I do about that?"

**Gratefulness is always in relationship to something, because we don't feel grateful unless there has been a gift, and there is never a gift without a giver!**

Have you noticed that when we have Communion, sometimes the language is that "we take" the bread and the wine but actually the translation is more like "we receive" so we receive these gifts of bread and wine. To understand ourselves as receivers is one of the most important insights into ourselves, as human beings.

Before we are anything else, we receive. If you are born, you received a gift - it had absolutely nothing to do with what you did - it was a gift - yeah! God has given you that life, all those molecules, DNA, cells came together, not because my mum and dad knew how to write the cell equations to form new life, but because the author of Creation gifted these abilities through my birth parents. So, the first part of anyone's life, we can neither take, nor control.

And because of how a human beings develop, our first few years are primarily a gift as well if you think about it. Someone had to feed us, tend to us, clean us, teach us, protect us. They kept us from being ill and tended to us when we are sick – and if someone doesn't do that for you, you have nothing. We sometimes talk about our children being the best gift we have ever received (I've done that many a time), even though my children have never attended to it.

And well fair enough, because they bring so much to our lives, but the truth of the matter is, as babies we are continually receiving a series of gifts from other people. Other people tended to you for the first decade or so and that was a gift.

The worldly perception is that we are born, and then we take what we need. Interestingly to note, that Christianity does not teach winning is everything. Winning is not the point of living. I can't think of a religious tradition that teaches that either.

For Christianity the point has to be the greatest of these, love. Loving is the point, so we live in this universe, where our lives are bathed in gifts from the very beginning, and we are first of all receivers. You have heard that it is better to give than to receive, **but you can't give until you receive**. Please, stay with me here.... One of the false myths is that there is someone (a benefactor) who will give us all the gifts that we deserve, and if we are just good enough, loyal enough, work hard enough, the person with those gifts is going to pay attention and we will be rewarded. And then we will say thank you in return and maybe do that person a favour in return. All of that is ancient Rome brought through to contemporary Australia. **And that is what Jesus was arguing against in the whole of the New Testament.**

Jesus, not Mr Caesar is loved and remembered. Jesus is remembered as one of the most compassionate to have ever lived, everyone remembers Jesus' name, we are not worshipping Caesar Julius, Augustus, or Nero, not in a kind way. But Jesus we remember, as He sets a table of gifts. Holy Thursday, Jesus reminds his friends of God's Holy abundance, of the freedom, the Exodus that comes from God's abundance. At the pass-over meal, Jesus reminds His followers of the freedom from slavery. Pharaoh controlled every movement of their lives, that meant all the food they ate, who they could marry, whether or not they could keep their children, everything. Pharaoh created a universe of scarcity, of haves and have nots. And so, with the events of the pass-over and the movement towards the Holy Land of plenty, of milk and honey, they passed over from scarcity to abundance.



The idea Jesus is reminding us of is that God sets a table in the wilderness, from the journey from scarcity to abundance. Now in that journey, the people didn't always trust the abundance, they fell back to the myth of scarcity, they were so afraid of the new path, the renewal with God, so much so that some wanted to return to slavery, scarcity. So that's where the line comes from- "will God set us a table in this wilderness?" **And God says, you bet I can!** Manner falls, water comes from the rock and all of a sudden there is renewal in abundance.

Jesus is replaying this story on the Thursday night, the night of His betrayal, the passing over of slavery to a fully gifted world. Jesus is saying this is the truth, this table right here is the pass-over you have been waiting for, the washing of the feet - to serve you must first be served, on that transformative night, our Lord Jesus flips the story of death, of control that sustains the system of haves & the have nots. Flips it from slavery to freedom, from scarcity to abundance and in the depth and power of His dying and rising, so the renewing begins and it's safe to say in hindsight, that is where the revolution begins.

The table is about fellowship, not about living in hierarchy. It's about being around a table and not being stuck at the bottom of a pyramid. Being a follower of Jesus, is not about slavery, nor being at the bottom the pile of the Roman Empire.

The fisherman who became disciples, I'm told, paid 90% of what they made daily to Caesar, as gratitude for being a part of the Roman empire. Caesar could have cut off their food supply at any time. So, when Jesus said come and follow me, I will make you fishers of people, He was calling them out of poverty, and a life of control, forced to tithe 90% of what they earned. The temple asked again from what was left, the temple said do this or you are not clean enough to be at worship. Both were corrupted systems of gratitude.



The disciples were ready to hear this, I mean there had to be something better than myths of scarcity, and then they meet Jesus, with the generosity of healing, the gifts of wine at the wedding party, the feeding of the 4000 and the feeding of the 5000 plus the women and children, they see Jesus living in the reality of God's abundance.

At first the disciples think that following Jesus means that they will overthrow the over lords of the Roman Empire and think that they will rise in rank and be the new leaders over others, become wealthier of course and others would be under them. But as it all turns out, and if they had a been paying attention for the 3 years Jesus was offering something entirely different; Jesus says "no" to a system of hierarchy, with someone on top and someone on the bottom. What he actually said was **the first shall be last**, and **the last shall be first**. It's not about who is at the head of the table, no new pyramid, Jesus is taking that whole structure down.

God loves, God loves you and me, not in some hierarchy of love. God loves you. Jesus' teachings open up our imaginations to the possibility of a world where there is no first or last. This table that renews us is holy. It is about putting a family around the table, the bread and wine are going to sustain us on our journey of compassion, of love, of grace, and if it's hard to do this on your own, well, we can do this in our community together, because we have gifts to share.

This is the journey of salvation, a journey of renewal, of being in a right relationship with God, *for the gifts of God, are for the people of God, receive this and do it in remembrance of me*. What we are saying when we receive communion is that we receive renewal through the gifts of abundance. It's for everybody, this table where we feed our soul, our inner being, our freedom in God, it is where there can be more and move more chairs up to that table.

Thursday night was the last supper of oppression, and violence, and control, and the kind of gratitude that taxes you 90%, or keeps you in slavery. The last supper of all of that... but... also the first feast, of the world that God has dreamed for us. The cross was such a devastation for the followers of Jesus, not just because of the murderous violence, but the Roman Empire is destroying the body of Christ, the table, the hope of renewal, the hope of a better world for everyone.

The Empire does not want a table of abundance, where all people are fed. Rome wants, debt, obligation to the earthly men, and it is running on corrupted forms of that, tit for tat, quid pro quo, "I do this so you must do that"! Benefactors use gifts to maintain status and power, increasing their own wealth of course. The Romans and the corrupted Pharisees don't want some table of abundance set up in the wilderness, and they are threatened.



You see, those followers of Jesus, begin to share their gifts, the vision of the feast, of plenty, of abundance from very little, that turns into a powerful vision of a different kind of society, a different way of thinking, **this is the change that Jesus brought.**

Today in this pandemic we can celebrate that death did not hold Jesus, that His life is risen, transformed. Rome took an axe to the table, they didn't want that table set because if that table is set, they know they are doomed. If the people believe and follow Jesus, their power is questioned, their hold over people will be challenged.

The cross on Friday was the destruction of a body, the destruction of the table and the feast and that is why Easter is so extraordinary. The renewal and resurrection is a pattern of life we see baked into all of Creation because our God says, that's enough to fear, enough to abusive power systems and myths of scarcity!

"You are not getting away with it this time!!! There have been too many acts of violence against my table, too many insane politicians and earthly kings, and dictators who want to take the feast away for from the people of the world, and I'm not letting this go this time., No, no. instead I'm going to reset this table."



When Jesus rises to life, we read that he starts a series of appearances and where does he show up? Almost everyone of those appearances is happening around a table, or they go to a table. Jesus is recognised by His friends after they have been walking on a road to Emmaus, they sit down at a table, and when he breaks bread,



they say "Ah hah! Its Jesus." Jesus goes to the same room where they held the last supper and finds the disciple there, scared and he breathes a grace on them, gifts them with a gratitude blessing, yes, and at that table... peace is shared and received. **And all of a sudden the world turns upside down for them.**

Jesus feeds disciples on a beach some fish, a meal, and there are between 10 and 15 accounts (depending on how you count them) in the New Testament of Jesus reappearing and the vast majority happen around a meal, at a table.

Jesus doesn't go back to the cross, the violent instrument of death and control, no He goes to the table, points to the table. The instruments of death, of Empire, of the cross, gone. The table of abundance is real, and Jesus points to the table of renewal, hope, acceptance, abundance and community.

*...all of a  
sudden the  
world turns  
upside down  
for them.*

Hope contributes to a positive outlook on life, life is bleak without it, through pessimism, selfishness and negative thinking that creates a lot of our suffering. Hope is a necessary ingredient for a satisfied, peaceful life, and it is very sad to see that there are some who want to twist it around into something to avoid because of their non-religious orientation or because of their philosophical reasoning. Hope makes us see the possibility of effecting a positive change in the world. We need to believe that the world can be improved. That Hope drives us, makes us seek new solutions, take risks, work smarter, wiser, harder and solve problems. Without it we are simply naïve.

So what do we do? We hope, we accept our humanness has some brutal imperfections and we go on in an attitude of abundance, hoping and working to make a difference in this world instead of falling into despair. To the Christian who trusts in the almighty generous, loving God, Hope is necessary for the present age and for the world to come.

So, in your recommitment in this season after lockdowns, arm yourselves with Hope and take the risk to share your story of faith with someone else. You have the intelligence, humour, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect and will, to meet the challenge. Will you take that step forward and share your faith?

Time will tell if our story is a story of courage for our faith or a story of failure and scarcity. None of us alone can save the world, but each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so. Together we are more likely to succeed.

What would sharing your faith look like if you asked for help to do it?

What if 10 of you from church got together to ask, share, grow a new family in the ways of Christian faith within this next year. Could there be 8 more families in church this time next year? Imagine what we would be doing with mission, youth and family ministries with 8 new families.

I believe in you; I have believed in this Church for some time now. Do you believe? Share with others why you like to gather with other Christians on a Sunday, on a zoom call, in the park. You never know what might happen! God is making all things new.

Hear the good news folks; YOU are loved at God's table. Jesus set a table full of gifts. Scarcity is not the reality of God's universe, **abundance is.**

And so we respond in love towards God generosity, by loving goodness, loving God with all of our hearts, minds and souls. And hear the call to renewal and go out to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Keep inviting people to the table, there's always enough.

*Go and  
see love  
as  
limitless.*

# News from Saltbush

**Rev. Tim Jensen** | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

As we continue to journey through the era of Covid, our collective lives as a society must be yearning for renewal. With the hope that we do not return to business-as-usual pre-covid but to a place where we are more aware of our impact on the environment, that we share this creation with so many other species, that we are more mindful of the needs of others and that we are able to appreciate what it means to be members of a global village.

Like so many in our world Saltbush has been limited by the lockdowns, we have focused on our on-line relationships and activities. We have had many encouraging meetings with leaders from different Synods alongside conversations with Uniting Theological Collage and the Vital Leadership team as well as many others. Saltbush worship continues on a Wednesday evening at 7:30. It is a special time of gathering and sharing our Christian journey together. We have been busy with keeping content on our webpage up to date as well as having regular meetings with the Far North Coast Regional partnership. As well as our cafés and gatherings all made available through the wonders of technology.

Yet despite the uncertainty of lockdowns Mark was able to find a window of opportunity to organise and lead Rev. Phill Matthews closure of ministry service in Moree. Phill's ministry in the Barwon Patrol was deeply appreciated by those for whom Phill served. We hope for both he and Lyn all the very best as they enjoy the freedoms of retirement as they journey around the country.





Saltbush Cafés have continued to provide a good space for conversation around topics relating to our shared Christian lives. Recently Geoff and Mark were joined by Jon O'Brien and Alice Salomon from Uniting Advocacy to present four cafés on Seasons of Creation. During this time participants were asked if they would like to donate to One Tree Planted so that at the end of the café 1351 trees were planted, an exceptional effort and amazing response to caring for the gift of creation. In the coming weeks Geoff will be hosting a lectionary café and later Mark will be presenting a café on Advent (Yes, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas!) As always our cafés are advertised on our email links, online at the Saltbush Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/> and on our website <https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/>



On September 16 and 18 we had a Saltbush Gathering via Zoom. On the 16th Rev. Peter Walker joined us to talk about the Uniting Church. Moving beyond our understanding of the UCA being a religious institution to being a movement. The conversation provided a lot of engaging and thoughtful discussion, participants felt encouraged to move beyond established thinking to imagining the church being a pilgrim people with a willingness to risk the vision of the Reign of God in our present.



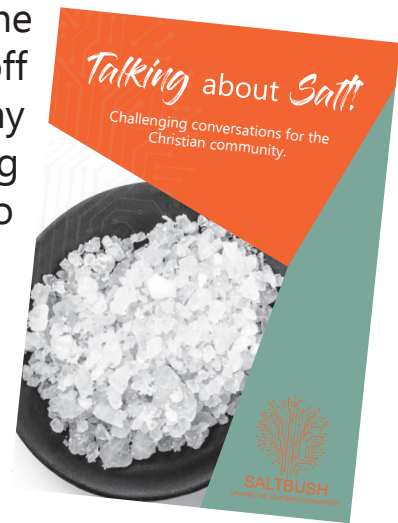
On September 18th, Rev. Alexandra Sangster joined us and spoke about chaos/disorder and uncertainty. Sounds like a heavy topic but Alex was able to bring a great sense of hope into our conversation as we explored the 14th century Julian of Norwich who had survived many plagues of that time. As part of our time together Alex included two thoughtful and inspirational clips. One of these is available on Youtube <https://youtu.be/9jynUQjIXxM> it depicts an empty cathedral where visitors are surprised as they encounter Handel's Messiah, Hallelujah chorus.



Spring/Summer 2021

We will have another attempt at meeting on the Far North Coast in Lismore for a gathering in December on Saturday the 11th. During this time the Saltbush Team along with the Far North Coast Region will be inducting Rev. Peter Overton as the Saltbush Regional minister. Peter's focus will be on the Far North Coast region while being an integral part of the Saltbush team. At the gathering we will also be discussing Talking About Salt: Challenging Conversation for the Christian Community. In the last issue of Ruminations, Geoff wrote: 'Talking About Salt offers Christian communities a way of exploring life and faith together and if you choose doing something about it.' Please contact us if you would like to know more regarding Talking About Salt.

As always, we feel that it is a great privilege to be serving the scattered communities and we look forward to meeting in person as the lockdowns ease and we have a greater freedom of movement. If you would like to be involved in any of the activities we offer, from café's to gatherings, please contact us via [Saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au](mailto:Saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au)



Tim

# Saltbush Relational Resources

## **Saltbush @ Worship**

At different times of the year the Saltbush team gather people from across the state and beyond for worship as Christian community. This is now streamed, one way or impersonal, but continues to build upon our belief in the missional relationship. Saltbush @ Worship takes place on different days/nights and is open to all.

## **Saltbush Cafés**

In regular series of three or four nights the Saltbush team hold online cafés centred around diverse themes or readings. Saltbush cafés are easy to attend, relaxed and an encouraging way to meet other and explore life and faith together.

## **Scattered Community Gatherings**

Three to four times a year in different rural or coastal location the Saltbush team hold Scattered Community Gatherings. You can also attend these online from wherever you are to wherever we are. These gatherings are centred around worship, encouragement, education and the practice of discipleship.

## **Word around the Bush**

Each week of the year the Saltbush team present a visual message based on the lectionary reading for that week. You are free to watch and use in your own congregation this message. You can also print off the Saltbush liturgy that is provided each week to accompany the visual message.

## **Talking about Salt**

This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to have some discussion around who you are, how you gather and how you live out your faith. Talking about Salt is five difficult conversations for congregations and can also be used to shape a life and witness discussion and consultation. Talking about Salt is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.

## **Digital packages for congregations**

If your congregation would like a Saltbush digital package so that you can use and connect with us and the wider church please simply get in touch. A digital package includes: smart tv, mobile stand for the tv, all connectors and cables, tv camera and our support to set it all up.

## **Visits**

The Saltbush team are always willing to visit your congregation or group to meet you, talk with you about how it is for you as a congregation or Christian community and how you seek to be part of the missional relationship with others. Simply get in touch and one of the Saltbush team will come to visit you.

Look on our website under **Word, Ruminations, Talking about Salt** or **Contact US**.

Spring/Summer 2021



# Thanks for your donations to Saltbush!

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 congregations and people in scattered communities of faith.

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:

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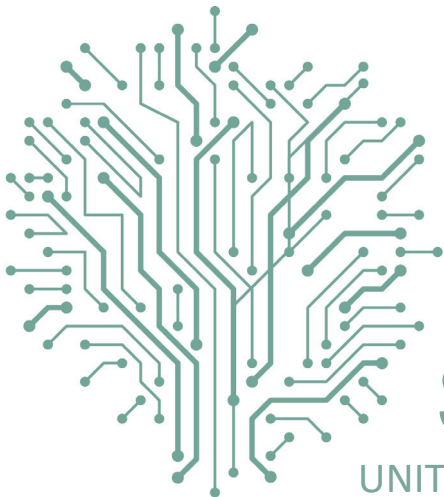
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# SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY