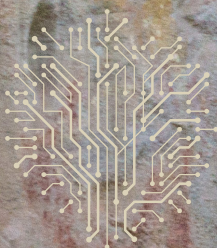


# Ruminations

Autumn 2023

# Stories



SALTBUSH

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.

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Autumn 2023

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# Editors Introduction - Stories

**Annie Baker** | The Downs Presbytery, Queensland Synod

Welcome to the first edition of 'Ruminations' for 2023. Our theme for this edition is 'Stories'. I wonder what comes to mind for you with the word 'stories'? The definition of 'story' in the Oxford Dictionary gives us two potential meanings.

1. *an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment.*
2. *an account of past events in someone's life or in the development of something.*<sup>1</sup>

This edition focuses on the second type of story.

Stories are a means of connection. Listening to story without judgement is validating not just the experiences of the person but a validation of the person themselves. It is saying I see you; I hear you. What a precious gift in a world that is so prone to judgment, competition and separation.

Stories can be windows to our souls. Can shine lights into the darkness. They offer us a glimpse of the other and invite us to engage in a conversation to gain greater understanding of the other and ourselves. They are shared in a spirit of openness offering a relationship. They are not opinion pieces for others to offer judgment. Stories challenge us to see Jesus in the other. Stories challenge our assumptions or awaken us to the fact that we even have assumptions and that maybe they are not true. Stories ground us to the reality of life today that is beyond ourselves.

Story engages perspective and perception. When I tell a story, it is from my own perception or perspective of what I experienced. Someone else experiencing the same thing, may perceive it differently. I have been amazed that each time I write or tell my own story (yearly, as part of my training) over the last 14 years, it changes. If I look back, I can see the transformation that has taken place in my relationship with myself, others and with God, and how each experience contributes to who I am and who I am becoming.

What I also found really amazing, (it ought not to have surprised me, but it did), that when I listened to other people's stories as a hospital pastoral carer, I changed. I resonate with those who don't feel heard or feel unseen. It has been a healing process for me to learn to listen both to others and to myself

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionary, 2023 <https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+story>



on a journey of listening to God. As I learnt to listen, the compassion grew not just for others but also for myself and my story. This allowed me to reframe my story and value the experiences that created pain and suffering as a resource in engaging with others who also have experienced pain and suffering.

We seek to love and to be loved from birth until death. To be truly listened to is to be loved. My heart was softened as I had opportunities to hear the other, their human cry. Where fear may have been present at the beginning, it was replaced with compassion. It was a privilege and a gift that I was given by each person who shared their story.

Sharing our stories can require great courage and vulnerability. Here they are offered with love for others to learn and potentially to offer hope and a vulnerability that encourages others to share their stories and to build connection. Sadly, not everyone has earned the right to hear our stories.

The story of the 'Road to Emmaus' offers some lessons in both listening to others, and sharing our stories. Jane Leach and Rev Dr Michael Paterson shares the following insight from Luke 24:13-27:

'Jesus...simply meets them on the road, puts them rather than himself centre stage, asks them about things that matter to them and establishes sufficient trust for them to unburden their heavy hearts to him. The encounter in the story is made possible not only because Jesus is fully present and attentive to the disciples, but because the disciples were willing to tell their story. They are willing to offer not just the bare facts, but all the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the last few days that are summed up in those poignant words, 'we had hoped'(v21).<sup>2</sup>

As you read this issue of Ruminations we invite you to notice, wonder and seek insights that lead us and our hearts to be more open, more gracious and more compassionate to the people around us we hear telling their stories.

Grace and peace  
Annie

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2 Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, Pastoral Supervision, A handbook, Second Edition, SCM Press, London, 2015, p36



# Everyone has their own Story

**Nathan Tyson** | Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement

Thinking about the theme of this edition of Ruminations, I got to thinking about how everybody's story is different. Even people from the same family will have different experiences and impacts on their lives as they grow. We are all unique. We all have our own story. We may of course share parts of others' stories - either via some of the same experiences, or perhaps just the broad themes, but we will always have our own unique story based on our own personal experience.

It is important to get to know somebody's story before you make any assumptions. Just because somebody appears confident, holds down a good job, and/or earns a decent income, doesn't mean they have not endured hardship in their lives. Just because somebody can smile, it doesn't mean they aren't living with grief and trauma. Many people who have endured significant hardships in their life have learned coping strategies and are able to put on a good façade at work and socially.

We each have a story. Some of us tell our stories loudly and to whoever will listen. Others keep their stories close to their heart. Perhaps they are introverted, or embarrassed, or scared that people will judge them. Perhaps they just don't know where to start or whether anyone will be interested.

For Christians, one of our greatest challenges is to love our neighbour. It can be a challenge because Jesus wasn't talking about just the person who lives next door, or the person from our cultural background, or even just all Christian people. Our neighbour is every human, from every cultural, religious and socio-economic background. Our neighbour is also the person who has wronged us, who has hurt us, and who we feel anger towards... these are the neighbours that Jesus says we must love. As I said, this is one of our greatest challenges as Christians.

Getting to know our neighbour's story is important. It helps us see people as human beings, who love, hurt, cry and bleed, just like you and me. It identifies similarities, and makes differences seem less scary. Sharing stories can help to find common ground, to build bridges, and develop trust. We are all human. We are all worried about something. Even the most independent person relies on somebody for something.



We need to stop seeing people from different backgrounds, cultures, and/or religions as different or “other”. We need to view difference as part of our divine diversity rather than as “other” and to value and celebrate our diversity... Imagine a world where we all thought the same, and believed in the same, and spoke the same, and did the same... how boring! Our individual uniqueness is a gift from our Creator and our diversity is part of creation. We are all meant to have different stories.

My story includes having divorced parents. My father was Aboriginal, and my mother is of Irish/European heritage. I am an “only child” of that relationship. I grew up in a working-class household. My mother was a professional hairdresser, now retired, who worked very hard 6 days a week, ran her own salons, and studied constantly. I spent many hours of my childhood in hairdressing salons – usually reading books or otherwise “keeping quiet”. My mother inspired a strong work ethic, and one of her favourite sayings is: “If you want something done properly, do it yourself”. Another classic: “Nobody owes you a living – if you want something you have to work for it.” I am sure many people of my generation heard similar things from their parents.

My childhood felt ruled by “the wooden spoon” – it was the disciplinary method of choice in my house. I was bullied in late primary school by a group of 3 other students – usually on the way home from school. I was hit, called names, spat on, and had rotten fruit thrown at me etc. To this day I have no idea what I did to these boys that cause them to bully me. It was a tough period, but also probably highly formative. I attended a Catholic (Marist Fathers) Boarding School in Lismore for six years of High School. I represented my school in swimming, athletics, rugby league and soccer. I did OK academically. I took up Taekwondo – I didn’t want to be bullied again. I was caned more times than I can remember, but this included for having my socks down, for my shirt not being tucked in, and for talking in study (usually trying to help a mate with their homework)... and I probably got caught swimming in the river a few times and for other youthful mischief.



Live well,  
laugh a lot,  
and  
love without  
prerequisites

I was a keen surfer in my younger years. I eventually attained a black belt in Taekwondo. I supported myself through university to attain a Bachelor of Law and a Bachelor of Jurisprudence degrees - repaying a HECS debt and student loans into my 40's. I had my first child at 23, while still at university, and my second child at 28. While at University I was elected President of the Aboriginal Students' Association, and also elected as the Indigenous representative on the Student Guild Council. Following university, I spent 10 years in front-line complaint handling and investigation roles for agencies such as the NSW Ombudsman, the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission. In my late 20's I was elected President of Ngalaya Aboriginal Lawyers and Law Students Association NSW – a voluntary position I held for 2 years. I also worked on two Committees for the NSW Law Society, and was Treasurer and Deputy Chairperson of an Aboriginal Community Organisation.

I lost my father when he was 58 years old in a boating incident on lake Eucumbene. I lost my half-brother to suicide a few years later.

I've worked in the Government, Corporate, University, and Community sectors. My kids are now grown and amazing. I've been through a divorce, and have been lucky to find new love. I've got a great job with the Uniting Church, and am currently studying Theology.

Of course, this isn't my whole life story - there are some parts of my story that are difficult to write, especially in a public sphere. But hopefully these few chapters provide some background to my story and life journey... and might encourage you to share some of your story with me should we meet.

I encourage you to share your story with somebody – even if it's just a chapter or two. Learn your neighbour's story. Love your neighbour. Seek common ground. Build relationships. Collaborate. Live well, laugh a lot, and love without prerequisites.



# Falling Seeds

a parable retold – Matthew 13:1–9

Listen.

Life scatters seeds indiscriminately.  
Seeds of hope, of peace, of kindness;  
seeds of joy, of love, of wisdom.

Falling on stone, birds may steal the seeds.  
Falling on rocky ground, the seeds grow fast, but  
do not live long without depth for resilience  
when the wind howls, and the sun scorches.  
Falling among thorns, the seeds are choked,  
no air to breathe, no room to move.  
Falling on healthy soil, the seeds of hope,  
of peace, of kindness, seeds  
of joy, of love, of wisdom push their roots  
down deep, stretch their leaves high and wide,  
grow strong, fruitful, spreading hope, peace  
kindness, joy, love, wisdom, letting seeds  
fall for more to grow in time.

Listen.

Which soil are you, for the falling seeds?

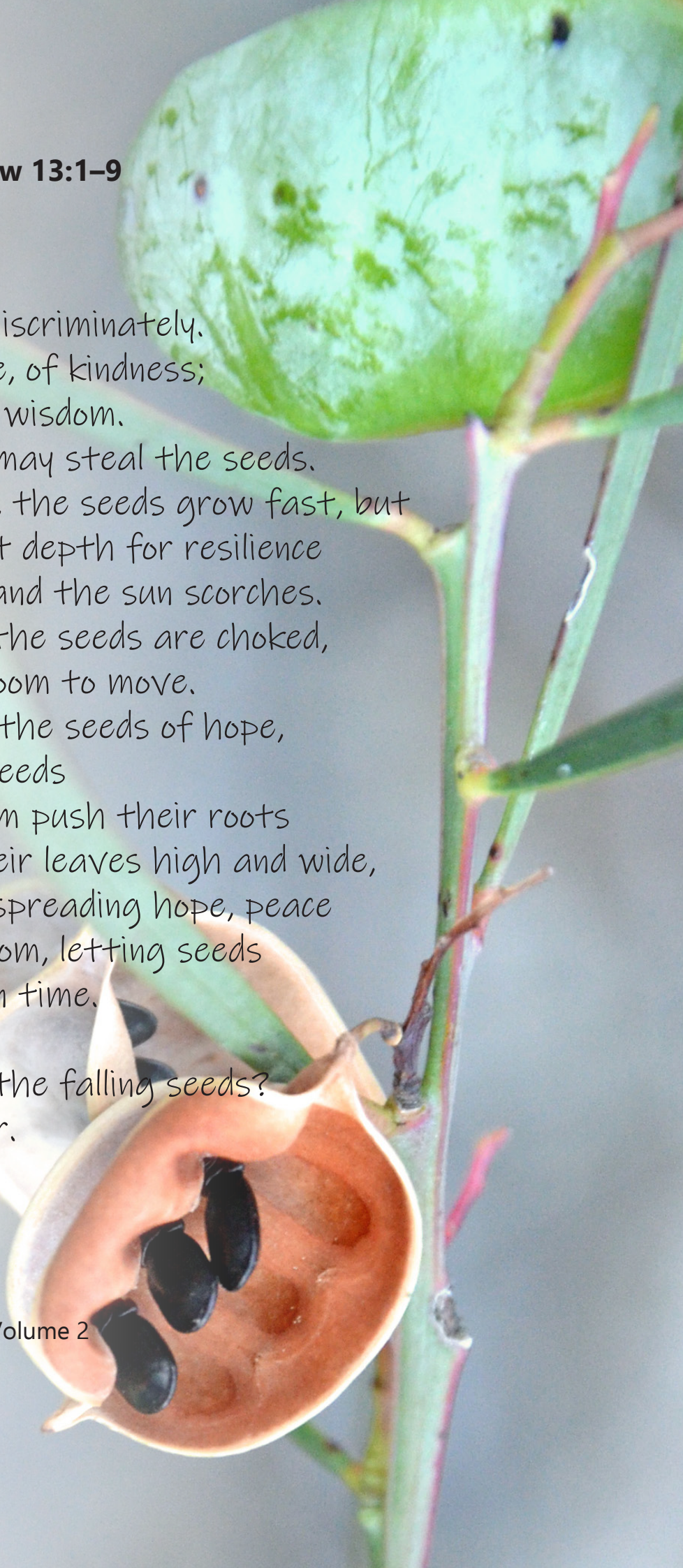
Listen. Listen and hear.

Amen.

Sarah Agnew

[sarahagnew.com.au](http://sarahagnew.com.au)

First published in Pray the Story Volume 2







## What's your Story?

**Erin Mawhinney** | Pastor, West End Uniting Church, QLD

Hi everyone. I haven't contributed here before so I will introduce myself! I want to tell you some pieces of my story and how I first connected with Saltbush. I am a fourth generation Australian of English heritage, a Queenslander - born in the tropics, currently living on Yuggera Country (Brisbane) and pastor of West End Uniting Church.

I first discovered Saltbush in June 2019, on a bus tour organised by Paul and Dorothy Creek from Riverina Presbytery, in partnership with some NSW Congress members, from Dubbo to Alice Springs/ Mparntwe. I was working for UCA, Queensland Synod at the time, on the Synod's Covenanting Action Plan project, and my colleagues and I were privileged to join this tour. As we travelled through the middle of NSW, SA and the NT we stopped and visited Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress churches and communities, and heard many stories about church and community life from many different people. The tour participants shared stories with each other on the way too. For me it was a time of listening and learning and forming new connections.

I am currently a candidate for Minister of the Word, and before this I worked for many years as a school chaplain as part of the National School Chaplaincy Program funding - a pastoral care role in two very different (non-church) schools. What I loved about chaplaincy in that setting was the way that it brought me into contact with people from all walks of life - people of different faiths and no faith, not only students, but families, teachers, community members, tuckshop volunteers, gardeners - all integral to the running of a school - and I was able to be a part of those communities. One of the things that I noticed early on was the privilege it was to be in such a trusted position that people would share their stories with me. Sometimes in simple daily conversations, sometimes more in depth pastoral conversations about struggles that people in my community had been through or were currently experiencing.

Part of the way that my faith has matured through my time in school chaplaincy is that it has brought me into contact with so many people from different backgrounds than my own. Each chaplaincy service is different, depending on the school's strengths and needs, and a chaplain is someone who often has a degree of flexibility (no teaching responsibilities) to make sure that no



student falls through the gaps. My first school was a large primary school in the Southwestern suburbs of Brisbane, in a suburb with a very culturally diverse demographic. While it had a great level of academic and extracurricular support for students, I noticed that many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had no connection to culture, often through foster care or parental separation. There was not at the time anyone on staff in a cultural support role for these students, so I began meeting with Elders and community members who could assist with connecting students with culture. This process was not simply a business transaction, it was a process of sitting with Elders, often over cups of tea, and building relationship. So I gradually got to know some of the Elders in my community, through sharing some of our stories. Just small details at first, but over the years, as trust and friendships grew, so did the degree to which stories and lives could be shared (and yes, the students at my school were able to be supported through art and dance programs and yarns with Elders). I have been encouraged by seeing connections form through the sharing of stories and experiences between the generations.

Another piece of my story is that I have been part of the Uniting Church in Australia for most of my life. Somewhere in the years during raising small children and my chaplaincy journey, a call to ministry within the UCA emerged. Part of this journey was encouraged by my congregational minister at the time, and other friends in ministry, who were willing to walk beside me and mentor me in my exploration of not only my personal faith journey but what has become a passion to connect and educate non-Indigenous church friends with our shared history of this country since 1788. I have discovered that reading history books and learning the facts around colonisation is useful, but it wasn't until I started hearing the stories of my friends in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that I realised how directly both historical and current government policies affect the lives of people who are my neighbours. Story is so powerful - I am sure that is why so much of what we can learn about the nature of God comes from the stories that Jesus told to his friends and followers so many years ago. I have noticed how stories take things from the theoretical to the personal.

My hope for my community and the wider church is that we all spend time listening to the stories of people who are different from us...

*I have been encouraged by seeing connections form through the sharing of stories*

So when I read a story that Jesus told of a neighbour - how does that affect my thinking about MY neighbours and their stories? When I read the story of the woman at the well, how does that affect the way that I interact with people who are different from me? Getting to know people and their situations first is important, for us this might take some time (maybe over many cups of tea, or many years!) ... I suppose that stories affect people in different ways, but for me, this was one of the factors that eventually became part of my call into ministry.

My hope for my community and the wider church is that we all spend time listening to the stories of people who are different from us - age, ability, culture, gender, sexuality, or socio-economic status. It is my hope and prayer that we will be open to be changed by these stories. That we will be able to build





relationship with these people we listen to, and share our stories too - stories about our lives, our faith journeys, that enable us to walk alongside all kinds of people, no matter how different they are from us. I pray that in this way, we will be joining a small part of God's mission across this beautiful country that we now call Australia, towards healing, wholeness and the restoration of all creation.





# An uncertain future

## Will Pearson

April 8th 2022 was a day for celebration. Fifty-five years since Betty Suggate and Will Pearson were married at St David's Presbyterian Church, Hurstville Grove. That was a day to remember. The uniting of two families from very geographically different backgrounds but with very similar beliefs and church involvement. From suburban Sydney to rural NSW. A girl from the big city marrying a country boy.

However, before the day was over, a dark shadow had enveloped us that would change our lives and many of our priorities for ever.

I received the diagnosis that I had contracted stage four metastasised oesophageal cancer. I was told the prognosis was not good. Thus began a series of further tests, a laparoscopy and development of a palliative treatment regime that set out to alleviate some of the symptoms while offering a better quality of life, but no cure. I was advised that the average survival for this type of cancer was three to six months without treatment, and twelve to eighteen months with.

As you can imagine this news came as a huge shock. Pearsons are renowned for heart issues, not cancer. I had a quadruple bypass in 2001. Many of my uncles had died suddenly from heart attacks, one in his sleep in the manse, one walking to bowls, one in a congregation meeting and one in the vestry prior to leading worship.

Death is something each one of us must face. It is a part of life, and not to be feared. Yet receiving this news was a real shock to the system. I have spent many precious hours in palliative care wards with people making the journey from this life to the next and have had the privilege of standing with families as they mourned a loved one. I slowly realised that if anything I had shared in those situations had meaning this also applied to me.

Our family was wonderful. The many and varied ways our children and grandchildren supported us as we adjusted to a new lifestyle was incredible, and we are so grateful for the help, love and support we are still receiving. Our extended family and friends have also been amazing. We feel totally enveloped in a cloud of prayer and love that is palpable.



Despite the many challenges, this has been a rich and rewarding few months as we have had the opportunity to say and do many of the important things that a sudden death prevents. Our children encouraged us to develop a "Bucket List" of things we wanted to do, so while waiting for the treatment to begin I was able to preside at a service for the interment of my Canadian sister's ashes at a little rural cemetery near Guyra, a short trip to Coffs Harbour, and a few days in Sydney, staying in the heart of the city and being tourists. A total of twenty-eight family members joined us for dinner one evening.

As I waited for the installation of the port that would facilitate the chemotherapy my health declined quite rapidly, and I have no doubt that without intervention I would not have survived. However, as chemotherapy started I had a remarkable turnaround, with many immediate benefits from the treatment and a minimal number of side effects.

Negative comments are often directed at the health system, but I can only reiterate how fortunate I have been. The various medical professionals I have seen have been amazing. Their skill and knowledge, combined with kindly and compassionate personalities have been so supportive and encouraging. To be able to receive such quality care within ten minutes of home emphasised how fortunate I was, and reminded me of those who are forced to travel thousands of kilometres to seek support, and those for whom medical assistance is no more than a distant dream.

I have been overwhelmed at the number of friends and family that have travelled vast distances and visited us, and the depth and profundity of conversations that ensued. There have been some very holy moments as often untouched topics of death, dying, prayer, faith, eternity were discussed at depth.

The prognosis I received emphasised to us the importance of making the most of each day we were given. There are many things in life over which we have no control, but each one of us can decide how we react to situations as they arise. We decided to live life to the full, accepting the limitations that were placed on us, and celebrating the many blessings that we received each day. We also had to come to terms with the realisation it was all right to accept help when it was offered!

We have had the time to recollect so many of the highs and lows we have experienced over our lifetime. There was the of building our own house at Yarrowyck. Betty's father drew up the plans, and my father, a cousin and I milled the timber from stringybark trees growing on our property. Betty and I became quite proficient at the many different skills we needed for the construction, and we moved in when the outside shell was completed, and the interior still a mass of uncovered studs. We had spent the first fifteen months of our marriage living



in two small adjacent caravans with a covered annex holding our refrigerator, so this was a great improvement.

Our lives were greatly enriched with the birth of our two children, Grahame and Elizabeth. Thankfully they arrived after we had moved out of the caravans! It has been an amazing gift seeing their development from tiny premature babies to the mature and caring adults that despite substantial difficulties from time to time, now hold significant careers and yet still find time to provide us with incredible support.

Both Betty and I have always been heavily involved in church activities, and our faith in a gracious and loving God has sustained us through many difficult situations. Over the years we have taught Sunday School, been involved in youth groups, been secretary or chair of elders, church council and Presbytery, as well as active lay preachers and held roles within Synod and Assembly committees. We value the many learning opportunities provided by the ELM Centre, and later the Centre for Ministry. Many times we wondered if we were being called to full time ministry, but each time a door seemed to close in front of us.

Growing up in a rural situation, I have always had a deep affinity with the land, and the people who tend it. This developed further over twenty years working as a Wool and Portfolio Manager across northern New South Wales, where I forged many friendships that have strengthened over time. Seasonal conditions and low commodity prices made life on the land even more challenging than ever. I soon came to realise that there were things over which I had no control whatsoever, and often all I could do was just stand alongside people in their time of need, and offer a listening and compassionate ear. Perhaps this was the time when I developed a real interest in chaplaincy.

In 2007, after completing four years as Presbytery chairperson, I felt a strong call to offer to do an Intentional Interim Ministry at Armidale, which was subsequently supported by the congregation, presbytery and synod. As I relished this role over the next two years, I realised that all my past experiences contributed in one form or another to the effectiveness of my ministry.

On completion of my Armidale adventure, and at an age when many are seeking retirement, I accepted a call to Broken Hill Congregation, and a Presbytery Minister role in Macquarie Darling, where we subsequently spent a rich and rewarding five and a half years. As we stepped off the plane, we both had a strong conviction that this is where God had called us. On 6th March 2011 I was ordained a Minister of the Word by Macquarie Darling Presbytery. When we finally finished that placement, a big part of our hearts stayed in Broken Hill and the outback.

**Autumn 2023**

Thinking there would be time in retirement to do some supply ministry, and confident it would be somewhere in western NSW, it was quite a surprise to find ourselves spending a few months at Canberra City Uniting Church, which was another very special time in our lives. We later spent five months at Tamworth, where we renewed old friendships and created new ones.

My relationship with rural ministry continued as Chair of Frontier Services Board. It is exciting to see the increase in chaplaincy numbers and continuation of work parties supporting those in need. I have also been delighted to watch the development of Saltbush, as it brings a new dimension to ministry in our vast country. Working with Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network and Police Chaplaincy have also been important aspects of my life.

As I now battle with loss of feeling in hands and feet, and face an uncertain future, I am reminded of a verse penned by the great hymn writer John Greenleaf Whittier:

***I know not what the future hath  
Of marvel or surprise,  
Assured alone that life and death  
God's mercy underlies.***







# Prayer for today

**AJ Jensen** | UCA Member

Over the weekend (18th and 19th March) trans and gender diverse<sup>1</sup> people protested in Melbourne CBD/Wurundjuri Country against anti-trans commentator Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull aka Posie Parker. Some of my friends were pepper sprayed by police in this protest as far right supporters of Parker gave the Nazi salute.

Read more here: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/nazi-salutes-performed-on-steps-of-victorian-parliament-as-protesters-clash-over-transgender-rights/yr7gzkevn>

I'd started writing an upbeat story about my transness and faith, but this is where I'm at right now. Here's my prayer for today.

Dear God,

Umm dear dear dear dear dear.

I feel really angry and tired of trying to see any part of you in the people that don't want me to exist.

Um it's just that I know I guess I know they're hurting, and they don't know who they are, and they don't know your love.

Um and the divine love of the universe, but it's pretty tough, pretty tough at the moment to feel faithful. Or that I deserve to feel faithful even. You know, after I saw all that happened down south with the cops and the Nazis over the weekend I just cried a lot.

I felt you there with me I could feel your love in my tears and your care for the communities I'm crying for, and the bodies that just want to be free.

It's just that I don't know, I don't even know where I can safely worship to cry for that, to mourn for that. There's a few places, but it just makes me mad. And I know that it's just like patriarchal and

<sup>1</sup> Trans and gender diverse: These are inclusive umbrella terms that describe people whose gender is different to what was presumed for them at birth.



colonial corruption of divine spirit but it's really hard to grapple with the fact that Christianity is used to kill people and to traumatise me and my connection with my godliness.

It hurts and I don't know right now um how it can feel better I guess, feel nourishing.

I mean maybe that's not true, as soon as I think that, I think of all of the beautiful trans people in my life, including me.

And their divinity, I guess. How spiritual it is to be trans, how precious, how blessed I feel to be trans and queer<sup>2</sup>, and intentionally live my life in the way I do and my faith is part of that.

But I feel very, like, starring into a void sometimes when my friends are experiencing literal state sanctioned violence because we don't want to back down from our rights. And it's happening everywhere.

I don't know, I'd like to feel safe or comfortable to see your presence in our lives and to not be afraid to open myself to my own spirit at the moment, because that's actually what's healing.

Unfortunately this misogyny and White Supremacy is ubiquitous in this continent and people take shelter in it. They can't be present in their wounds. They decide to hurt those whose existence threatens their defences from themselves.

And they have a lot of power. I just pray that they that they lose it.

I'm unsettled. Can you be with me in that? Help me be open to your presence.

Amen.

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2 The term 'queer' is commonly used in our community as a catchall for the LGBTIQ+ community. It is also used to describe an individual's sexuality and/or gender identity

My name's AJ (they/them) I'm a non-binary trans person living on Widjabal/Wyabul country. I'm a social worker and am (loosely) a member of the UCA. I think and write about queer feminist theology and collaborate with my friend Teash Taylor (she/her) in consulting with churches and faith groups about LGBTIQ+ experiences in faith through Queers Be With You: <https://www.queersbewithyou.com/>

Some Further Resources:

- Trans faith resources: <http://austenhartke.com/trans-faith-resources>
- Information on Pronouns from ACON TransHub Resources: <https://www.transhub.org.au/pronouns>
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Rainbow Archive: <https://indigblackgold.wordpress.com/>









# Memor theology, story and being "carriers" of God:

## Knowing God in a new neighbourhood

Rev. Dr Karina Kreminski | Newtown Mission

One of my favourite quotes I use often when teaching or speaking on missional topics is by missiologist Darrell Guder. He writes that "The centrality of the community to the gospel means that the message is never disembodied." In other words,

*The word must always become flesh, embodied in the life of the called community. The gospel cannot be captured adequately in propositions, or creeds or theological systems...the gospel dwells in and shapes the people who are called to be its witness. The message is inextricably linked with its messengers. If there is good news in the world, then it is demonstrably good in the way that it is lived out by the community called into its service. The early church in Jerusalem lived in such a way that they had "the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:47). (Darrell Guder, Incarnation and the Church's Witness)*

What I love about this quote is the focus on the gospel not being primarily about propositions, but being fleshed out or embodied by individuals that make up the church. In the same way that God did not leave us a set of rules, creeds, theologies or pithy thoughts to know God, but instead became incarnate, we also only fully witness to the gospel as it is fleshed out in our lives. So ultimately, the gospel is told through the story of our lives. The story of God intersects with our story and the world sees the fullness of God through the flawed but beautiful story displayed by the church. The church, to quote Guder again, is a "parable", telling the story of God.

This means our stories matter. And more than that, we can know God better through the stories of our lives. Our stories can be like "texts" that, when "read", reveal to us the nature of God. This is often called "memoir theology" and it is a legitimate and dynamic way to know the God who loves to draw close and be revealed in fluid, embodied and grounded ways. As we think through the nature of God through the lens of memoir theology (some might call it Narrative Theology – though they are not exactly the same), we begin to understand God, ourselves and our contexts in a surprising and intimate way.

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In her recent book *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence*, Diana Butler Bass uses memoir theology as a framework for her writing. The result is surprising as she moves from one experience of encountering Jesus to another and draws a theology from her story that is strongly grounded in scripture and in the tradition of the Christian faith. She observes that, when men write of their experience of encountering God, it is called theology, but when women write about their experience it is marginalised as "memoir". So, she suggests that, when women write from a memoir theology framework, they take themselves seriously as being "carriers" of the story and nature of God.



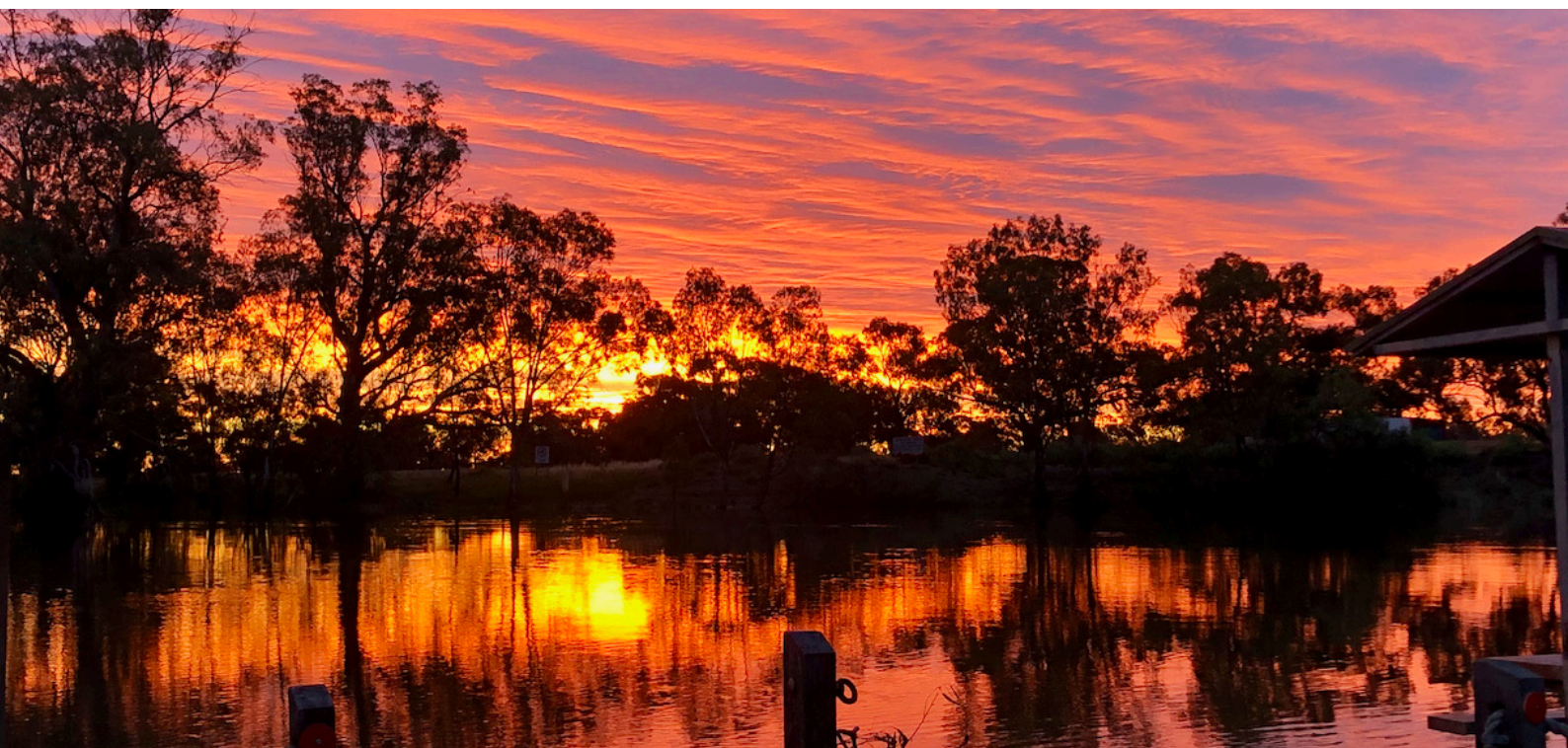
## Selah

I moved into an inner-city neighbourhood to plant a church. I had it all sorted. I was going to move in with a team, start a worship service and see that congregation grow. But God seemed to have other plans. As I started to connect with the neighbourhood, my plans to start a church became frustrated. So, I decided to simply turn up to events in the neighbourhood, get to know the community centre and hang out where people found connection. As I did that, I felt God whisper in my ear, "Don't plant a church, just love these people - or something like that. It made me think about how deeply non-deistic this God is who we follow. In other words, God is not removed from our lives, watching over us "from a distance". Instead, God works with us and knows us even better than we know ourselves. Psalm 139:1-4 speaks of the nearness of God: "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely."

In all of this, I found God surprising in that God reversed my plans, and this helped me to focus not on missional activities but on building relationships in the community through love. This set the course for what I was to do in the neighbourhood for the next seven years: simply show up to places, meet people and love them. Ultimately a faith community did emerge five years after moving

into the neighbourhood, but only after I first learned about joining in with God's rhythms which always put loving people before activity. This has made me think about the way we often plan our lives so carefully or have very set plans, and then God surprises us with something outside of our framework – which in the end was what we really wanted all along. I think of how God said to Sarai and Abram that they would have a child when they had pushed the thought of having children to the back of their minds – so much so that Sarai laughed at the announcement from God. Sometimes the way God turns my plans upside down makes me smile.

As I connected with people in my community, I realised the importance of place to God. Human beings are always placed people, and to be displaced can be dehumanising. The more I got to know my neighbourhood the more I asked, "God, what are you up to in this community?", when as a minister in a church I used to ask, "God, what are you up to in this church?" I became more and more convinced that God is not only in the church but is God over creation and place, city and nature. I could discern what God was doing in the neighbourhood where I lived by listening and looking for the signs of hope, life, death and angst. I reflected on the garden of Eden and on the fact that it was not just any garden, but it had a name – Eden. God is interested in the particular. Think about all the place names in Scripture and the images those places conjure up – Jerusalem, Sodom and Gomorrah, Rome, Canaan, Egypt. The names of places are important. Those places indicate a history, connection, memory and tradition. Sometimes they become mythological or symbolic. Similarly, each suburb, town or city where we live carries different characteristics, histories and contexts. The more we are grounded in a place and listen to the Spirit in that context, the more we see God revealed there and can join with God on God's mission of reconciliation and the flourishing of our society. Each place is different so our thinking about what the church might look like in those places will be varied rather than homogenous.





The interactions I have with people in my neighbourhood have made me think more about the way God speaks through people who might not yet know God and that those people might even be speaking prophetically – a “mission in reverse” of sorts. It has reminded me again of the activity of God outside the four walls of the church. I wonder what we are missing by not listening to those in our culture whom we brand as sitting outside of God’s kingdom. Are we sometimes giving answers to questions that people in our culture are not even asking? What truths can our community speak into the church? This is not unheard of in Scripture as we see many secular prophets. Think of Jonah running away from God and the sailors on the boat who spoke truth to him and ended up worshiping Yahweh by the end of the story. Who are the marginalised people in our communities and how could they be pointing to God’s truth and character? This might even challenge our delineations of who is inside and outside the church. In the small faith community we are a part of in our neighbourhood, we gather with others of different faiths or no faith and we talk about life, faith and spirituality. Sometimes I can hear the voice of God through them. Other times I feel as though I am in “church” and that the Jesus who continually surprises me is very present.

God has challenged me and stretched my faith over the last seven years in a new neighbourhood. I have learned more about God. I have also come to know God in a deeper way. My theology has been shaped by my story with God as lived experience in a particular place as I have come to know a particular community.

***What is your story of how God has been revealed to you in your neighbourhood? How do your story and God’s story meet and transform you into a follower of Jesus? How is God calling you to improvise, together with God, the rest of your story?***

# Left alone

## Acts 16:16–34

*imagining into the first part of the story, which we often skip over for the sensational miracle in the jail cell: the story of the female character.*

*Nothing more is said of the servant girl after she is liberated from the malevolent spirit, her malevolent masters.*

*Is she left to fend for herself?*

*Or might we plausibly imagine her story thus:*

Standing in the marketplace, forgotten, I felt a freedom I had never known. Healed of the spiteful, angry voice in my head, there was a silence inside me, a stillness about me.

I was glad my masters abandoned me, that the crowd left me to follow my masters as they dragged those men away.

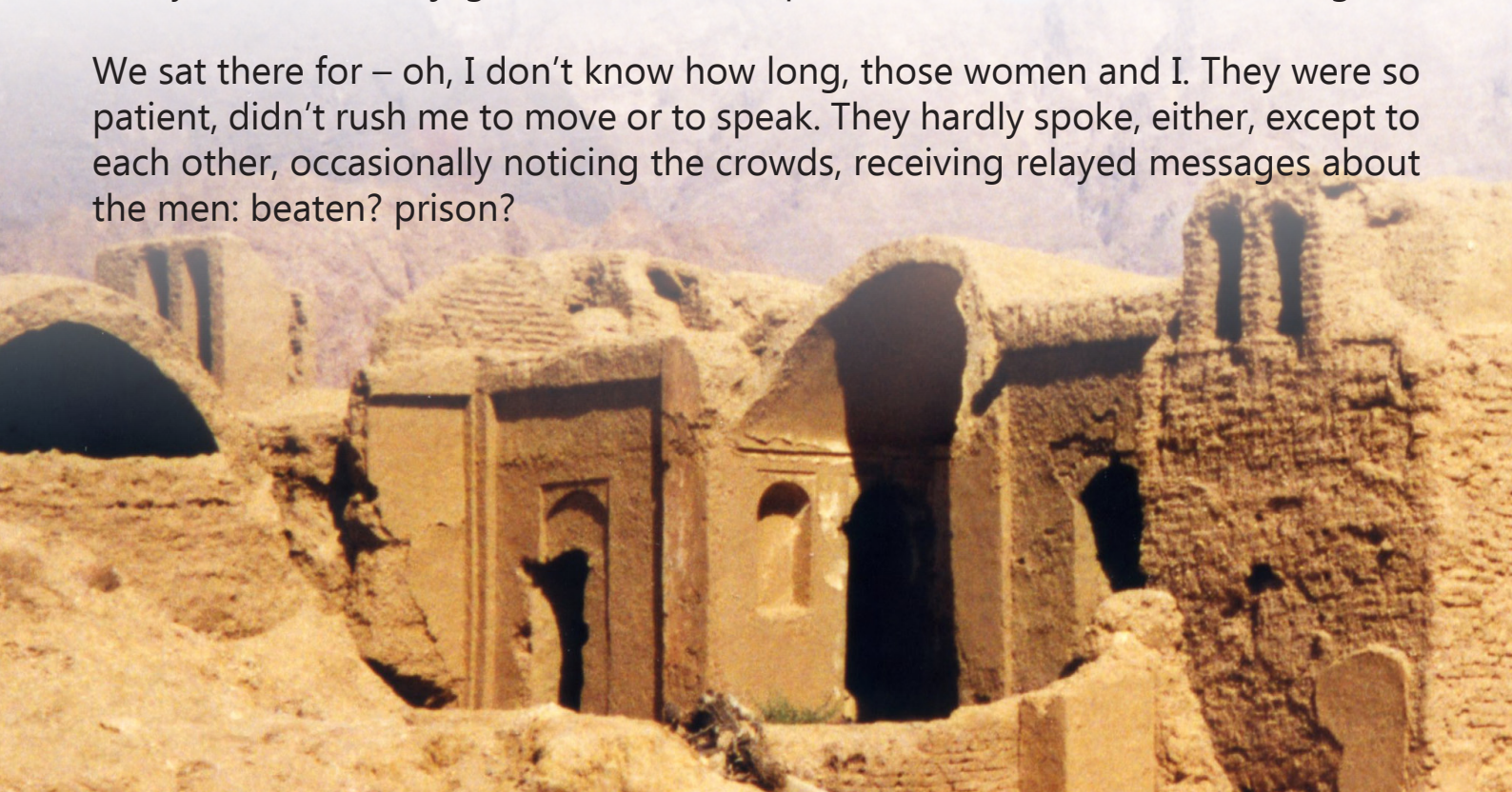
Later, I was worried for those men, but in that moment, I was blissfully alone for the first time in my life, and I breathed - a long sigh out, for I think I had held my breath at first, not willing to break the spell. Then deeply, in, out, as I turned around, saw my hands, my feet, as if I'd not seen them before - me - free! I pushed the rope from my wrist to the ground: free! So this is how it feels to know you are alive!

And then I think I must have fainted - for the next moment I was aware of, a couple of ladies were kneeling beside me in the dust, lifting my head and torso gently -

'Don't rush,' they said, 'sit a while yet.'

A boy arrived with a jug of water and a cup: 'Drink. You'll be in shock, I imagine.'

We sat there for - oh, I don't know how long, those women and I. They were so patient, didn't rush me to move or to speak. They hardly spoke, either, except to each other, occasionally noticing the crowds, receiving relayed messages about the men: beaten? prison?





Eventually: 'I think I am ready to stand now,' I told them. But my voice sounded strange. 'Was that me? Yes, it is, I sound different - I'm sorry, this is all quite strange.'

Smiling, with knowing: 'Do you have somewhere to go?' she gently spoke.

'I don't know - I can't go to my masters', they'll not be happy with me.'

'Do you have any family?'

'I have been with my masters so long, I can't remember life before that. Oh: where will I go? How will I earn money for shelter, for food? What have they done to me?!'

'Don't be afraid, child, remember the feeling when Paul sent the bad spirit away: hang on to that.'

The other lady spoke: 'If you like, you could come home with me.'

'Are you sure?', the first woman asked her.

'Why not? I have room in my house, now my daughter is in her husband's family home. I could give her shelter and food for now. I'm sure with our connections you and I could find her work. Or she could join us in our work in the congregation, helping the other widows, and the orphans.'

'I don't know if I am good at anything, without the voices telling me things about people, how could I help anyone?'

'There is time to find out what you can do. Take your time. Your life has only just begun!'

Sarah Agnew

[sarahagnew.com.au](http://sarahagnew.com.au)





# News from Saltbush

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

As I look back over the past years of Saltbush there is a story too!

I remember when I was applying many years ago to undertake some post-graduate study, I had to sit with a university panel to explain my application and study proposal. In short, at one stage of the interview, I was asked what my work would look like at the conclusion of the study, to which I replied with comments illustrating my vague idea and adding that sometimes we don't know the end until we have started at the beginning. Well, the panel openly objected to that notion, telling me so, but in the end, they allowed me to undertake the study.

Of course, I still hold my opinion on this one!

In the church, where we seem fixated on measurable outcomes, mission and strategic plans, directional committees and forward planning exercises, irrespective of any value they might bring, we've often allowed them to determine who we are and reduce our creative spirit to the page, or worse, allowed them to reduce the creative Spirit!



Amongst all the foundations laid by the Saltbush team and our building upon them, we continually find ourselves on a road shaped less by what the future might be, and known to be, than by a creative, growing, renewing edge within

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the wider Christian Community. It's a wonderful time to see the church changing, dying in places, being confronted in other places and talking about what the future might look like. And.... In ways.... Trying to both perceive and allow the creative Spirit.

The Saltbush team continue to work within the Synod as it seeks to support Presbyteries through change, alongside Presbyteries and Regions, with congregations, groups and individuals. Even amongst all the unknown there are many signs that the road ahead is good and that where the creative Spirit is allowed, chosen, there will be life. Perhaps not as planned, managed, charted and strategized, but life none the less!

The Saltbush team continue to provide ways for individuals, groups and congregations to be supported in their gathering and the exploration of life and faith.

Word around the Bush with simple Saltbush liturgies are made available every week. Online Cafés, Ruminations alongside our other conversational publications are always available for anyone.

You can find all this here:

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

This year we have had gatherings in the Far North Coast, Uralla and Goondiwindi in the Down's Presbytery Queensland. Others will be held in the Riverina and Macquarie Darling Presbytery. Our gatherings are open to people from anywhere and you can attend in person or be equally included online.

Of course, the Saltbush team is in ministry alongside you. If you would like to be in touch you are always welcome.

Mark .

# 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**.

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# 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:

Bank: Uniting Financial Services

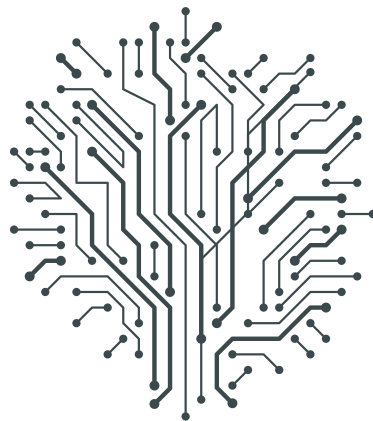
Account Name: UCA Synod Office

**BSB: 634-634**

**Account Number: 100009463**

Payment Reference: "**Saltbush**"





# SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY