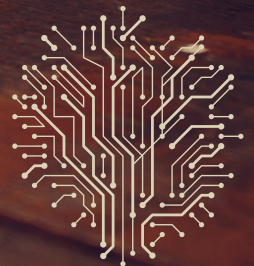


# Ruminations

Spring /Summer 2023-24

# Song



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.

Editors: Mark Faulkner  
Geoff Wellington  
Tim Jensen  
Peter Overton  
Yvonne Ghavalas  
Monique Potter

Uniting the Scattered Community

PO Box 648 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

**John Coleman** is a singer songwriter and painter, living in South East Tasmania. He has worked as a forest ranger, teacher, Coordinator for L'Arche in Australia, counselor and pastor. John is part of the Quaker community and remains strongly connected to L'Arche. He has recorded a total of thirteen albums of songs – the first in 1985. "Falling into Light" recorded in 2022 is the most recent. Nine of his collections (including the songs he mentions in the accompanying article) can be accessed via:

[johncoleman.bandcamp.com](http://johncoleman.bandcamp.com)

**Rev Anne Perrin** is a member of the Mission Enablement Team. Prior to this placement, Anne was a Minister at Clarence Uniting Church in Hobart and served as Chairperson of the Presbytery of Tasmania. Ann has also been a Lecturer in Double Bass at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and has contributed articles to a number of publications and conference papers.

**Dr Anthony Rees** has taught in a variety of contexts in Australia and Fiji. His work has foregrounded particular social issues, leading to publications which engage matters of politics, gender, the environment, and colonial violence. He is committed to finding ways in which sacred texts - formed many ages ago and treasured by communities across centuries - might continue to speak to contemporary struggles. Anthony has also been a professional trumpeter

**Rev. Glen Spencer** is the Director of Mission at UME. Prior to joining UME, Glen was the manager at HopeStreet Woolloomooloo and is part of the wonderfully creative and beautiful church Newtown Mission, and the new congregation 'breath' that meets at the Annandale Creative Arts Centre.

**Nathan Tyson** works with the Synod of NSW & ACT in the role of Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement. Nathan is an Aboriginal man who has spent most of his life in Sydney and is of Anaiwon/Gomeroi descent.



# Editors Introduction - Song

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

While watching a rugby international between France and Australia, I was struck by the French national anthem and how triumphant it sounded. This was matched by the team who were singing with a ferocious passion. It got me wondering about the words of 'La Marseillaise'. I was shocked, it is violent and bloody. There is no doubt the anthem is enough to get the team fired up to play as focused and committed as possible, like the Haka for Aotearoa/New Zealand teams. From national anthems, in church, in pubs, at concerts, songs have that power. A song's lyrics evoke passions deep within us and when sung within a group, there seems to be a unity of purpose and identity. A song can promote peace, consolidate national identity, call out for justice, cause hatred and division, offend groups, evoke memories, worship and be a source of comfort. (This is by no means an exhaustive list).

The Bible has many songs that speak of the sovereignty of God alongside the desires of God. These are songs of justice, compassion and equality, songs that challenge our thinking and actions.

Here are just few that might be familiar to you.

Psalm 89:14 says, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." Psalm 111:7-8, "The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness."

Mary's song: Luke 1:46, 51-53. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowly state of his servant.... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

**What song or songs evoke in you the desire for God's reign to be known on earth?**

In this issue of Ruminations our contributors speak of the power of song and how songs deeply resonate with our spirituality, God's desire for justice, creations song and how our collective voices give rise to worship.



*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne*

Nathan Tyson challenges us to think more deeply about the words of popular songs. Especially those that call for justice, particularly for First Nations people. In many ways these song's lyrics echo the cries for justice that we read throughout the songs of the Bible as mentioned above.

The Saltbush team would like to introduce John Coleman. John features in a lot of our liturgies as he invokes strong images of the Australian bush matched with an authentic expression of faith. John speaks of this love of songwriting, the L'Arche community and two important strands of writing. Song writing as spiritual practice and group song making.

Ann Perrin takes us on a journey which begins at an early age with her love of music. A love that guides her life's choices, then moves her to an appreciation of how music creates such an expansive expression of God, that moves us into God's future. Ann also challenges us to extend our hospitality in church to include styles of music that are familiar to the wider community.

Mission director Glenn Spencer considers the importance of song and coming to a space of owning his gifts as a songwriter. To quote Glenn: "Songs are such beautiful expressions of grace. Songs are deeply formative." He cites an excellent article by Nick Cave who is responding to people contributing songs that have been generated by Artificial Intelligence. Glenn also highlights the unifying force of singing together and the album Transforming Spirit. A compilation of songs written by Uniting Church members.

Anthony Rees reflects on two events where song impacted him and would resonate with all of us. The first was being part of a service at the church on the campus of Malua Theological College Samoa where 'One could hardly fail to be moved by power of the song and I found myself deeply moved as I joined my own voice to the heavenly sound surrounding me.' Then at UTC's conference on theology and the Anthropocene. The conference is a reminder that creation is itself involved in its symphony of praise. As a human race we are silencing creations song by our impact on the environment.

Finally, Mark and the Saltbush team welcome Rev. Yvonn Ghavalas. Yvonne begins in December. Mark keeps us up to date on all things Saltbush in the final article for our Spring-Summer edition.

May we be freed to sing new songs of hope, love, justice and compassion. May our songs join with all creation in praise of the Creator.

*Tim*



## Sing with your hearts

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

This month's theme is song. I pondered what to write, as I'm a significantly better writer than singer! Singing is something I do quietly in groups at church, or loudly and badly to my favourite 80's songs when nobody else is around.

One thing I have often thought though, is that it is much easier to send difficult and potent messages through the lyrics of a song than in an article or piece of writing. Bands like Midnight Oil for example have sung about social justice issues for decades - those who know the issues can appreciate the deep messages... others just hum along to the jingle on the radio while they drive along and few usually take offence at the messaging.

How many Australians bopped along to Yothu Yindi's "Treaty" song... I remember dance floors full of people dancing away... some of us understand the deep call for justice in this song... many I think just like the tune.

Today we have awesome artists like Briggs, Dan Sultan, Baker Boy, and Thelma Plum who continues to speak through song. Powerful lyrics with a deep call.

The result of the Voice referendum on 14 October was disappointing for myself and the majority of First Peoples in this country who voted for it. The spoken lyric of our peoples, the deep call for justice, was again not really recognised, in fact the nation unfortunately heard Dutton's ditty of misinformation and fear mongering much more clearly. Somehow the fictional and intentionally divisive lyrics of Dutton resonated whereas the heart-spoken lyrics of First peoples in the Uluru Statement were rendered little more than elevator music.

But we move forward. We need to replay some of our old favourites - like "From Little Things Big Things Grow", "Took the Children Away", and "Blackfella Whitefella", listen to champions like Briggs, and also make new songs to raise justice issues and awareness that our struggle continues.

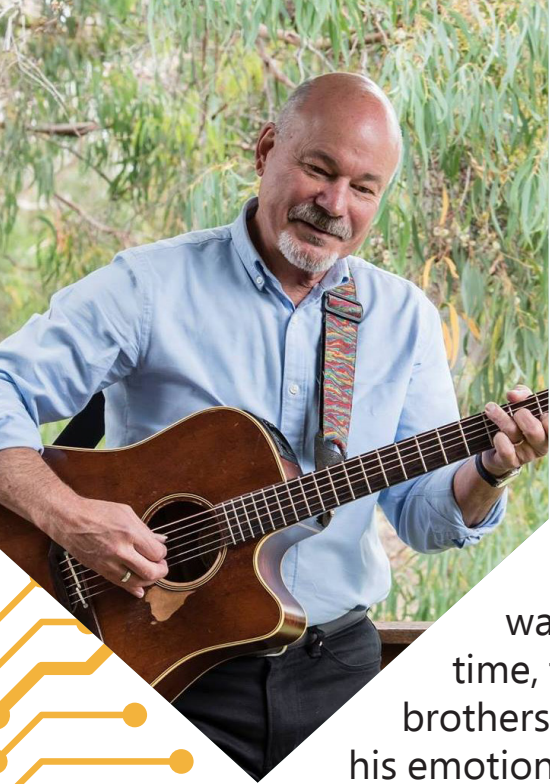
In the future I hope the songs I sing loudly when nobody is around are ones of strength and joy, of progress and success, rather than of protest and the need for recognition of truth and the struggle for justice.

I thank those who have heard the lyrics of First Nations peoples and our allies, and have sung along with your hearts. For those still humming along but not really listening... I encourage you to tune in a little more and listen to the deeper messages and call.

*...tune in a little more and listen to the deeper messages...*







# There's something about song that just gets me

**John Coleman** | Singer Songwriter and Painter

Once there was a little boy so affected by particular songs that he would become emotional whenever he heard them. When he was five, a song written during the American Civil War was popular on the radio. It was titled "When Johnny Came Marching Home". For a time, this song curiously affected him. When the boy's elder brothers learned of this, they discovered to their surprise that his emotions could be played like a jukebox. On one occasion the family was visiting cousins living on a dairy farm in a remote area of NW Tasmania. The little boy was meeting them for the first time and his brothers thought it might be amusing to say to the cousins, "Hey – watch this!" They sang a few lines and on cue the tears sprang out even though the boy knew what was coming.

That memory has always stayed with me – not as a wound but more as a source of bemusement. How did that happen? What was it in that marching song from the Civil War that had the power to undo me?

I have been a songwriter for over 50 years. As soon as I began to learn the guitar and a new chord was able to be played, that new chord invited a new melody, another rhythm. From the beginning I was drawn towards creating songs that might explore the bittersweet. Twin sisters – beauty and loss; presence and absence; the profoundly deep and the out and out silly; the light and the shadow. My songs are rarely totally jubilant nor totally without hope.

I love the Psalms – they are perfect examples of what appeals to me in songs – the interweaving of light and shadow – presence and absence. A Psalm may begin with despair and loss where all is finished – once we enjoyed the closeness of God and God's blessings but now everything is broken. Then comes the sweet postscript – "yet you love us Lord, and yes your love is everlasting and though we may be in the deepest despond you will lift us up again. You are our rock and our salvation and we will never forget you nor will you ever abandon us."

Songs that draw me are those that make me think and feel. Especially to feel. To feel joy, jubilation, sorrow, anger – feel what it might like to be the older person looking back on the ups and downs of partnered life – like the man in Stages



of Love. The honeymoon, the long repetitive, grace filled years – all of it full of grace, and now the partner is gone. I wrote this in my late thirties and now I'm older than the character at the end of the song. For me it's a hymn to the ineffable beauty of what it is to be alive and to love.

Story songs – the fisherman in Recherche Bay is my grandfather who is rowing his clinker built boat out of the bay and into the lightening sea in the early and still dark morning. This boat he has made with his own hands and as he rows, the rowlocks emit a groaning and the sound reminds him of his best friend, killed years before in a bush accident – killed by the tree my grandfather fell. He is drawn into persistent memory and feeling – into resolution and finally into the safe arms of Recherche Bay. Into the safe arms of God. Song, song, song. Song is prayer and how can we keep from singing? Recherche Bay tells my grandfather's story and keeps him close to my family and me.

I am not a trained musician, nor have I formally studied music theory or history – but I am thankful to say that I am a songwriter. The songs I have made are emblems of my life's history and every one, an aural diary entry. However, I would like to touch on two strands of my writing that have become especially important to me. One is song writing as a prayer practice and the other is group song making.

### **Song writing as a spiritual practice**

I believe I have been blessed (though my family might say cursed) to be a person who sings, hums or whistles a good deal more than the usual person might. From an early age I would create song while walking on my own. A word or line would emerge along with a simple melody while my footsteps gave me the percussion to keep it all moving. Jesus with Me was written like this. I had taken a late evening walk along the Derwent River and was troubled. A good and plain speaking friend had challenged me and it had shaken the comfortable view I had of myself. So I was walking it out. As I walked I began to sing and it became a prayer "Jesus with me, always with me ... ever near me, always with me". It calmed and comforted me then as it continues to do so now, thirty years later. As I walked on, verses sprang into life like this final verse:

...the Jesus who gave – the blind man his sight, to your presence open our eyes ...

I was able to retrieve the words and melody when I returned home because I had chanted them into my memory and still often use this refrain when I walk and before sleeping. It has become a close companion.

My Christian journey has paralleled my involvement with an organisation called L'Arche. L'Arche is an international federation of intentional faith based

communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live and share life together. Part of the mission of L'Arche is to announce the gift of people with disabilities to the society around us. Our giftedness is often hidden but can be revealed through sharing life and time with each other. Mutually transformative relationships are the fruit of time. L'Arche is a great school of the heart and for me as a songwriter has been a major source of inspiration over the last 35 years. Some of my works have been theme songs for particular international events – Carry the Dream for a gathering in Atlanta, the home of Martin Luther King; Let Us Drink From the River for a Federation meeting in Assisi, the birthplace of St Francis; Pilgrims Together for a similar meeting in Swanwick UK. L'Arche has inspired many songs that touch on finding extraordinary experiences of God in the ordinary life of community.

### **Group song making**

Many years ago I discovered the joy of writing songs with groups of people. The writing process holds within it an element of vulnerability. We gather – a group of around twenty people and me, a whiteboard, pen and guitar. I don't have a melody up my sleeve but generally have a sense of the theme that the group wishes to explore. The song is frequently a response to a question like "what does this group, place or process mean to me – to us?" We begin with some sing-along songs to warm us up and unite us in the moment. Then words are called out – feelings, images, situations – and these are recorded on the whiteboard. It is usually loud and chaotic. A line or particular image will emerge and this may give us the beginnings of a verse or chorus. I pick up the guitar, noodle around and find a melody and chord pattern – people sing along and we refine and build as we go. The song Sea of God emerged from group reflection on the baptism of Jesus and his wilderness experience. It was written on a L'Arche Companions retreat in Galong, NSW and it all came together over the course of an hour. There are other times when the process is not so swift and we leave the session with just a chorus or verse. I can take this away and build on it, using images that have come out of the group process. We meet soon after, and again we sing and refine it. I have always prefaced my writing sessions with a "no guarantee of outcome statement" but thankfully and mysteriously, to date it has always worked.

There are two miracles that come out of these sessions – one is the song and the other is the joy of unity and accomplishment. Let me share an example.

In 2000 I animated the music for a retreat in New Zealand. L'Arche Kapiti was only two years old at the time with just one household of people with and without disabilities but there were many people in attendance from other like-minded groups around New Zealand. It was a wonderful time of silence and prayer, sharing and play, and song and reflection. The retreat was a time to especially

reflect on the knowledge that all of us, with and without disabilities though flawed, are beautifully gifted and loved by God. The song we created was called Broken. Words can't adequately explain the importance of this song to L'Arche Kapiti – it has become part of its culture and shared story. Twelve years later I returned to Kapiti and as part of my visit was invited to play several songs during a service at the local Catholic church where a number of L'Arche folk attended. While people received the Eucharist, I sang Broken.

Towards the close of the service the priest thanked me for the songs and told the congregation that I was John Coleman from Australia and was the composer of Broken. At this point Trish, one of the members with disability, rose to her feet and made her way swiftly and unsteadily to the microphone, which she appropriated with confidence. All were hushed. What on earth was going on? The service had been hijacked. Then Trish loudly proclaimed "No, no, no! That's not John's song. We wrote it. It's our song!" She was speaking the truth.

As I write this reflection I am in New Zealand again having spent a week with the L'Arche Kapiti community. Part of my brief was to present a concert for their 25th anniversary. I was also asked to write a final verse for Broken that would emphasise more fully the healing gift of time and the "slow action of love" that smooths and forms us through years in community. This is the verse that now concludes our song:

**Wholeness, loved into wholeness – to rest in the arms of each other and God**

**Beauty, discovering beauty – in the eyes of each other – in the passage of time**

Trish was there at that workshopping meeting and we shared the microphone and led the 110 people gathered at our concert in the song. Broken is our song.

Today the little boy who cried when he heard that Civil War marching song is 70 and still in love with song – still listening, making and being affected by the healing, troubling, unifying and encouraging mystery of song.

Scan here  
to listen to  
John's song  
Recherche Bay







## My life in song

**Rev. Ann Perrin** | Mission Facilitation Consultant

Music has always been an important and integral part of my life. Song often comes to me unbidden. Singing my life into being is now a spiritual discipline.

As a child my mother tells the story of how I used to narrate my life with song. From the age of about two I would accompany myself with a made-up song describing whatever I was doing. On the first day of Year 4, knowing I could begin to play the recorder, I fronted up at the teacher's door wanting to join the beginner recorder group.

At High School a gifted music teacher harnessed my love of low sounds by putting a Double Bass in my hands with a Tune a Day Book for Bass and writing a double bass part to every musical High School event. Youth Concerts, Prom Concerts, Music Camps, and the televised opening of the Opera House Concert provided me with the stimulus to know what I wanted to do once I left school.



So, my life before ministry was one long musical journey in that House and across the country. Before long I discovered that Opera and accompanying singing was my passion. Names like Sutherland, Pavarotti, Bocelli were part of that time as well as Farnham and INXS. I give thanks for the blessing and privilege that life brought me.

I was not a Christian through this part of my life but there was one event that planted a seed that God was to bring to fruition a few years down that track. I was invited to be part of an orchestra to perform Handel's Messiah as worship. For the string players the work was three hours of non-stop playing and there was to be only 10-minute interval. At the end of this worship service the silence was deafening! Absolute silence for minutes.

But for me in that silence an inkling began to form that Handel wanted to celebrate God first and foremost before the possibility of performance. It was profound. Who was the God that would inspire not just Handel but Bach, Mozart, and others to express their belief and confidence in God through music. It was a few years before I could start answering this question but my conversion and call to ministry, which happened outside the church, was accompanied by song and the inspiration provided by what I now name as the Holy Spirit.

Just over 1000 years ago, Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine Abbess, understood Jesus Christ as the Song of God. From our reformed and evangelical heritage, it was Martin Luther who believed that music was the expression of the God given harmony of the Cosmos, a means of preserving creation over the forces of dissolution. John Calvin described music as one of the bright sparking remnants of the Fall and an enduring testimony to God's goodness.

After 15 years in congregational ministry, I now work as a rural/regional mission consultant, a member of the Mission Enablement Team part of Uniting Mission and Education. I also have now realised that I have always thought missionally about music, so I often ask the question what do you sing? What we sing describes who we are.

We know that music is powerful, inspiring and helps make meaning. So now I encourage all who will listen that we need to sing ourselves into God's future. What this means if we take this seriously is to sing the songs today that are for the sake of God's tomorrow. These are the songs where we claim we are the foretaste of heaven. To sing ourselves into God's tomorrow I believe needs serious and thoughtful consideration. John Bell expresses this as every generation

...music  
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expression  
of the  
God given  
harmony of  
the Cosmos...

...the future  
God to which  
calls us, we  
sing in God's  
love

writing a new verse to much loved hymns. Finding the language of the current time and to even nuance songs more appropriately and theologically for today. He also encourages new words to our favourite hymn tunes. These tunes we know well not only reverberate with new words, but the old words sing themselves through into today as well.

Another aspect of thinking missionally about music is to be musically hospitable. If mission is the heart of the Triune God, the church exists for those not part of the church. We are prompted to consider what music is listened to outside of the church in your wider community. Hospitality means that we make space or a place in our worship for the style of music to which others might engage and respond.

So, to where are we inspired to move. May I suggest a couple of places you may or may not know to research new music that perhaps may move you to new understandings of God:

**Singing from the Lectionary:** This is a terrific resource that has a wide range of music for worship based on the Common Lectionary <http://lectionarysong.blogspot.com>

Song writer **David MacGregor** for contemporary songs lectionary based so we can offer the hospitality of God for those outside the church:

<https://togethertocelebrate.com.au>

**Resound Worship** is from the UK, but each song has different arrangements to match your musical resources in print and visual media. There is a cost but good value for money:

<https://www.resoundworship.org>

Also from our Uniting Church NSWACT Synod, hot off the press the new **Transforming Spirit Album:**

<https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/resources/transforming-spirit-album/>







# Songwriting

**Rev. Glen Spencer** | Director of Mission

I am a song writer.

It took me many years to be able to say that. For a long time it was much easier for me to say that “I write songs a bit” or “I do a little songwriting.”

I clearly remember the day when as part of a spiritual retreat I penned the following in my journal: *Being a songwriter is a significant part of who I am and who I believe God has called me to be. I believe that music+songs can deeply touch people. Songs can shape theology, soften hearts, rekindle hope, breathe new life, break spiritual strongholds and bring clarity and conviction. Songs can unite communities, instil vision and bring momentum to a movement. Songwriting is not just something I love to do – but a gift that God can use for Kingdom purposes - tools in God’s hands to bring about transformation in the lives of those who hear them and sing them.*

This moment shaped my identity and articulated something of why I believe songs are such beautiful expressions of grace. Songs are deeply formative. I love the way the Psalms are such an honest and raw expression of both faith and doubt. They resonate with us because they reflect a complex spectrum of human emotions and experiences clearly emanating from a place of authentic spirituality from those who wrote them. This resonance fosters a deep connection to the Psalms and invites us into spaces of formation and re-formation, reinforcing the idea that faith is not detached from the complexities of life but is intimately intertwined with them.

## **ChatGPT: Write a song in the style of Nick Cave.**

Earlier this year I read a wonderful blog by Nick Cave who was responding to the bizarre experience of being sent multiple songs by people who had generated lyrics of songs using Artificial Intelligence. His response beautifully articulates the deep creative process and vulnerability that is part of songwriting and indeed any genuine artistic expression.

*“Songs arise out of suffering, by which I mean they are predicated upon the complex, internal human struggle of creation and, well, as far as I know, algorithms don’t feel. Data doesn’t suffer. ChatGPT has no inner being, it has been nowhere, it has endured nothing, it has not had the audacity to reach beyond its limitations, and hence it doesn’t have the capacity for a shared transcendent experience, as it*

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*has no limitations from which to transcend. ChatGPT's melancholy role is that it is destined to imitate and can never have an authentic human experience, no matter how devalued and inconsequential the human experience may in time become.*

*What makes a great song great is not its close resemblance to a recognizable work. Writing a good song is not mimicry, or replication, or pastiche, it is the opposite. It is an act of self-murder that destroys all one has strived to produce in the past. It is those dangerous, heart-stopping departures that catapult the artist beyond the limits of what he or she recognises as their known self. This is part of the authentic creative struggle that precedes the invention of a unique lyric of actual value; it is the breathless confrontation with one's vulnerability, one's perilousness, one's smallness, pitted against a sense of sudden shocking discovery; it is the redemptive artistic act that stirs the heart of the listener, where the listener recognizes in the inner workings of the song their own blood, their own struggle, their own suffering. This is what we humble humans can offer, that AI can only mimic, the transcendent journey of the artist that forever grapples with his or her own shortcomings. This is where human genius resides, deeply embedded within, yet reaching beyond, those limitations."*<sup>1</sup>

Singing together is a unifying force that binds people together in a way few other things can. It not only allows us to express our shared identity, but it shapes it. In his book "Becoming what we sing", David Lemley argues that we sing "our way into selves, societies and cosmic perspectives."<sup>2</sup>

This is why I am delighted that the Uniting Church has recently released a collection of songs written by various members of our church – songs for worship, encouragement and reflection in an album entitled 'Transforming Spirit' aligning with the theme of Synod 2023. I encourage you to check out the album.

Here are links to two songs that I have written. Wild God was written as a reflection on the Synod 2021 theme and weaves together some key threads within the Basis of Union that I particular love (and is on the new Uniting Creative album). Sing Over Me is a song that held me through a time of unravelling and helped me trust in the steadfast love of God through moments of chaos and uncertainty. I share them as a part of my story and my journey as a songwriter in the hope they might encourage you and give expression to what the Spirit is working within you in this season.

### Wild God



### Sing Over Me



<sup>1</sup> Cave, Nick. "The Red Hand Files Issue #218", accessed 10 October 2023, <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/chat-gpt-what-do-you-think/>

<sup>2</sup> Lemley, David. *Becoming What We Sing* (Grand Rapids, Michigan : William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 27.





# All things musical

**Dr Anthony Rees** | Associate Head of School

Many years ago I worked as a professional trumpet player. I grew up in a musical family, my church experience involved a lot of music, and so almost as a matter of course when it came time for University studies I barely gave any thought to anything else. For years of my life my trumpets were never too far away, and if I wasn't playing one of them I was listening to music, going to concerts, poring over scores, searching out CD stores (this tells you how long ago it was!), singing to myself or wiggling my fingers as if I was playing scales on my instrument.

Those days are now well past (even while some of the ingrained habits remain!), but music still consumes a large part of my life and I am always interested to hear or hear about all things musical.

Two things happened to me in September which are related to this brief personal history! The first took place at Malua Theological College in Samoa. I was there to attend the Oceania Biblical Studies Association meeting and had a great time seeing old colleagues and making new friends. There were lots of highlights, but two moments stand out. On the final morning of the conference we gathered in the large church building on-site. It is a new building, shining white in the brilliant Pasifika sun, and enhanced by the installation of beautiful windows that depict symbols of the scriptures, and the sacred symbols of Samoan culture. In that beautiful place the sound of the choir and congregation reverberated and filled the air. One could hardly fail to be moved by power of the song and I found myself deeply moved as I joined my own voice to the heavenly sound surrounding me. Later that evening I was fortunate enough to sit in the back row as the choir rehearsed for the coming services that weekend. Even there, away from the rhythms of the liturgy and the intention of worship the singing worked its power on me. I sat with my friends (who happened to be the choir directors) and followed along in the book they handed me. The tunes were familiar enough, and I could make out the meaning of some of the words, but actually, they weren't necessary. As the voices swelled and the different parts filled out the harmony, all that was needed was present. In that moment, with those sounds, the LORD was praised.

The second happened here at UTC at a conference on theology and the Anthropocene. You might think that musical talk at a conference on ecological calamity could be out of place. But the conference reminded me that creation itself is engaged in the performance of its own symphony of praise, that goes on around us if we have Isaiah's "ears to hear." The scriptures famously speak of this reality:

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rocks cry out, trees clap their hands, the ocean roars. The anthropomorphisms point to an even greater reality: creation is singing its song, each creature playing its part, the rich harmony and counter-point filling the cosmos with energy. Indeed, I learnt during the course of those days that if one stills their mind and presses their ear to a tree, you can actually hear the tree drinking the water from the earth; you can hear the life of the tree coursing through it. It might take a few days to learn this art, but with patience it is possible. In a similar way other living things produce sound that can be heard, remarkable songs and tonalities that lie beyond our ears, but which can be heard through technological means. What all this technological advancement has demonstrated is that as the ecological system stretches and breaks, those sounds become less vibrant, like a trumpet played into a pillow. Creation's symphony of praise is turning into a different type of music; a strained echo of its natural timbre. As we degrade Earth's systems we are de-composing Earth's song.



To describe this as a tragedy is to say too little. There was a time before human habitation of Earth that this music played without us. Creation's song does not need us, but it is affected by us. And perhaps there is a future beyond human habitation of the planet where a new version of the music will be played. Some parts will be missing, and other parts may well emerge and take their place, and the LORD will still be praised. May it be so.

But while we are a part of creation's choir, should we not do what we can to contribute to the song? Are we right to overpower the ensemble, to play out of time and out of key? Shouldn't we be sensitive to the role the other parts contribute to the production of the song?

Musicians are always listening: to themselves, to the person next to them, to the people on the other side of the stage. And they are always questioning. Are we together? Are we in tune? Are we too loud? What can't we hear? The performance relies on sensitivity, on awareness, and trust. Playing on your own is fun, but by and large, music making is a social activity that requires a deep level of engagement with others. It seems to me that this is a powerful illustration of our relationship with Earth. In fact, it is more than an illustration, because it relies on exactly the same action: sensitivity, awareness and trust. These are both behaviours and commitments, and so we are all capable of them. Are we in tune? Are we too loud? What parts are buried and need to be brought to the foreground? Are we actually listening?

All of us play a part in Earth's song, whether we identify ourselves as musicians or not. And even if we don't, we can learn the lesson of the musician: to listen intently and respond with sensitivity. The song will be richer for it.

# News from Saltbush

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

As we come to the end of 2023, I'm thankful for the year the Saltbush Team have had; the places where we have been welcomed and the people who have invited us into their spaces and sat with us. We have sought to continue our creative work, shaping worship, dwelling in the Gospels, providing places for people to explore life and faith together, while at the same time working in the wider church to bring about change and encouraging connections and structures for the future.

I want to thank those people, groups, congregations, Presbyteries and Regions who support and encourage us along the way. We don't take this for granted and see this as part of our Saltbush missional practice based on Luke 10: 1-12. I want to also write that I'm thankful for Monique Potter who is part of the Synod Secretariat and her creativity and willingness to help with Ruminations and many of the bits and pieces that go along with Saltbush.

The year ahead into 2024 is a big one for us as a team. Peter Overton will continue as Regional Minister in the Far North Coast and Geoff Wellington will continue as Regional Minister in the Riverina. Each of these Regions are overseen by a Regional Partnership which is led by the Synod Associate Secretary, Rev. Bronwyn Murphy, and supported by Synod staff, the Saltbush team, the Regional Ministers and local people on the ground. This is indeed an example of a broad church working together.

The Saltbush team's Scattered Community Ministers are now Rev. Tim Jensen, Rev. Mark Faulkner and we welcome Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas. Yvonne begins with the Saltbush team on 1st. December. We are thrilled to have Yvonne within the team and for her gifts of creativity, grounded theology and ministry practice alongside her grasp of the little movement that Saltbush is. You will get to meet Yvonne more, both online and in person, as the year ahead unfolds.

We're also thankful to be welcoming another member to the Saltbush Scattered Community Minister team from 1st January.

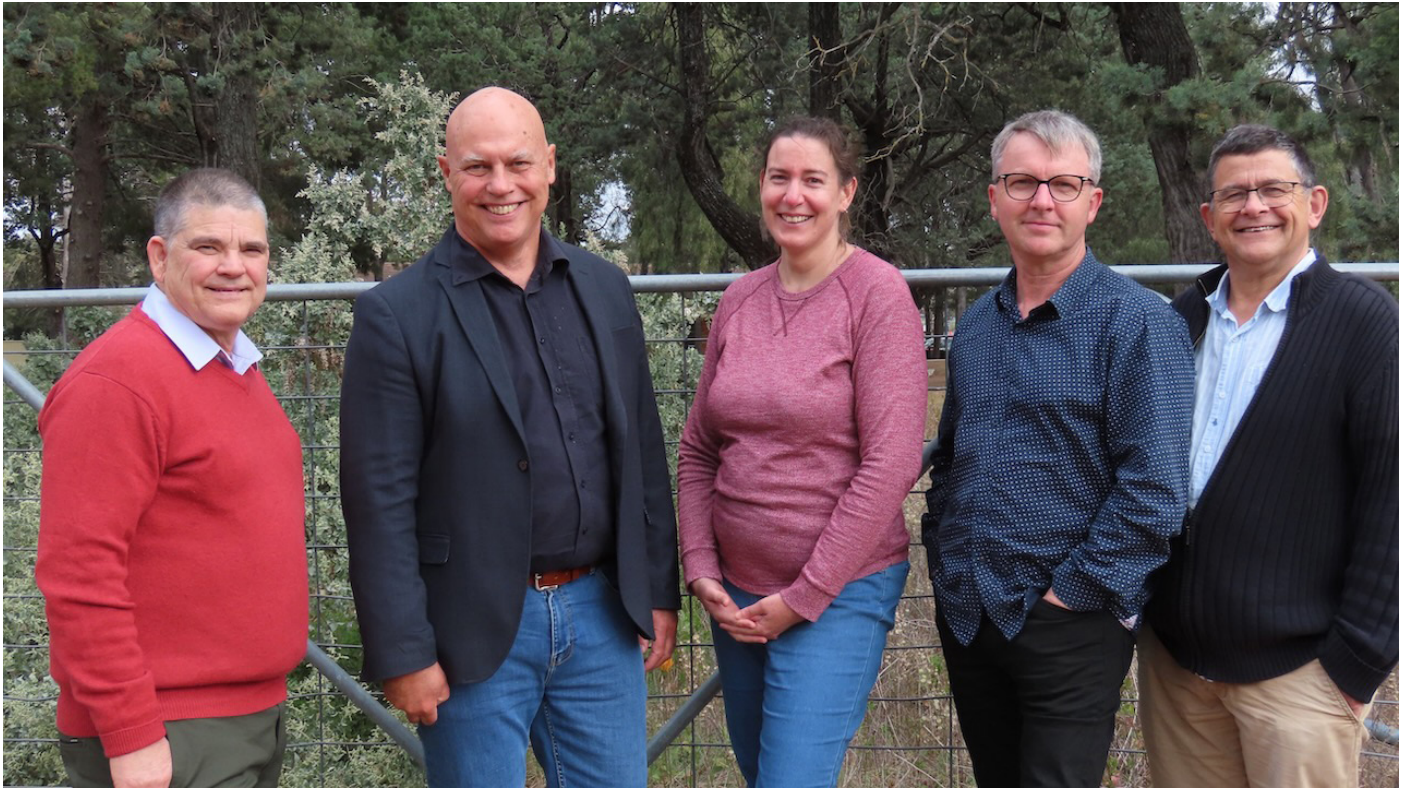
As the Saltbush team changes and grows we look forward to shooting some new spaces and places for Christian community as we continue to explore life and faith together within a grounded theology amongst the global neighbourhood in which we find ourselves in 21st. Century.

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The first part of 2024 for the Saltbush Scattered Community Ministers will be to both shape our team within a grounding of both gospel and practical practice and then to envisage what might be unfolding for us within our ministry.

The Saltbush team sits within Uniting Mission and Education under Rev. Glen Spencer who is also an encouragement to us along the way and into 2024.



Friends, we look forward to sitting alongside you in our cafés, gatherings, retreats, meetings and conversations as well as sharing with you through Word around the Bush, Ruminations and a few new opportunities as the year unfolds ahead of us. The Saltbush team are always mindful of the broad congregation in which we live and minister and we send our greetings and peace to you as we draw closer to the season of Advent and mystery of the birth of Jesus the Christ.

Peace to you all.

*Scott Tim Yvonne Mark . Petr*



# 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.

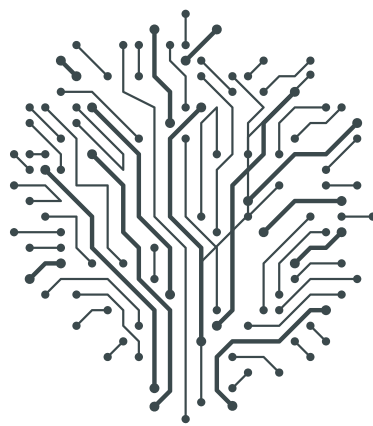
You can donate generally towards Saltbush and this will include the cost of enabling the printing of Ruminations.

To donate please make a direct transfer:

Bank: Uniting Financial Services  
Account Name: UCA Synod Office - Saltbush Project  
**BSB: 634-634**  
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UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY