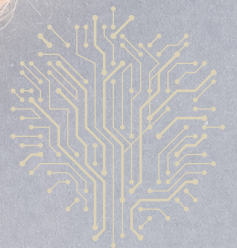


The Great Unravelling



SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

The Great Unravelling is produced by Saltbush as part of the work of the NSW & ACT Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia.

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

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Are you interested in reading **Joining God in the Great Unravelling** by **Alan J. Roxburgh** as an eBook from Camden Theological Library?



Camden Theological Library

A resource of the Uniting Church in
Australia, NSW/ACT Synod

<https://www.library.nsw.uca.org.au/contacting-us/contact-us>

Welcome

Please read this first!

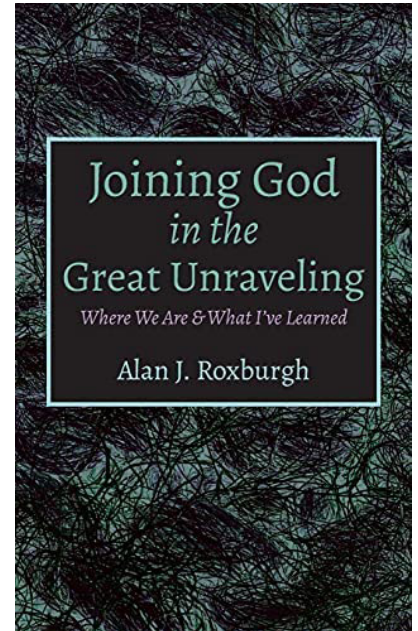
Welcome to **The Great Unravelling!**

The Saltbush team have prepared these six conversations as part of our reading of the book:

Joining God in the Great Unravelling by Alan J. Roxburgh.¹

However, these conversations are not a study guide to the book, but an invitation to open ourselves to deeply consider who and how we, the church, our christian communities, are participating in the ways of God beyond ourselves.

These are not easy things to think about. These are not easy conversations. Limited number of Alan Roxburgh's book Joining God are available to borrow from the Saltbush team or from the Camden Theological Library.



In this book, Roxburgh writes:

Like a growing majority across society, congregations are characterized by fragility and anxieties about their future.

In the midst of these disruptions congregations are bombarded with programs and aspirational calls to be God's... missional, adaptive, weird, innovative, evangelistic people. But in all these calls from gurus and leaders this underlying fraying of belonging is too often unaddressed. To mix metaphors, when one has a toothache, its difficult to think about someone else....

What has to happen for congregations to understand and address this situation? First, they have to rediscover how to talk with and listen to one another about their experiences of fragility and loss of belonging. There isn't much of this listening happening right now. Second, in a similar way they also need to do this same listening in their own communities².

¹ Permission to reprint and quote excerpts granted from Alana J Roxburg WIPF & Stock publishers, Oregon
² Pp.25-26

These conversations are an invitation to sit with others from your congregation and discuss, but also listen. Not only listen to each other, but listen to a wider voice speaking beyond ourselves.

The Saltbush team realise (we include ourselves in this) how hard it is to discuss and think beyond what we have known for so long within the church. This challenges us to listen to each other. This challenges us to see God beyond the church. This challenges us to listen and look to the neighbourhoods in which we find ourselves, even if we think we know them and they are familiar to us.

The nitty gritty of The Great Unravelling conversations!

Each conversation has a theme and you are encouraged to lead yourselves through the conversations one by one. You don't need a professional to lead you through, you just need honesty and a willingness to ponder both the present and the future. Remember, lasting change comes from relationships that are built on honest reflection and a passion towards living out what we believe.

You will want to draw into your conversations the presence of Christ and a sense that Christian community is like the first gatherings of Christians; the expression of the way of Christ.

We would also suggest that you include in your conversations a genuine act of hospitality. This is central to the heart of healthy Christian community and sets the tone for your conversation. Be generous. Be comfortable. Be hospitable.

Each conversation goes like this:

10 min A time to begin

20 min A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

30 min A time for conversation

10 min A time to ponder in silence

15 min A time to respond

5 min A time to end



Click here to view
the Introduction
video

Remember, you can always contact your Saltbush Team if you have any questions, comments or simply want some contact along the way.

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Conversation One

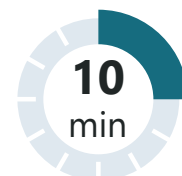
Disruption



Welcome to our first conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Disruption**. We are thinking about ways or times when our life journey has been disrupted in one way or another and within those times, moments where perhaps we have had a sense of God being in the midst of the disruption. They might be times of personal disruption or times when there has been a wider disruption to a way that we thought would be enduring, certain or set out before us. Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together.

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: Acts 16: 1-12.

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas

***16** Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. ²He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. ³Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.*

Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

The Conversion of Lydia

¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

We think on the interruptions, disruptions and ways unexpected as part of our lives.

Silence

We think on a God who has come amongst us as in ways of disruption – into the lives of Sarah, Samuel, Mary, the disciples – Peter, James and John, the Pharisees, the woman at the well, Nicodemus....

Come amongst us now as Spirit, within and around, as we sit in this time as Christian community and ponder what is known and unknown before us.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Disruption" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.

20
min



Click here to watch
"Disruption"

*The following reflection is based on Roxburgh -
Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 108-109.*

Acts 16:1-15 is part of Luke's account of how Paul and his companions found themselves, unexpectedly, in Philippi and their encounter with Lydia. Luke's underlying story is about how the Spirit continually disrupts the journey and plans of Paul and his company. Roxburgh suggests: "The longer we dwell in this text the more it confronts us with the fact that a primary work of the Spirit is **disruption**."

Luke describes how Paul and his companions are about the making and going about of their plans and ideas and yet this comes to nothing. This includes speaking in places, travelling to places and finding a synagogue in which to preach and teach. Luke describes this as being "prevented" by the Spirit.

Instead, Paul and his companions go outside the city walls where they encounter a group of gentile women and of course one of them is Lydia. There are multiple layers here... the going outside of the walls... the meeting with the women who are gentiles... the presence of Lydia.... from which grows an unexpected community of Christians.

The passage says; "The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to listen...." It's the opposite to being "prevented". And as Roxburgh says on page 108, "God is already ahead of us, pressing forward with the healing of people and their communities down by a river bank among a group of Gentile women. The church comes into being as Paul and his friends participate in this ferment." The ferment of the Spirit.

It's easy to find people who believe that when something doesn't happen God mustn't have wanted it to happen and when something does happen that must be the work of God too. People talk about this as doors opening and doors closing. However, perhaps this is way too simplistic, if not convenient, and makes God into simply a puppeteer pulling all the strings.

We are aware of all the plans and designs that we personally make, or the church strategically works on and often it seems we include a language that is religious to help us confirm our choices and the directions we want to take. However, disruption includes a couple of traits. Firstly, disruption of the Spirit is inconvenient and often doesn't have an outcome that is perceived or understood at the start.

Secondly, disruption of the Spirit seems to sit outside the practices, people and expected ways of not only the Church, but also our images of what God “wants”.

Perhaps this is what we draw to mind each Pentecost; the disruptive ways the Spirit draws close and amongst a diverse group of people of different nationalities and languages; there the Spirit burns and blows. [Acts 2]

So, what does this all say about the church now and disruption as part of our experiences of church and the part we play?

We are intently or even vaguely aware that there has been an erosion of trust in institutions and the movement of the church away from the centre to the edge of our society and culture. We are also aware of decline and you can each think of the way you see, feel and know of the decline. Within the Uniting Church in Australia, one example of decline is some of the abilities, resour – their ability, resources, leadership, capability and faithful dwelling. Some will acknowledge this and some still live in denial.

Where in all this is the ferment of the Spirit?

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith.



How do you feel about the sentence from Roxburgh... “The longer we dwell in this text (Acts 16: 1-12) the more it confronts us with the fact that a primary work of the Spirit is disruption”?

What other accounts or stories of disruption can you think of?

What does this “disruption” mean in your context?

Where is disruption in the life of your church, your Christian community, and what does that mean for you as a church? Is this the Spirit’s ferment?

A time to ponder in silence



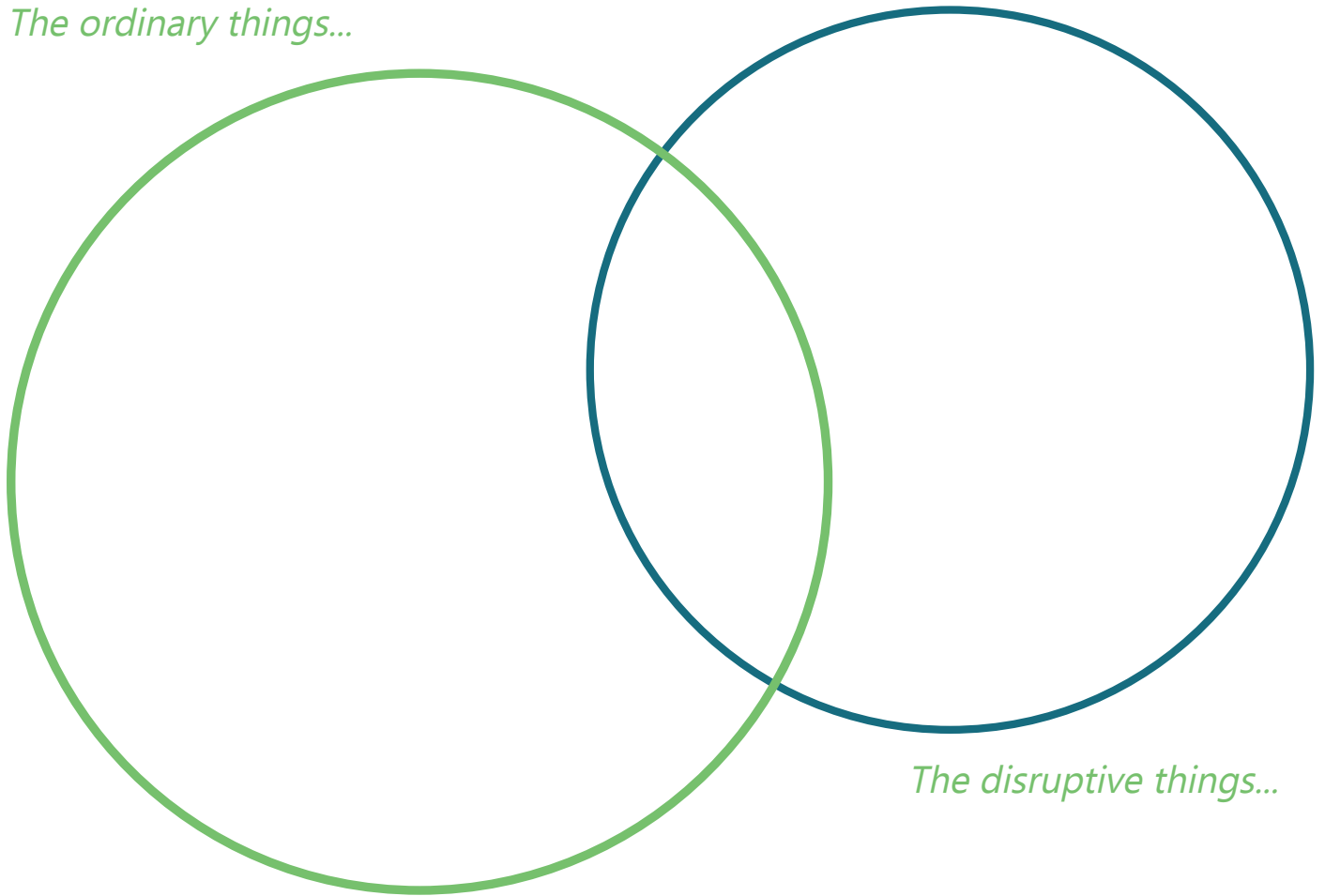
Without over-thinking it, write in the circles, both the ordinary, expected things in your **life** and then those things that feel like disruptions.

Or

Without over-thinking it, write in the circles, both the ordinary, expected things in your **church** and then those things that feel like disruptions.

What is the overlapping part of the circles?

The ordinary things...



The disruptive things...

Then sit looking and reflecting at what you have written and some ways of responding to this disruption.

A time to respond

You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.



Sit looking at what you have written and choose how you would like to respond to this disruption.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you
And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

We pray for each other as we go from here.

May we be open to the disruptions of God and have eyes to see and the spirit to realise the ways in which God comes.

Bless us and those we meet along the way.

Father, Son and Spirit.

Amen.



Conversation Two

Unravelling



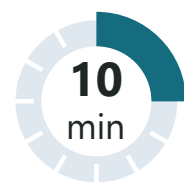
Welcome to our second conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Unravelling**. We are thinking about ways where God has been unravelling religious systems, it appears to have been an activity of the Holy Spirit from the birth of time. We now live in an era where there are fewer people in Australia claiming any religious affiliation let alone Christianity. That the way we share the message of the Gospel using programs, projects and missional outreach is unravelling.

What do you think God is unravelling?

Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together.

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

At this time and at all times loving God, may we be receptive to the wildness and freedom of your Spirit.

May we have eyes to see and ears to listen.

In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Unravelling" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.



20
min



Click here to watch
"Unravelling"

*The following reflection is based on Roxburgh -
Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 7-10 and 57-61.*

The Word made flesh for all the world (from John 1) is a shift in thinking, that locates God outside of the church or Temple. Affirming that the Word 'was in the world' and has always been in the world. That the place for those who believe the Word is and always has been in the world amongst the unravelling. If this thinking locates God outside the church, then those who believe are situated with God outside the church. This does not negate the place of the church but challenges the understanding of how we are to be a Christian community within this thinking.

It would be helpful to acknowledge this is not new but comes from the life of Jesus, who was always amongst the people in villages and towns. The synagogues and Temple rejected him.

Furthermore, unravelling religious systems appears to have been an activity of the Holy Spirit from the birth of time. Where a system has relied purely on its law, tradition, professional/clerical elites or hierarchical power.

Now we live in an era where institutions are viewed with suspicion. Those who claim an elitism or authority are questioned and in the Australian census report there are fewer people claiming any religious affiliation let alone Christianity.

Roxburgh considers the idea that the Churches message of the gospel is unravelling.

That the way we share the message of the Gospel using programs, projects and missional outreach is unravelling.

That the way Church life is managed and controlled through determining growth by numbers of people, record keeping, adhering to key performance indicators is unravelling.

Churches requiring clergy to be the face of the church is unravelling. We are invited to join God in the unravelling.

“The journey of joining with God calls for a huge transformation of a congregation’s self-understanding, habits and practices. The Spirit invites us to do something that few families, ethnic or affinity groups would choose: cross boundaries and enter the lives of others who are different and have their own stories, practices and traditions. — Roxburgh, Joining God, 107

Joining God is about being with rather than doing for one’s neighbour. It involves discovering how to be in relationship with people rather than expecting some kind of return for service (in this way the church looks more like a shop).

Roxburgh proposes four ways in which the church has been misdirected in their practice and understanding of mission.

- driven by technique;
- rely heavily on methods of management under clear controls and guidelines (i.e. no Spirit risk);
- their primary concerns are about how to make their church successful;
- clergy centric: driven by the minister not the congregation.

These four characteristics can all be done through our own efforts without really attempting to discern the activity of God in the world. Roxburgh argues that God is unravelling the churches dependency on these four characteristics. To quote Roxburgh “a resurgence of Christian life has less to do with the ways of being shown how to be the church by professional consultants and more to do with the recovery of habits that had long been at the centre of gospel life such as dwelling in, with, and among the people in neighbourhoods, dwelling in Scripture, listening to the Spirit’s ferment from the bottom up and outside in, being formed by liturgies of Christian time. Such practices lie at the heart of Christian ways of knowing.” (-Roxburgh, Joining God - page 58)

Congregations need to rediscover or enlarge how they understand God as central to their lives and in their neighbourhood.

The challenge for churches is in how they might come to know God beyond how we have always done mission, how to rediscover our engagement with a God who is the primary agent in our everyday lives, communities, and neighbourhoods. Only by discerning God ahead of us and risking joining God in the local can we, the congregations, recover our identity as Christian communities.

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith



Where do you see God unravelling the Church?

What do you think is the focus of the Spirit's unravelling?

How do you understand what the Spirit's ferment is?

A time to ponder in Silence

Follow this piece of string with your pen and write down any thoughts that come to you as you move around the string. If you come to a cross over and feel as though you need to stop, write down your thoughts at that point. What other thoughts came as you were following the string?



A time to respond

You can decide as a group if you want to share this part, or not.



Then sit looking and reflecting at what you have written, and choose how you would like to respond to this Unravelling.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

Gracious God, help us to let go of relying on our sole human agency.

May we sit with those feelings of anxiousness and failure and allow them to move us past our need to control.

Holy Spirit, may we discern your ferment and not fear where you are leading.

In Christ.

Amen.

Conversation Three

Discerning



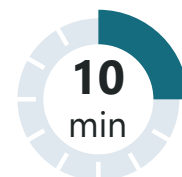
Welcome to our third conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Discerning**. In the disruption and unravelling that is being experienced in the western world, how do we know what God is doing? How do we, as Christian community learn to see what the Spirit is doing ahead of us in order to join God there? How might we as Christian community move beyond “fixing things” through assessment, studies, asset mapping, strategies and needs?

Christian communities down through the ages have in answering these questions turned to “Discernment”. Diana Butler Bass puts it this way; “Discernment is the way that Christians talk about deciding on a course of action that they believe is grounded in God’s will and that will help realise the reign of God.”³

Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: Acts 15: 1-21

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

The Council at Jerusalem

15 *Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.⁷ After there had been*

³ (Bass, 1983, p. 93) Diana Butler Bass, Ph.D., is an award-winning author, popular speaker, inspiring preacher, and one of America’s most trusted commentators on religion and contemporary spirituality.

much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' ¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago."¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled^[e] and from blood. ²¹For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

We come together to discern in times of chaos, doubt, fear, expectation and excitement of what the Spirit is fermenting in our neighbourhood.

Silence

We think on a God who reveals God's self through out creation and in the coming of Jesus the Christ.

Come amongst us now as Spirit, and open our hearts and minds to your leading that we might catch a glimpse of where you invite us to join in.

Come amongst us now Spirit and be within and around us, as we sit in this time as Christian community and ponder what is and what lies before us.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Discernment" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.



[Click here to watch "Discernment"](#)

The following reflection is based on Roxburgh - Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 139-151

How do we know? A question that people often take for granted – we just know. Perhaps they assume "that's the way we have always done things around here". Sometimes people feel they "know" because of cultural assumptions or because of particular values that are important to them and to consider thinking, feeling or doing things a different way doesn't work so well for them. All this may blind us to knowing differently or practicing discerning what it is that we know.

In the scripture reading I think we hear most of those assumptions going on. A long cultural and religious tradition blinds some to the new thing God is doing. That is revealing God's self to the Gentiles through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. This new revealing of God brings forth a new expression and practices of what it is to be followers of Jesus. Alan Roxborough makes the point that our first way of knowing is grounded in God's self-revelation. That is beyond our own cultural norms and influences of the modern era. Beyond, "I think, so therefore

I am⁴ ". Knowing happens in this factual lineal way, but it brings limitations and often traps us into our own assumptions. Peter, Paul and Barnabas at the Council of Jerusalem point towards this other way of knowing. It recognises the actions of God that reveal something of the nature of God's self beyond ourselves and our knowing.

What do we experience of God's self-revelation? The two most obvious ways God is revealed to us is through creation and through the coming of Jesus into the world. Both of these ways reveal the nature of God to be relational. The whole creation is dependent on the interrelationship of earth, sea, sky, plants, animals and humans to work well. We know deeply when we experience such interrelationship because we are dependent on the other. In the birth of Jesus as God with us, God reveals this relational nature again. God's choice to be one with us rather than removed, otherworldly and distant is personal and relational. Our discerning and knowing then is tied up in our relationship with the other. If we have no, or little relationship, we cannot know or discern where God may be active in our neighbourhood and join in.

Our discerning and knowing is deeply dependent on mutual revelation of ourselves. We can gather facts and data about others and our neighbourhood. We can study them at a distance and make assumptions about them. But until we reveal ourselves to each other we cannot really know. This takes time and a willingness to dwell in the place of the other to really get to know their place, their rhythms of life and what they have of themselves to reveal in mutual trust. When such relationship is fostered, knowing comes from the heart space, a reflection of the very nature of God's self.

Of course, such mutual relationship requires risk and commitment. God risks moving right into our space through Jesus. Paul and Barnabas risked moving into the neighbourhood of the Gentiles. They risked moving from the centre of their world to discover what God was doing. In the process they gave up somethings because in the mutual relationship they recognised God's new thing happening. But it takes commitment and risking what we think we know to discover what else there is going on.

In all this discerning of what we know, it seems obvious that as individuals we can't do that on our own. Because there are times when as individuals we find it hard to know.

At these times we need each other to hold the knowing for us.

⁴ Descartes, Kant, Locke – Philosophers of Modernity

Paul and Barnabas hold this greater knowing for the Council of Jerusalem when they cannot know any longer. Together they discover a new knowing and discern this new activity of God in a place they never imaged they would. Sometimes it requires the other, those strangers not like us to really know and hold us in this practice of discerning where God is active in our neighbourhood.

The church at times falls for the trap that it can turn discernment on and off as it chooses. That if it puts in place process and ways of doing things it can claim God's hand in the decision making. However, Roxburgh reminds us that knowing and discernment requires practice, an ongoing commitment to the honing of the skill of knowing. Perhaps he is suggesting that this is a way of "being" rather than one off choices driven by the dominant facts and reasons of our time.

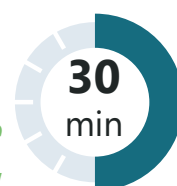
In summary Alan Roxburgh identifies six ways of discernment that lead to a deep knowing of God's activity in the world.

- Knowing is grounded in God's self-revelation
- Knowing is fundamentally relational
- Knowing requires the other to reveal themselves
- Knowing involves risk and commitment
- Knowing requires community
- Knowing is a skill that must be continuously practiced

If Christian communities are to "know" and to practice the art of discernment then grounding ourselves in these six practices offers us a way forward out of the unravelled church and into the neighbourhood where God is already at work.

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith



When you personally consider what "discernment" is, (that is knowing what God is inviting us to join in with) how do you feel or think that takes place?

How do you feel about Roxburgh's six stages of "discernment"?

Where is discernment in the life of your church, your Christian community, and what does that mean for you as a church?

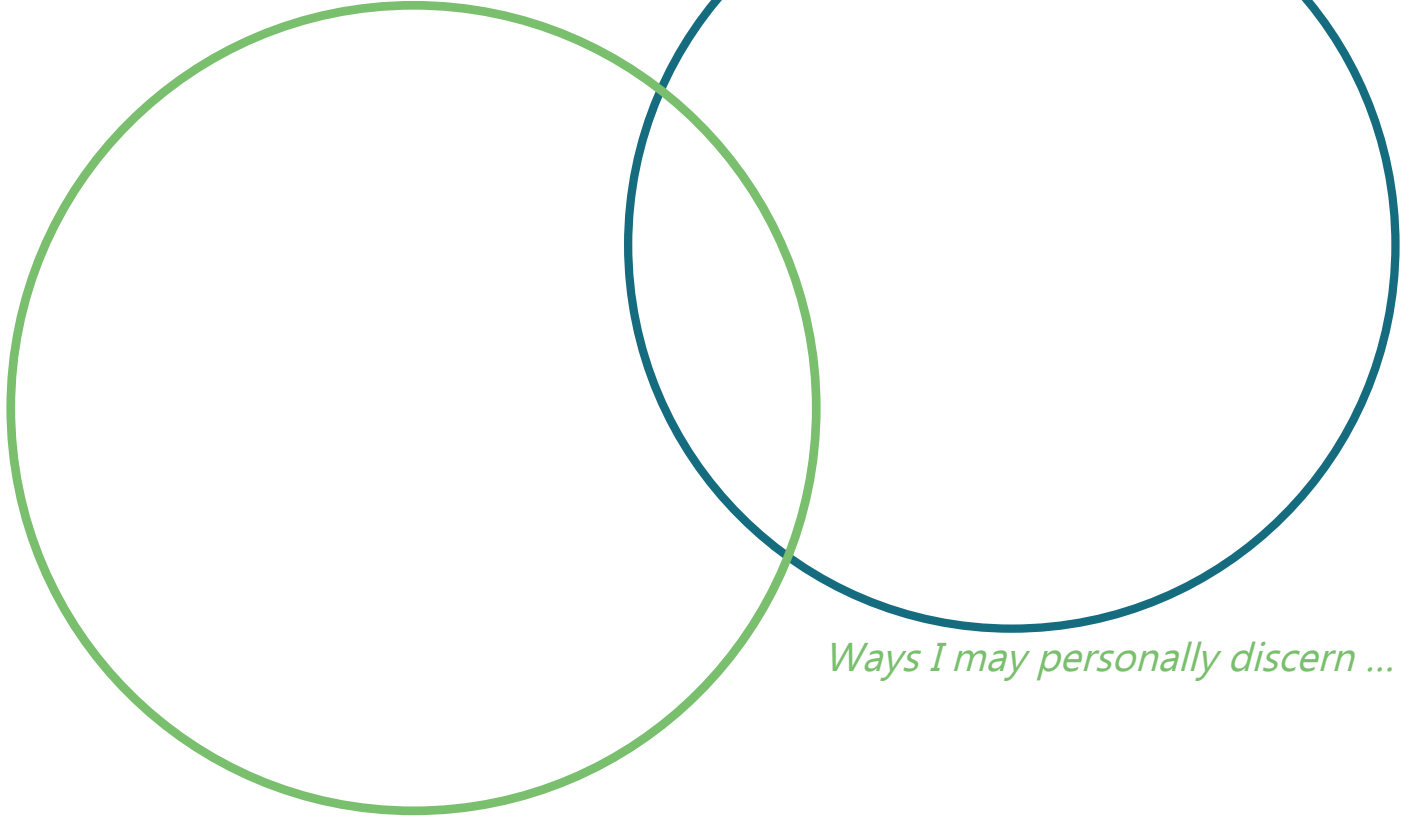
A time to ponder in silence



Without over-thinking it, write in the circles, the ways the church may Discern and the ways I may personally discern.

Where do you see them overlapping?

Ways the "church" may discern...



Ways I may personally discern ...

A time to respond



You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.

Sit looking at what you have written and choose how you would like to respond to this discernment.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

We pray for each other as we go from here.

May we be open to the disruptions of God and have eyes to see and the spirit to realise the ways in which God comes.

Bless us and those we meet along the way.

Father, Son and Spirit.

Amen.

Conversation Four

Language



Welcome to our fourth conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Language**. This doesn't just mean what we speak or say; it's not just about words. We are thinking about the way we are shaped by what we know around us; this includes our customs, traditions, and for people of the church it's our buildings, liturgies, institutions and spoken language. We are talking about all this as the "language" that touches how we think about life, faith... and Christian community and how relevant it is to others. This means how easy or difficult it is for others to understand the "language" we cling to and use within the walls and institution of the church. Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together.

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: Luke 10: 1-12.

The Mission of the Seventy.

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹"Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." ¹² I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

We think on the things that have shaped us as part of the church.

Silence

We think on a God who has spoken into all the traditions, and institutions, and places and languages down throughout the ages. We think on a God who continues to speak and call us and the church into life.

Silence

Come amongst us now as Spirit, within and around, as we sit in this time as Christian community and ponder what is and what lies before us.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Language" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.



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min



Click here to watch
"Language"

*The following reflection is based on Roxburgh -
Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 82-88.*

Within every culture, organisation, group... and church there is a language that goes along with it. We're not thinking about different languages like French or English, but about the language we use and express in all its different forms including buildings, activities and expressions. At times, whatever language is used becomes so accepted by those who use it they assume, without thinking about it, that everyone else knows what they mean and what they are talking about. For example, we've all heard someone use an abbreviation (initialism) thinking that everyone will know what an EL2 or even a CEO is and what the WHO does. We've heard people use a name for a group without any explanation as to what the group is or does. Some buildings tell us that we're not welcome, even if a sign says that everyone is, and some groups (and churches) simply change plans without communicating to anyone beyond their circle. What does that say?

The language we use shapes us – how we see the world and how we interact with others. It affects who we are and how we live out who we say we are.

In ways (organisations/politics/churches) the language we use is already given, ready for us to use, but as Roxburgh says: We can be using language to describe our experiences in ways that actually no longer represent what we have come to believe." (Roxburgh - Joining God p. 83) Within church life perhaps you have found yourself saying (or singing) something that you no longer feel is what you want to say or what you have come to believe. It might even be a "language" that doesn't express what you want to say.

Recently I was in a conversation where we started to talk about "meaning". We then went on to talk about the absence of talking within the wider community about the way of forgiveness, or hope, or love, beyond what might be found in romantic comedies. Within church life the language we use may also affirm the absence of meaning, forgiveness, hope or love, even though we think everyone knows that's what we talk about and we might even believe ourselves that we are expressing these things, when we aren't. Again, this might be in our words, but also our ways, buildings, structures and attitudes.

In our reading from Luke 10 there is a language of valuing others, a simple announcing of peace, an affirmation of hospitality and a dwelling for a time without the need to race away. It's a remarkable reading of shaping a language based on the way of Christ amongst the people met along the way.

On page 88 of Roxburgh's book (paragraph 2) he writes sharply about the way our language and imagination as Christians and as the church is "being continually shrivelled". These comments are part of his reflection on the significance for us to consider deeply the language we use, intentionally and unintentionally, and our part within this along the way.

It's worth us being curious about this as part of our conversation.

The ways we may use language (in all its forms) to exclude or confine.

The way we may use language to remove even a sense of God's presence.

The way we may use language that reflects a consuming, product driven nature.

The way we may use language that has been simply handed to us as part of tradition or institution that we haven't given thought to or been aware of and have no idea what we are saying to others through it.

I would suggest, on reading Roxburgh, that Language (in all its forms) is entwined in who we are as Christians and our declining place within society, our ability to perceive what God is doing in the neighbourhood and is a significant part of the unravelling.

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith



Did anything jump out at you as you read either the book or the comments and thoughts above? It's ok if you have other thoughts.

What do you feel about all the language/voices/traditions/words that are so much of our life within the church?

In your conversations with each other where is your "God talk"?

A time to ponder in silence

You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.



Looking at this picture, what are some of the many layers of language that you see? What is it saying?

What are some of the languages of your church that unsettle you?

How do you think people in the wider community, society, your town.... Hear, see, feel, experience, the language of the church?



A time to respond

You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.



Sit looking at what you have written and choose how you would like to respond to this language.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

We pray for each other as we go from here.

May we be open to the disruptions of God and have eyes to see and the spirit to realise the ways in which God comes.

Bless us and those we meet along the way.

Father, Son and Spirit.

Amen.

Conversation Five

Posture

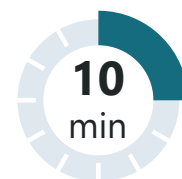


Welcome to our fifth conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Posture**. Often, we associate the word posture with our general physical mechanics. How we stand, walk, position our head and shoulders, and engage our core. How well we are postured then influences how affective we are in our physical pursuits. Roxburgh speaks of his own bad posture where he walked with shoulders hunched, head bent and feet walking like a duck. The two things he needed to do was identify his body's default posture and then he had to practice walking with shoulders back, chin out, head up, and feet moving in a straight line. His trainer told him his posture was a pre-requisite for the training he wanted to do. In my own life as a rugby coach of under 10's we began each training session with working on posture. These young ones not only needed to make sure their backs were straight and heads up, they also needed to work on lowering their centre of gravity, and using their legs to drive through tackles, rucks and mauls. A correct posture meant everything before they learnt the very foundational skills of rugby union. In this conversation we are going to consider how the church explores changing its posture.

Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together.

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: John 3:1-8

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

God of the cosmos, speak into our lives, show us where you want us to be and where you don't want us to be.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Posture" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.



The following reflection is based on Roxburgh - Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 93-98.

As with our physical posture, we can use the same ideas for how we are postured, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

[Click here to watch "Posture"](#)

When thinking about Nicodemus who adopted a Pharisee's posture, this posture meant that they would keep people answerable to the religious leader's interpretation of the law and adherence to this interpretation may over-ride the grace of God. In many ways their interpretation became the God and the posture imposed by the Pharisees portrayed a punitive and inflexible God. For Nicodemus such a posture blocked him from the freedom of knowing the wildness of God and the freedom of the Spirit. It stopped him from being prepared for the movement of God in his life, when God was confined by the Pharisees Posture. Jesus suggests that he change his posture and be born from above. Being born from above then requires a more flexible, adventurous, and trusting posture.

The postures of the church, the churches with which we are so familiar, have become shaped and confined by professionalism, management, and control. The norms of social expectations, consumerism and individualism are now the underlying norms shaping the church. Without removing these postures there is no chance these churches can respond to God's great unravelling in any kind of life-giving way. We are in a season where society no longer values the churches viability due to a post-pandemic hangover and a consumerist culture with its promise to give us all the good things of life. Congregations and clergy must now discover the costly need to take on a different kind of posture; one within which they are no longer in control.

In Western society an individualistic, consumerist mind set appears embedded in how we view life. Our communities are then geared for this way of living to be optimised; education is geared to develop people to be financially independent and successful, governments are deemed effective if they are good managers of the economy, companies serve profit margins and shareholders, to consume is to live. It appears that all our institutions exist only to serve themselves.

Unfortunately, the church is no different. The challenge is to move from this embedded, rusted-on understanding of society and the church, which will require sustained, collective, long-term commitment.

To learn a new posture there will need to be an intentional laying down of the systems of control and power that we have used to understand ourselves. Only in this laying down can we discover those pathways that might return us to our own core reality; God's reign.

Sources of authority, long-established structures, taken-for-granted techniques for managing and fixing our world are suddenly no longer working. Normal default responses of finding a new fix or new technique or programme are appearing completely inadequate. What is required is a different posture of body, mind and Spirit. Such changes are profoundly disruptive. The gift of this tentative, anxiety-filled moment is the invitation to turn our attention to where and how God's Spirit is inviting us into relationships with those in our communities. A focus on fixing our churches with past ways will misdirect us from what God is doing. The churches core reality in God's reign are lived out through discerning the Spirit's ferment and in relationships. Discerning comes from asking what God is doing and where we are being called to join with God.

This new direction calls us into our neighbourhoods.

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith



Identify the churches posture which inhibits encountering God in the neighbourhood.

What kind of postures does the church need to practice in order to be receptive to the Spirit's activity?

A time to ponder in silence



Sit and begin to explore your own posture. Where do you feel heavy, light, pain, tiredness, aching, happy, energetic, joy, loneliness, hopefulness, creativeness, uncomfortableness or any other postures you can think of?

How would you describe the Church's posture?

It might be helpful in your meditation to colour the leaf.



A time to respond

You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.



Sit looking at what you have written or thought and choose how you might like to respond to this posture.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

Eternal Presence, move us to a place of surrender.

Take us on a journey of discovery.

Reveal to us where you want us to be.

In Christ.

Amen.

Conversation Six

Apprenticing



Welcome to our sixth conversation! Our theme that we will talk about here is **Apprenticing**. Alan Roxburgh offers four ways in which individuals and Christian community can engage in Joining the Spirit's ferment. In the last conversations we have explored discerning, discovering a new language and adopting a posture. In this conversation a fourth way in which we as individuals and as Christian community might find a way forward in a disrupted and unravelling time is to apprentice ourselves to "Elders and Mentors" that help us navigate our way to recognising God's activity in the neighbourhood.

Simply let this conversation unfold and see what you find in your time together.

A time to begin

This is a time to gather, pray and simply be.



Reading: Acts 18: 24-28 & Galatians 1: 11-24

Acts 18: 24-28

Ministry of Apollos

²⁴ Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers^[a] encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

Galatians 1: 11-24

Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship

¹¹For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

(a) Acts 18:27 Gk brothers.

(b) Acts 18:28 Or the Christ

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

Simply read the passage in silence and then sit for a time to ponder it alone.

Prayer

We come together remembering, O God those who have been our "Elders and Mentors" across the years and we give thanks for the gift they have been to us. They have shaped our lives and faith in so many ways. We would not be the people we are without their deep love, trust and guiding and we give thanks to you for them.

silence

Open our eyes, our hearts and ears to recognise those Elders and Mentors who can shape our journey together into the future.

Come amongst us now Spirit and be within and around us, as we sit in this time as Christian community and ponder what is and what lies before us.

Amen.

A time to read and listen as we begin our conversations

You are invited to listen to our video for "Apprenticing" and then read through with the Saltbush team the following comments.

20
min



Click here to watch
"Apprenticing"

*The following reflection is based on Roxburgh -
Joining God in the Great Unravelling, pages 98-104*

If indeed our experience of the church and our ways of leading within its organisational framework have come unstuck, how can we personally encounter the revelation of God that leads to conversion?

Our Bible readings give the accounts of Apollos and Saul/Paul as they are "apprenticed" following "conversion" type experiences. That is a "conversion" to a whole new way of being and leading and knowing. Both Apollos and Paul entered into deep relationships of dependence, commitment and trust with "Elders - Mentors". Alan Roxburgh suggests that such "Elders - Mentors" will guide us along the path of discovery to God's activity within the neighbourhood.

But what sort of "apprenticing" is required? Clues may emerge by asking some questions to help identify what sort of apprenticing.

Questions like:

- If the Spirit is fermenting kin-dom life in our neighbourhoods who might be those from whom we can learn?
- If God is out ahead of us in this unravelling of social life across Western societies, then who might be the "elders" we need to seek out?
- Apollos and Paul experience apprenticing by others. What are the characteristics of these Elders that help us to identify Mentors in this time and place?

The striking thing in the accounts of Paul and Apollos is that they humbly recognised they needed to re-learn. The old Elders - Mentors and their knowing are now redundant. That the old frameworks they had been working with were broken and would no longer be useful to them or those they sort to work with. That re-learning requires the letting go of our sense of power and control and Elders can help us recognise that. For Apollos it was Priscilla and Aquila who expanded his understanding and showed him a much larger picture of God's activity through Jesus. For Paul, retreating away from the centres of power and the former bastions of knowledge enabled Paul to start to really see and know what he was being called to. Paul spent three years re-learning and only then did he start to build relationship with the disciples who mentor and support him.

Slowly but surely, Paul tests his new knowing away from the centres of power in a new neighbourhood.

For Apollos and Paul as they relearnt through the apprenticing of Elders, they didn't give up entirely what they already knew, even though they recognised its limitations. What they did do was to build on those foundations expanding its base and reimagining its meaning into a new setting. The Bible gives us example and after example of this way of re-learning and re-imagining the same story but in a new way for a new neighbourhood. As one example think of Jesus in his home town (Luke 4: 16-30) where Jesus takes a writing from the Prophet Isaiah many hundreds of years earlier and tells of God's activity in this new time in a very powerful way.

In same way Jesus takes the story of Passover and creates a new way of belonging and sustaining followers through what the Church now calls Holy Communion/ Eucharist. Alan Roxborough suggests that one of the most powerful ways of apprenticing is participation in the practices of gathered Christian communities or Eucharistic communities. These Christian communities can shape these old practices and knowledge in the neighbourhood where one lives so that our prayers and liturgies are shaped in the rhythms of discerning the Spirit in the neighbourhood. Our participation in community mentors us as individuals into new ways of knowing and recognising the Spirit's work in the midst of our own neighbourhood.

If our call is to be apprenticed into a new way of knowing and responding to the Spirit's ferment then it may mean locating ourselves more firmly in our neighbourhood, rather than continuing to drive out to some place we call "church". Rather ,we gather around in Christian community participating in the practices of Word, Prayer and Eucharist attending to the celebrations and laments of our immediate neighbourhood.

It seems clear that these new elders will not come from the usual places. They will hold different understandings than we currently have and we will feel disrupted in our re-learning. These understandings may come through questions and promptings and re-imagining old stories we have long forgotten or have never heard before. Elders may prompt us to again focus more closely on the local neighbourhood and Christian community may start to shape its Eucharistic practices and the exploring of life and faith in the emerging activity of the neighbourhood.

A time for conversation as a group

Listening carefully to each other, open a discussion around these conversation starters. Remember, these are questions for exploring life and faith



What has been your experience of being with an Elder or Mentor?
How do you feel about Roxburgh's comment that the apprenticing we may need to do is "being a Eucharistic community in the neighbourhood where one lives so that our prayers and liturgies are shaped in the rhythms of discerning the Spirit in the neighbourhood"? (Roxburgh – Joining God -Page 104)
What does this "apprenticing" mean in your context?

A time to ponder in silence

Without over-thinking it, choose words that describe the way Elders – Mentors help you embrace a new way of being.



Challenge **Belief** Noticing **Inclusion**
Support Affirmation Reframing
Repeating Faithfulness Listening
Respect **Encourage**
Belonging Awareness **Wisdom** **Modeling**

Or

Without over-thinking it, write in the table, things that you may want to unlearn, relearn and readapt as you take this journey of discovering where God is active in the neighbourhood.

Ways the "Elders/Mentors" ...

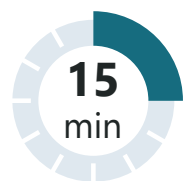
| Unlearn | Relearn | Readapt |
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Or

Write a prayer or poem that reflects the Spirit's ferment in your neighbourhood

A time to respond

You can decide if you want to do this as a group or individuals.



Then sit looking at what you have chosen and decide how would you like to respond to this apprenticing.

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A time to end

Sitting – a time of silence.

Standing – One person leads while all respond.



The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you and each gathered here.

Acknowledge each other or share the peace together.

We pray for each other as we go from here.

May we open ourselves to discerning where God is inviting us to participate in our neighbourhood with eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to respond to the spirit calling.

Bless us and those we meet along the way.

Father, Son and Spirit.



Conclusion

We hope you have felt the conversations have been difficult, challenging, but above all an invitation to continue thinking and talking about what makes for Christian community in today's world. Be encouraged though! In all times and places people have lived out their faith within the towns and villages to which they belong, within the communities and people to whom they belong and it has always been a challenge.

Below are some places where you can summarise some points you have made from each conversation and in particular conversations 3-6, which particularly invited a response. Don't leave the conversation there; continue to ponder these things, ideas, thoughts and challenges.

And.... Wherever you are, the Saltbush team offer you our prayer of peace and encouragement along the way we share as Christians together.

Ways the christian community responds to The Great Unravelling

Conversation 1: Disruption

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Conversation 2: Unravelling

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Conversation 3: Discerning

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Conversation 4: Language

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Conversation 5: Posture

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Conversation 6: Apprenticing

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