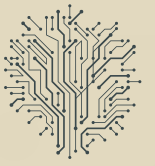


Ruminations

Autumn 2025



SALTBUSH
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY



Contributors

Rev. Colin Gurteen is a retired UCA minister who has served in both rural and urban congregations in Queensland and Tasmania

Mikenzie Ling is a proud indigenous woman with a Masters of Theology focusing on Indigenous Land Theology, excellent connections through Aboriginal Christian networks, and brings a unique perspectives to our work on Walking Together with First Peoples. Mikenzie is deeply passionate about people, Creation, theology, and education, and brings genuine enthusiasm to everything she does.

Rev. Dr Cliff Bird resources the Uniting Church in providing pastoral care and religious and spiritual guidance to people who are participating in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALMS) program. The role will work with Presbyteries and Congregations, along with PALMS workers themselves to grow capacity in providing pastoral care and creating genuine and inclusive Christian community.

Lucy Earl is a candidate to become a UCA Minister of Deacon and is currently serving at Nowra Uniting Church.

Rev. Simon Hansford is the Minister at Armidale Uniting Church. Simon has spent much of his life working with regional, rural and remote communities. His deep affinity for and love of the rural church informs much of his understanding of service, theology and community.

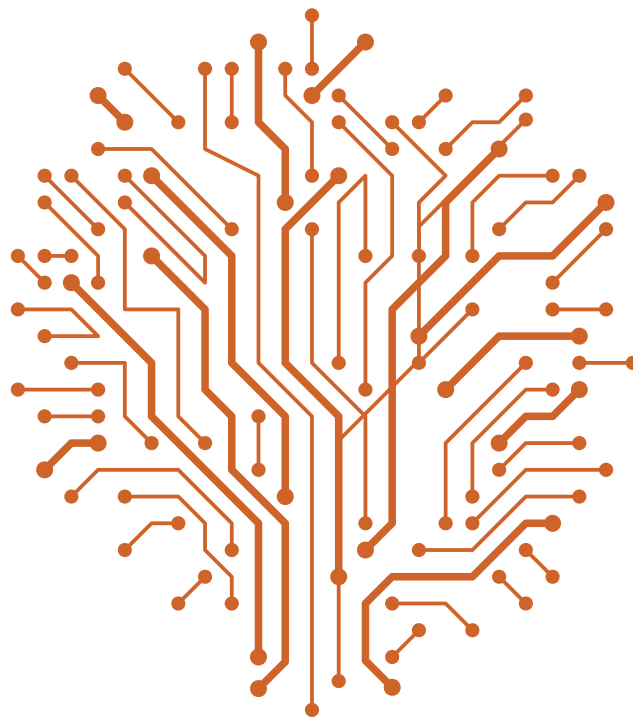
Rev. Nigel Hawken an ordained UCA Deacon having mainly worked in Hospital and Aged Care Chaplaincy, currently Chaplaincy & Pastoral Practice Lead South across Southern NSW & ACT. Nigel has a heart for people in rural areas and discovering God's presence within the beauty found in remote places.

Bambi Cunningham is a Primary School teacher in Griffith and Lay Preacher at Gunbar Uniting Church. Originally from Wangaratta via Bendigo, Borroloola, London, Stavanger, and Wodonga, she loves the arts, travel, and community involvement.



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Editors Introduction: Lost

Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas | Scattered Community Minister

Oh the irony! I've been quite lost trying to find a starting point for this editorial for some weeks now. I have plenty of stories about getting lost – some hilarious and some downright terrifying (up until the point of being found again) – but as I revisited each one, none felt quite right for heading towards a deeper sharing of life and faith with one another.

Then I bought a book on indigenous research methods which contains this opening:

*“Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. **Part of finding them is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.**” (Tafoya, 1995)*

Then one of my Word around the Bush recordings centered around Luke 15's parables of the lost. They begin with the very religious muttering and grumbling about the fact that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors. A sheep, a coin, and a wayward son become lessons in how much joy there is when the lost is recovered by an attentive shepherd, an ingenious housewife, and a loving father.

The final landmark that helped me find my bearings was a “lost” poem I'd written soon after my divorce in response to a “Poetry for Publication” assignment. It reflects so many aspects of what it felt like to lose 23 years of my life, a core component of my identity as woman, and an imagined future. It was hard then to know how much more I would gain, one faltering footstep at a time.



You put a pen in my hand
and tell me to poet
but you don't show me where or how to begin.
In fact,
you say, "You don't have to begin at the beginning"
as if that helps

Please.

Instead,
it reminds me that I'm halfway through this life of mine
without really knowing how I got here
that I've lost my voice
in the midst of the voices that might appeal appease
please

give me the right words to write down
to meet your expectations
to make sense of the middle
to bring the distant lines and the space of time
into some sort of sensible rhyme scheme
please
don't leave me
hanging here stuck

in the emptiness of an unimaginable ending.

So here you are with me – at this point in the page; a point that would be completely different if I'd sat down all those weeks ago completely certain of where I was starting and where I was going to. Being a little lost within myself has helped me to pay more attention to the signs and people around me right now as I try to find my bearings and take that one next step toward the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory.

In the pages that follow, you will find a circle of stories to lose yourself within and, maybe, stories to help you find a way forward through the last of this Lenten season into the new life anticipated with Easter's sunrise.

Colin Gurteen mulls over the relevance of the Exodus journey through the wilderness for a pilgrim people putting aside old ways to receive God's gift of new life.

Mikenzie Ling emphasizes the unwavering commitment of Creator God to seek and restore the lost as she reflects as a Wiradjuri woman on the profound journey of identity and belonging within the contexts of faith and culture.

Cliff Bird retells a terrifying story of being lost at sea in a dugout canoe and the joy of family and friends who celebrated their discovery and safe return with a hot meal – a real-life Luke 15 moment!

Lucy Earl's drive through mountain passes in blinding fog reminds her of the presence of God who is always with us – even when we feel lost in the thick of life.

Simon Hansford likens the sense of disorientation that can come from being in dense and chaotic bush to the anxiety we may feel navigating the increasing urgency of life and entering into Jesus's journey of suffering and sacrifice – only to find our one true refuge in the God who insists on finding us and bringing us home.

Nigel Hawkens highlights the significance of guides along life's journeys who keep us on track and go looking for us when we have wandered off on our own in unfamiliar territory.

Bambi Cunningham shares her sense of being lost in a world in which she once had purpose and direction and how she is intentionally holding on to her faith as she navigates all of the bad news that impacts her outlook on the future.

As we journey through this edition together, may you find a sense of connection with members of this scattered community who offer us signposts and companionship along the twists and turns of life's path, reminding us that getting lost can lead to profound revelations, renewed faith, and communal celebrations.

In true Easter spirit, may their stories inspire you to embrace the uncertainties of your own journey, opening your heart to the love that awaits in vulnerable moments and the journey of being found.

Together, let us navigate this sacred terrain, celebrating both our wanderings and the grace that leads us to our welcome home.

Yours in Christ

Yvonne



Reader's Letters - Experiences - Photos

We'd like to hear from you!

Send in a story of up to 200 words, or photo with caption to:
saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au*

This can either be on the Ruminations theme's for 2025 which are Lost, Saltbush and Joy, or on the topic of your choice.

*We will endeavour to include as many stories as possible, but cannot guarantee all submissions will be published.





News from Saltbush

Rev. Mark Faulkner | Saltbush Ministry Team Leader

Greetings to you all as we draw ourselves into this Autumn edition of Ruminations.

There is one person who has participated in our little Saltbush movement for years and at the end of each encounter he finishes with: "Thankyou Saltbush friends"! This little word of gratefulness and his genuine expression of friendship given and received reflects the mark of Saltbush as relational ministry. So, as I write this Saltbush news the team send our greetings to all our Saltbush friends and those who find both encouragement and challenge through our ministry. We think of you all from across the land whenever we meet, which is most always weekly.

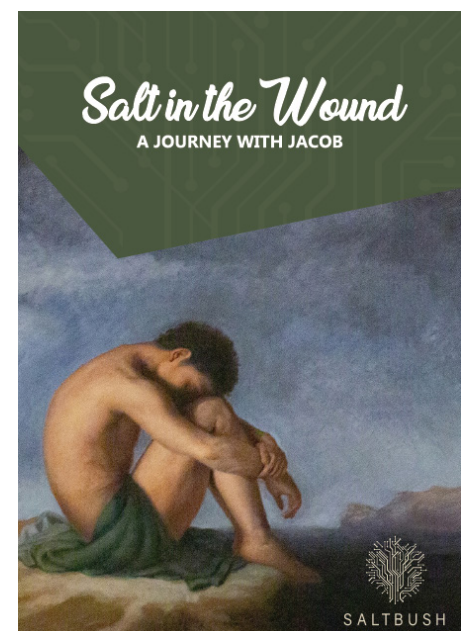
The first news is that our team is changing! Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas has felt for a time that while she has loved the Saltbush ministry and team, for such a time as this, her ministry is within the life of a congregation. We are thankful for the gifts and graces that Yvonne has offered as part of Saltbush and we know that those same gifts will be embraced by others through her ministry. These are the days of a changed community needing a grounded, creative ministry and church and into this time and place we release Yvonne.

As for myself, Natasha and Tim we look forward to the ways and opportunities that will unfold for us as we continue to encourage diverse ways of being Christian community and exploring life and faith together.

Our latest publication is called *Salt in the Wound*: a journey with Jacob!

All our publications of conversations for congregations are designed to be used by small groups, Church Councils and congregations as one way of exploring both the Christian faith and the challenge of Christian community in our changing society and world.

Salt in the Wound is more of a personal faith exploration and series of conversations and sits in a different way to our previous publications.



You can find all our publications here:

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

You can find Salt in the Wound here:

<https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/salt-in-the-wound/>

Each of our publications also come in printed form for free. Just get in touch if you would like copies for yourself or your group!

Since the start of the year, one or more of our team have visited Merimbula, Wyndham, Yass, Junee, Griffith, Narromine, Parkes, Maitland, Shortland, Jesmond Park, Wangi Wangi, Quirindi Church Council, led a retreat at Rylstone for their lay leaders and held our first Saltbush Gathering for 2025 at Goulburn for the Canberra Region Presbytery.

These visits are not simply fly in fly out, but part of our relational ministry building upon the journey we have been sharing over the past years. The invitation is always there if your congregation would like to know more about Saltbush, the ways we seek to support lay leaders and are open to explore change and challenge for the Christian community in the places in which we find ourselves.

This year we will be offering a lay leaders retreat, during the week of 25th. – 28th. August at St. Clements Retreat near Galong. This will be a time for any lay leaders within our church (not just those in appointed positions) to gather, breathe, and ponder the way of the Christian faith from our own experiences and stories.

Peace to you all.



Mark Faulkner

Lay leaders retreat Finding ourselves in the story!

For any lay leaders (not just those in appointed positions) within our church who want a time apart to explore faith and life together.

During the week of
25th.-28th. August
St. Clements' – Galong

To express your interest before registrations and more information comes out please email Saltbush
saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au

(The cost to attend, accommodation and meals, will be subsidised)



Leaning in to Wilderness

Rev. Colin Gurteen | Retired UCA Minister

If you were a member of a congregation with the word “Pilgrim” as part of its name, what would you expect? Would you expect a bunch of people on the move? Agile, flexible, looking forwards rather than behind?

I’m a member of Pilgrim Uniting Church (the one in Launceston rather than its namesake in Adelaide). We’re in the process of selling our property! If you would like to buy three, grand, heritage-listed buildings, then we have exactly what you need. We’re selling and we’re on the move. A congregation of pilgrims setting out for parts unknown, with little experience of journeying in the wilderness, with few physical resources and, to be fair, we’re tired before we even begin.

Our journey to this point is an all-too-familiar one for churches in Australia. Even though we’re called “Pilgrim”, we put down our roots decades ago, positioned ourselves middle-class in the middle of the city, where our impressive white steeple has for generations been a visible sign of our faith and our faithfulness. But the years have not been kind: we’ve settled and aged and diminished and lived as if all is well with the world until we can’t ignore reality any longer. We have to move or die!

It’s one thing to undertake a pilgrimage to a sacred site - perhaps to Lourdes or along the Camino De Santiago, but quite another to journey as we are compelled to do. A pilgrimage to a holy shrine means the destination is already known, the journey planned, and a return to the known and familiar anticipated. It is the journeying itself which matters, the movement along a path which allows the pilgrim to encounter the sacred, to willingly transform the ordinary into the Divine.

For us? The destination is unknown, a return impossible, our steps unwilling and faltering. No mystical and revered destination beckons us. Ours is not a sacred quest. Our pilgrimage is a pain filled abandonment of all that is familiar and comforting. Ours is an Exodus.

The central motif of Judaism is the flight from Egypt into the wilderness, told as the story of God’s delivery from slavery and oppression into a land flowing



with milk and honey. Again and again, devout Jews rehearse the story of their deliverance, recalling God's enduring faithfulness. Forty years of wandering set against God's provision, protection and steadfast love. For forty years God's people were lost - unable to save themselves but never lost to God. However, while the Exodus is celebrated as the revelation of love for God's children, I'm always mindful of the opening to Exodus 16: "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness."

Complained? Surely not! But reality is that the Israelites were ordinary folk, with human foibles - including the need to blame someone else when feeling lost. And the pilgrims of 2025 are complaining too: where are we going? how will we have our needs met? who is to blame? Our anxieties, our grief, our sense of being cast adrift from the buildings which have tethered our faith for generations, all these blind us, deafen us to the promise of God: "I will be with you to the end of the age." Ours is the same God who was faithful to the Israelites in the wilderness, the provider of a path through the sea, manna from the heavens, and water from the rock.

As powerful and useful as the image of Exodus is, perhaps we also need to recognise that the central metaphor of our faith, of Christianity is death and resurrection. We cling so tenaciously to life that we forget that death is both inevitable and essential. As pilgrims, it is only in allowing our old life to die that we can allow God to gift us with new life. While we have no choice but to leave, we still hunger for a return to earlier times - when our bank accounts were healthy, our buildings were strong, and our congregation burgeoning and blossoming. I suspect that much of our complaining is because we want what we cannot have: the clock cannot be turned back any more than our grey hair can be restored.

But... the circumstances of our leaving are not a problem to be fixed but God being revealed to us in a new way. To be a pilgrim in the wilderness is to allow the possibility of resurrection! We are not lost. Rather we are stepping into God's divine future.





On Being Lost and Rescued

Rev. Dr Cliff Bird | Mission Consultant: PALMS

I do not know about you, but I have many personal stories about being lost. I will briefly tell one of these stories and then end with a brief reflection on being lost and found.

Dark Stormy Night Out At Sea

What a night it was ... December 7th 1977! I was home from high school for the Christmas/New Year holidays and was out fishing with my elder brother. Fishing was an integral part of my growing up but for my brother, this was his first-ever fishing trip! We were about 10 kilometers from our village in a small traditional wooden dugout canoe. At about 5 in the evening I noticed that a huge storm was building up and so we decided it was time to paddle home. Little did we realise that this was an almost fatal decision. The rain poured down and with wind-speeds that threatened to blow us overboard, the raindrops felt like nails being driven into our increasingly numb bodies. The winds whipped up the sea into huge angry and hungry swells as darkness covered the earth! We were engulfed by the darkness and it was near impossible for us to see each although we were only two metres apart! (You could say zero visibility!) My elder brother had given up and refused to paddle any more. The final visualization I had just before we were completely covered by the darkness was the location of three tiny islets. I knew that if we missed all of these three we would be blown away into the big wide dark ocean and most probably would never be found. My muscles were on the verge of collapse and yet I kept paddling and paddling, and more paddling, energised and beckoned by the vision of the three islets, and my family, in my mind's eyes! Five hours into the almost non-ending torture, I heard waves breaking over the reef and I was both thrilled and fearful at the same time – thrilled because somehow we must have been driven by the storm towards one of the three islets and fearful because we could be smashed into smithereens against the reef by the huge waves. I could not see but I could hear and feel and smell! All my senses kicked into action and I jumped into the dark raging waters and maneuvered the canoe, with my elder brother inside, towards the shore! As a fisherman I had already “drawn” a rough mental map of the island and this helped me to guide the canoe safely to shore. After helping my brother ashore, I collected some fallen coconut leaves and built a very small hut



for him to shelter. Fortunately, the match box that we wrapped in a plastic bag was still quite dry so I lit a fire (thanks to my high school Boy's Brigade learned skills!) It was around midnight when the storm finally subsided enough for us to make a larger fire in the hope that members of nearby communities would see the fire and rescue us. Sure enough, about a couple of hours later we heard the most beautiful sound of a boat coming towards the island! Standing at the front of the boat was the master fisherman – our dad! We finally reached home about 4 o'clock the morning the next day. The entire family was there to welcome us over a hot meal shared in joy, celebration and gratitude! (And yes, I also got an earful from my paternal grandmother, who adopted my elder brother, for almost having him lost his life in the storm!) In the midst of it all, we were overwhelmed with fear, hopelessness and joy!

My story tells of just one of so many stories all over the world of being lost and, in my case, of being found – alive. There are hundreds, even millions, of stories of being lost, and in so many of these stories the lost, or that which is lost, is/are not or never found! The questions of “who is lost” and/or “what is lost” are relevant and pressing in our time, perhaps more-so than ever! I have often wondered if the three “lost parables” told by Jesus in Luke 15 invite the readers, including us, to open ourselves to seeing the manifold ways and manners in which the state and nature of being lost (“lost-ness”) continues to happen in the readers’ own time! And I have often wondered if we have been blinded by our sense of worth and self-righteousness – a sense of narrow-minded spirituality – to ask the question “who is lost” and to respond in truth and in spirit. In view of the last of the three parables, I invite us to reflect deeply on the question “who is lost?” Is it the younger son (as is most commonly stated?) Is it the older son (as is commonly glossed over?) Or is it both of them? For me these questions are at the heart of the third parable! In this season of Lent, we might need to do some deep self-reflection!

To end, let me go back to my story! My brother and I were found and rescued by our father and his team. We found out that he and the entire family, in truth the entire village community, were so worried and concerned about the two of us. He/they started looking and investigating as soon as the storm begun and even well before I lit the fire on the islet. He/they did everything he/they could and looked out for signs and symbols of survival and life. He/they never stopped asking, never stopped looking and never stopped thinking! In retrospect, without such a commitment and even a small glimpse of hope that he/they held onto, he/they would never have found us. In Luke 15, the shepherd (parable one), the woman (parable two), and the father (parable three) made the difference in being found! Using the imagery of a shepherd, a woman, and a father, I do wonder at times if Jesus is giving the readers a moment to visualise and experience the divine engagement in the ordinariness of our lives and existence! Perhaps the Lenten Season affords us the condensed moment for us to do so!



The Lost Sheep

Lucy Earl | Nowra Uniting Church

All of us at some point, have had an experience of being lost. I vividly recall being lost in a Kmart store when I was seven years old. It was probably no longer than fifteen minutes, but I remember being so scared and it felt like it went on forever! Perhaps you are directionally challenged and finding your way when driving often leads you down different roads than you had planned. Whether it is being physically lost, lost in thought, lost in the magic of beautiful music, feeling lost in the direction your life is taking or feeling lost in your faith. We all experience being lost in some way, at some point in our lives.

My current drive to work is a new drive for me. It winds its way down a mountain range, through a valley and then climbs steeply up another mountain and then down the other side. The scenery is exquisite. Lush pastures lead into rich green trees and bush filling the sides of the winding mountain road. At the top of both mountains, before beginning the descent, you can look down and see God's beautiful creation at its finest. Its beauty makes me pause and take a deep breath while I marvel at what is before me.

Besides its beauty, this area is known for its thick fog, which often descends through the night and on some days can stay through the entire morning, or even longer. On my drive this week, within seconds I went from clear sight, to being surrounded in the mist. On and on it went. Down the steep mountain with a blanket of grey through the valley. A moment of clearness before once again climbing up into a cloud soup so thick that you could lose all sense of where you were. Then as I rounded the top and began to descend, the fog parted as if by magic, and I caught my breath as the familiar scene of beauty once more lay before me.



In the middle of the deep fog, I could see nothing of what lay before me; I could only trust that the road I knew was there would lead me through. God's creation can teach us deep truths about His nature, our relationships with him and the rest we have in his presence when we trust in Him. When we feel a little lost and surrounded by fog it can be hard to imagine a way out. It can feel all consuming and isolating. We can't see anything, and no one can see us.

What I have realised in travelling up and down 'my mountains', is that even when we are in the midst of the fog and can't see our way clear, what lies beyond it never disappears. Just because I can't see the wondrous view when I stand in the mist, doesn't mean it isn't there. And this is just like God. We might feel lost; we might feel far from God. But God is never far from us. He never leaves us.

His great love for us is shown all throughout scripture; nowhere more clearly than in the Gospel of Luke when we read of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son (or the prodigal son). And just like these stories show us, God loves each one of us dearly and believes we are each of such great value to him that he will always seek us when we are lost, just like the one sheep as the ninety-nine remain safe in the fold.

⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep...'"
(Luke 15:4-6)

If we've lost our way or just can't see the path through the fog, Jesus will always come and find us. And just like the shepherd with the lost sheep, Jesus will be filled with joy when he does!





Becoming Lost

Rev. Simon Hansford | Armidale Uniting Church

Walking in the bush is a wonderful experience. Fiona and I try to take a three or four day walk each year in a National Park. We are not always successful.

One aspect of the wonder is not always being particularly confident that I am in the right spot or heading in the appropriate direction. I have read books about being lost and confused in the desert, where each rise looks precisely like the previous one, and nothing seems different, or appears to change.

Standing in the midst of the Australian bush can be confounding for the entirely opposite reason. It's full – of trees, which are reliably irregular in size and shape; of low scrub, so footprints are obscured as if you have never walked to where you are; and it's dense, so that seeing the path (if there is one, in particular), or the goal of your walk is frequently unclear.

The sounds can also be disorienting. Cicadas in summer can be stunningly loud, sounding triumphant, even mocking, if you are confused. Frogs take their harmonic turns through the evening.

The raucous choral wonder of birds is operatic, if you know your path; if you aren't sure, or have missed your turn, they can taunt you at every step.

A map, and a compass, a GPS (if you have range) and an EPIRB (as a last resort) are either essential or preferable in your walking, moving from a model of orientation which has served us for centuries, to one which many of us still don't completely trust.

I have European friends who regard the disorder of our native forests as chaotic, even threatening. The concern of becoming lost looms large for them, as it



has for those of us who have settled in this land since the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Becoming lost is a fear many second Australians share. A book, *The Country of Lost Children – An Australian Anxiety*, by Peter Pierce, describes how art and story depict the deep concern of what lies in the scrub, the bush, the area beyond our fence. McCubbin's artwork, stories like *Dot and the Kangaroo*, serious movies like *Wake in Fright* and *One Night, The Moon* all echo the fear of being lost in the Australian landscape.

That fear translates into many aspects of our world; in the increasing urgency of life around us; harried by the insistence of electronic communication; the constant need to learn new skills; all these lead to a feeling of disorientation and lostness.

We are often unsure that we know where the path leads, or even how we arrived where we are. We remember the safety of home, of the spaces we know. We are thankful for a familiar friend, our favourite chair.

This season in which we find ourselves now, this season walking towards Jerusalem and the cross, with Jesus, can be disorienting. The concept of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice might be well known to us, but the journey for disciples - especially the original mob – takes them (us!) from familiar territory into apparent danger.

We know the story of Easter from the other side. We have seen not only Jesus' death; we also know of his resurrection. We journey with this hope already in our lives.

One theologian uses the Prodigal Son parable as a starting image, and describes Jesus as the son who journeys into a far country, risking himself, to find us all in our lostness and bring us home.

What might we say of a God who persists in seeking us out and, in Jesus Christ, finds us? We have this traditional image of the Aboriginal tracker, who can read the signs no one else can identify, finds the lost child and brings them back to their family and community.

Our language of "finding Jesus" is, perhaps, a subversion of the truth. The one who seeks is God, in mercy and love, who insists on finding us and bringing us safe home. When we encounter - and are embraced by - this God, we most certainly discover our one true refuge.



Lost in unfamiliar places

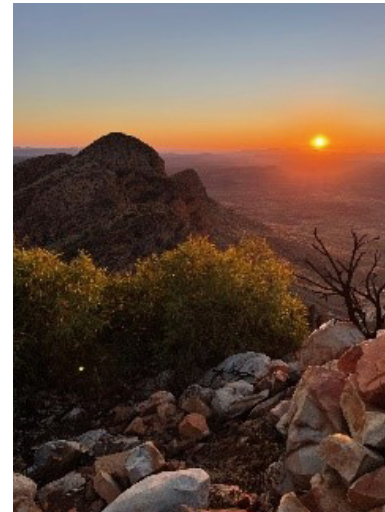
Rev. Nigel Hawken | Uniting

I've been part of two special treks within Australia in recent years. The first was the Cradle Mountain Overland Track, as part of a 65km pilgrimage called Sacred Geography, with Tasmanian Walking Company guides. The second covered 60kms of the Larapinta Trail in Central Australia, with a Wayside Chapel fundraising group, led by *Autopia* tour guides. Both experiences held incredible mountain-top moments at the top of Mt Ossa in the Pelion Range and a sunrise on Mt Sonder (Rwetyepme its Aboriginal name) in the West MacDonnell Ranges.

There were spectacular scenes as we trekked through ancient wildernesses and especially when we stopped by the waterside to pause and be refreshed.

The skilled guides on each journey were critical going into those remote parts of Australia that could easily have led to one or more of our group becoming lost. Along these walks were times with straight paths, whilst some held moments where the group was spread out and we lost sight of each other, and where a disoriented hiker could deviate off into the wilderness.

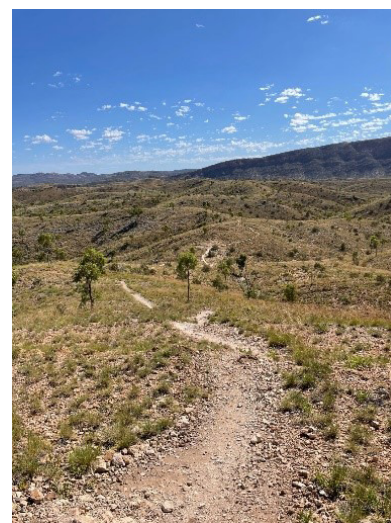
A couple moments when I had become separated from the group, like when I had wandered off to one side of the track to explore that I had to take my time to carefully find my way back. I was so glad for the wisdom and repeated messages from our guides to keep us safe and to help us when we struggled, like one hiker who was injured and one guide carried their backpack and supported them getting to our campsite to recover.



It has made me reflect on our life journeys and how when we go alone into unfamiliar places, without trusting in a guide and listening carefully to their voice, that we can wander off and get lost. This reminds me of one of Jesus' parables, the Lost Sheep, Matthew 18:12-14 says: ¹² *What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?* ¹³ *And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.* ¹⁴ *So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*



My personal story of getting lost involves the illness and death of my dear late wife, Rev. Annette Hawken, three and a half years ago. This was a completely disorienting experience into unfamiliar places on a path to great loss. For me, I am so thankful to Jesus, the Great Shepherd who sought me out, as well as my fellow 'sheep' companions, to find me, even carry me and bring me back into life. Just like the guides on my treks, who continued to say the words of Christ "Follow me", may we listen for the voice of God, be sustained in the communion of people of faith and love, and be led to the summit and see the beauty and glory of God all around.



Amen.



Lost

Bambi Cunningham | Gunbar Uniting Church

Have you ever been lost? Not known where you are or where you are meant to be going?

It's a frightening feeling but at the same time you have a purpose - to discover your location, get some help and head off in the right direction.

There is a greater loss - the loss of purpose.

Have your children grown, left home, no longer seek your advice?

Has your work become bogged down with administration; ticking boxes for other people?

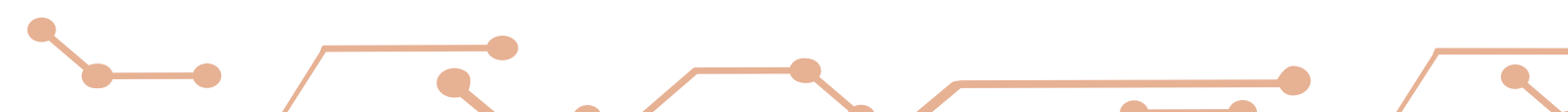
Has your faith become a Sunday habit? Attending church for an hour then back into a disconnected world.

Have you stopped watching the news or reading the paper because you feel unable to cope with the direction the world seems to be taking?

Where once you may have been actively engaged with fostering your children's growth; your career and ambitions may have brought you challenge and satisfaction; your faith felt real and an integral part of your life; the world around you was a place full of possibilities.

Where are you once life has moved on and these things are no longer your primary focus?

I believe that having lost purpose is far more dangerous than being physically lost. When we are mentally healthy we are connected to others, we believe in our own value and ability to make positive change, our spirit is secure and we are able to see good in our world as well as bad. There is little doubt that Australia is experiencing a crisis in mental health which I believe is because so many of us have lost purpose / direction / positivity / faith.



We see the 2023 statistics on mental health....

- 42.9% of people aged 16–85 years had experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life
- 21.5% of people had a 12-month mental disorder, with Anxiety being the most common group (17.2% of people aged 16–85 years)
- 38.8% of people aged 16–24 years had a 12-month mental disorder

For me this loss of purpose is personal and current. My son is grown, making his own choices, finding his own way in the world. My husband's farm concerns are disconnected from my daily demands at school. Teaching has become such an administrative exercise; being constantly behind in the data analysis that is now seen as the only way of being an effective educator; appeasing disgruntled parents and dealing with anxious students. Where is my passion for sharing the wonder of discovery that used to be teaching? Attending church has become a responsibility; church council meetings, compliance requirements, luncheons to prepare and finding the time in a busy week to prepare a sermon (generally 6-8 hours, often overnight). Thank goodness our Goolgowi / Gunbar services are monthly and a shared responsibility. I wonder how weekly lay preachers manage to fit preparation into their lives? As for my experience of world events, I have stopped watching the news or being a regular reader of newspapers. Sourcing news from social media has taken me down too many negative roads and really impacted my outlook on the future.



I feel lost in a world where I once had purpose and direction. Is there a solution for me and for others experiencing similar feelings?

My faith is helping. I find comfort in the Bible readings and research I do when preparing a sermon. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths."* **Proverbs 3:5-6** So many times, my understanding of scripture is deepened and answers provided when I read God's word. The relationships I



I have with other Christians sustain and inspire me. Those hours of preparing food for lunch after church fade when compared to the connections strengthened over lunch conversations.

As I approach retirement, I am looking for ways to use my skills to continue to help others. Celebrancy is something I feel drawn towards and though many people may not regularly

attend church, they acknowledge their desire to have a spiritual (read Christian) element in their occasions. I am lessening my resistance to further involvement in Uniting Church business. Where I once believed that as a "younger" church member, I would be responsible for helping close our far west churches, I now see that the Uniting Church is looking into ways to support and build distant congregations. Yes my future may involve more meetings and ticking boxes but I hope to balance that with actions that help me build stronger relationships.

Family relationships have become more important as I age. There is loss as older family members die but also the opportunity of becoming the keeper of family stories and sharing identity with the coming generation. My Christian faith that death is not the ultimate end has helped when we farewelled our elders and supported each other.

Taking care of my mental wellbeing is a conscious choice I need to make daily. From putting parameters around the hours I work, to finding some time for things that give me joy (sewing, art, coffee, my dog). Prayer helps. Accepting the events that I can't change but can bring to the Lord. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."* **(Philippians 4:6)**



If, like me, you experience the sense of being lost and without purpose, I encourage you to look around you for God's blessings, no matter how small they may seem. From these glimmers of positivity you can find ways of bringing more joy and purpose into your life. When you feel lost, pray and remember that you are not alone ...

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

References: Australian Bureau of Statistics. National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing. 5/10/2023



Never Not Fully Found

Mikenzie Ling | First Peoples Strategy and Engagement Consultant

Earlier in February I had the honour of participating in the inaugural Regional Ecumenical Youth Council Conference in Suva, Fiji. We gathered as young Christian leaders from across the Pacific Islands, the Pacific Diaspora in Australia, and the First Nations of Australia to strengthen our leadership and advocacy through cultural exchange, while collaborating on justice issues affecting our communities. The week was full of rich and weighty discussions navigating the interconnectedness of Spirituality, cultural identity and ecological stewardship. Throughout these conversations I was reminded of some profoundly simple yet central truths about the nature of relationship that God holds with us.

One particular yarn from Millicent Barty, a social entrepreneur and advocate from the Solomon Islands, has lingered with me since. Whilst sharing how traditional *kastoms*¹ guide and inform her peoples' identity and guardianship of creation, she expressed, *"We carry these sacred truths in our bloodstreams. We can't lose what we inherit in the blood. The only thing we've lost is our way of connecting to it..."*² She encouraged that, "the answer lies in knowing who we are, where we come from, and where we are going." Many Indigenous Peoples deeply affirm this conviction, and as a



A special moment meeting First Nations Theologian Aunty Evelyn Parkin



The First Nations Delegates of the REYC Conf Fiji 2025

1 'Kastom' is a Melanesian term used to encompass traditional knowledges, culture and practices that are passed down through (largely oral) teachings and stories (<https://www.vanuatu.travel/nz/stories/what-is-kastom>)

2 This quote was taken from Millicent Barty's presentation as a panellist during the OVC Seminar 'Engaging Indigenous Knowledge and Practices of Ocean Guardianship' (Fiji National University, 20 February 2025). Every effort was made to present her exact phrasing and intended meaning; however, minor discrepancies may exist in the word-for-word reproduction.



Wiradjuri woman, it is one that my own story often circles back to. Millicent's words were stirring because they are an echo to my experience of Creator God, in loving kindness, refusing to allow loss and disconnection to hover in the midst my identity.

There are many names by which the great 'I Am' is known, and many stories given to us through scripture, tradition and creation that reveal the expansive array of qualities within the nature of God. There is one propensity within God's disposition, though, that I believe can be discerned across

the widest array of these stories and names: to find, restore, and redeem beyond measure that which has been lost. Because ours is the God of Restoration. The God of the once lost, but now and forever-always found. We see this confirmed within the very heartbeat of Jesus' mission and ministry. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)³

To be lost though, does not reflect an oversight or failure on God's part. It is not They that lose us. Rather, 'lost' is a state in or of our beings. Creator God cannot and does not ever fail to perceive, track, sense and understand all that They are sovereign over. So, even in our lostness we are never not *fully* seen and never not fully known. Furthermore, despite whatever has caused us to become lost, God assumes the toll required for our **full** 'foundness'. This is exemplified in the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. They bring illustration to our salvation in Christ, of being rescued and wholly reconciled to God. We can perceive the Divine will for redemption of our earthly relationships and sense of belonging, through the rejoicing and rehabilitation orchestrated within the communities. And there is reflection of the Creator's heart to see us renewed, revived and reaffirmed deeply within our own identities. These yarns reveal that God has no intention of allowing even a single small part to remain disconnected and missing from the whole. Nor for the wider group to be deprived of the full joy and benefit that comes when each one is home, in the place where it belongs. Anything that is lost becomes the subject of God's unflinching pursuit to restore.

Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Reference Group meeting with Gen Dec of WCC in Geneva 2024



3 We can also see this conveyed in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

*We cannot lose
what we inherit
in the blood for it
has been divinely
designed and inbuilt
within us.*

Much of my own story reiterates how this truth extends to every layer and part of who we are. For the first ten years of my life, I grew up on my homelands on Wiradjuri Country, and as a little girl I remember always knowing and being proud that I am Aboriginal. Due to separations in my family and impacts of generational trauma, however, I experienced deep disruptions to growing and connecting with my culture. Then in my preteen years our family relocated, and we started going to church. I found a deeply personal relationship with God, but I also found myself subjected, for over decade, to a deceptive message that if I was serious about following Jesus then I should “leave

my Aboriginality behind”. This lie sought to convince me that embracing my culture and identity would undermine my salvation and diminish the validity of my faith. The erroneous notion that my Blackness, a central textile in the very fabric of who I was created as, held no significance or value to God left me displaced and soul sick. Those parts of me that were made to feel unknown, incomplete and illegitimate were left out to wander. I was saved and yet who I am was still lost to me.

But ours is the God of Restoration! Not content with the most-part, or just “enough to get me over the line”, God remained in a slow-burn pursuit until the entirety of who I am was found, given context and a community, and brought home from lostness. The kind of restoration that God brings about aligns with Their character. It is gentle and thorough, patient and relentless, unwavering and unabridged. It unfailingly accounts for each part of our whole, because what God makes is good. There is no part of who we are that is created with intention to later be erased or left unclaimed and unincluded. *We cannot lose what we inherit in the blood* for it has been divinely designed and inbuilt within us. It is part of that which is never not fully seen and known, and therefore, never not fully found. So, even if we are lost in *our way of connecting* there is hope because our God of restoration will not yield or fail in the pursuit to restore who we are, *where we come from, and where we are going.*



Thanks for your donations to Saltbush!

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

Your donation will be directly used for the work of supporting Saltbush and the ways we are working to encourage congregations and people in scattered communities of faith.

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

To donate please make a direct transfer:

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Saltbush Relational Resources

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

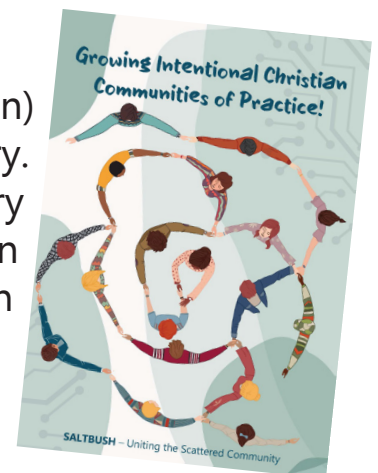
This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to have some discussion around who you are, how you gather and how you live out your faith. Talking about Salt is five difficult conversations for congregations and can also be used to shape a life and witness discussion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



Intentional Christian Communities

This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to think about the challenge of being intentional in how we gather as the Christian community.

Dive into any part of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) and you will find Jesus intentionally going about his ministry. At times it looks like chaos and no doubt it was, but at every step Jesus acts with intention. Growing Intentional Christian Communities of Practice is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.



The Great Unravelling

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

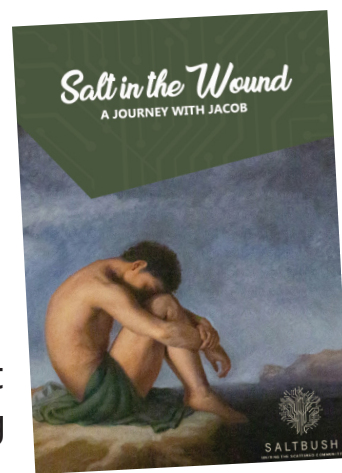
Joining God in the Great Unravelling by Alan J. Roxburgh.

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.



Salt in the Wound

This is an uncomfortable set of conversations. Like salt in a wound, they sting and irritate before they can soothe and heal. We hope you will sit with them – on your own or, preferably, with a small group of people with whom you are willing to explore your life and faith. There are seven chapters, each representing a particular phase in Jacob's life story and focusing on a specific theme. You can work through each in sequence or choose four significant to your current life phase or the life of your congregation for a month-long small group study.



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**.

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

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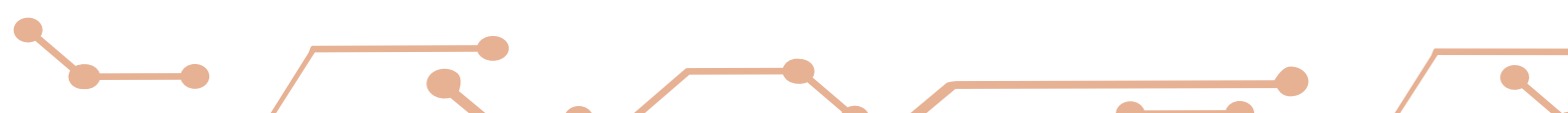
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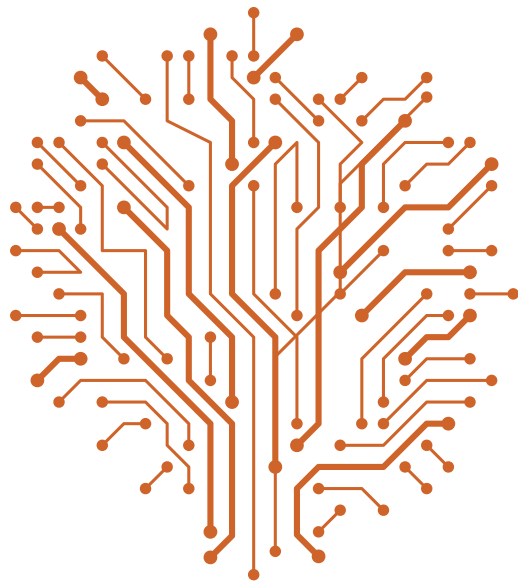


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