



Belly & Bones

taste and see



***“For a change is coming,
so prepare for the flood;
There’s a fire in my belly and a burning in my bones.
Set a light for new beginnings and a turning of the soil.
Cry for justice and redemption in a world
defined by hurt;
give me courage yet to speak
and yet be humble to receive it.”***

—From “Belly & Bones” by Sarah Su



12 on Country (Front cover)

*Posca paint/acrylic sheer film/paperbark
background (sourced on Dharawal country)
: Tanya Tindale*

This image was given to me on the flight back home after we had visited the dhiyann community in Dalby, QLD (Barunggam people). You can see the Bellies represented here in the 12 personal symbols which you will find on pages throughout this journal. We are walking together over the landscape combining into one thread while sitting under the southern cross. A transformation of spiritual hearts, a coming together with such clarity and conviction of the Holy Spirit.



We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the many lands on which this journal was created, and will be shared and read. These lands hold enduring cultural, spiritual, and historical significance for First Nations peoples who have cared for them for countless generations.

We honour the Elders past and present, whose knowledge and stewardship continue to inspire and guide us. As a collective of diverse voices and perspectives, we recognise the privilege of contributing to this work on these sacred lands.

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Welcome

Have you ever been taken by surprise by a verse in the Bible that you never realised was there? These 'in-between' places of the Word can be overlooked, but many are rich with story and meaning. It's in these verses where the 'minor' characters of the narrative are mentioned, quiet actions are taken, or the inner workings of the heart are explained.

It's in these verses that we often see and hear from the women of the Word. Culturally, they may well have been pushed to the edges, but in God's story, when we read it with our eyes and hearts open, they are neither overlooked nor underestimated. Women are used by God as judges, prophets, doctors, church leaders, teachers and eyewitnesses to some of the greatest moments of history:

Miriam, the bold sister of baby Moses, later known as a worshipper and prophetess.

Deborah, the courageous judge who fought for freedom of her people.

Esther, the reluctant leader who rose up to save God's people from annihilation.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, who risked everything to be faithful to her call.

The **Samaritan woman** at the well, who called out her whole community to follow in faith.

Mary, the mother of Mark, who led through hospitality, creating space for believers to meet and pray.

Anna, the widow, relentlessly faithful and chosen to reveal the Messiah had come.

Priscilla, the teacher, helping others to grow in their faith and fruitfulness.

Lydia, the entrepreneur, a woman of influence as a business owner.

Lois, the grandmother, whose faith impacted generations to come.¹

Women have always been a part of God's plan, God's story. Despite this, women are often still being pushed to the edges in our communities and, sadly, even in our churches. As ones made in the image of God, women should not have to dull down their giftedness or call to account those, even among their own ranks, who seek to keep them silent and stunted.

*"In the Last Days," God says,
"I will pour out my Spirit
on every kind of people:
Your sons will prophesy,
also your daughters;
Your young men will see visions,
your old men dream dreams.
When the time comes,
I'll pour out my Spirit
On those who serve me, men and women both,
and they'll prophesy.*

—Acts 2:17–21 (The Message)

In this season, our network of churches of Christ has made it a priority to recover the voices and the value of women. One of the first fruits of this intention is the formation of a creative cohort of twelve women, known as *Belly & Bones*.



*But if I say I'll never mention the Lord
or speak in his name,
his word burns in my heart like a fire.
It's like a fire in my bones!
I am worn out trying to hold it in!
I can't do it!*

—Jeremiah 20:9 (NLT)

For a year, this cohort has shared stories, engaged in creative journeys, and walked together through layers of healing and empowerment.

In the pages that follow, you will meet these twelve women, who are beginning to offer forth, with courage, parts of their unique selves to share some of what the Spirit is stirring in their bellies and bones. These are women who haven't always had a voice, women who have suffered, served, sacrificed, loved and lost. Women who are still finding their way; but are noticing some of the signposts and groanings of God's Kingdom coming among us.

What will you 'taste and see' as you open the pages of this journal?
May His word also burn in you as you do.

The Bellies



Main image: Sunset Dam at Bethel Farm, Dalby – Tanya Tindale

¹ 10 Women in the Bible that God Used to Save and Lead Others, Chara Donahue, Contributing Writer, (Updated Aug 01, 2024) <https://www.ibelieve.com/christian-living/women-in-the-bible-god-used-to-save-lives-and-lead-others.html>.



Small Lights

Carly Cassidy

*It's a dark world we live in, an everlasting night
Now every house you look in, there are people holding tight
Holding onto dim lit dreams, of a world they thought they knew
Holding tight to the remote, for the news has made them blue*

*For every night it paints a picture, using only grey
And every night it sings a song, of heartache and dismay
People hurting everywhere, and the pain we feel it deep
Our mothers, aunties, sisters, friends, no one escapes pains teeth*

*It takes a bite of everyone, at some stage in our years
A broken heart, a broken limb, or living out our fears
We carry it around with us, a heavy weighted soul
An empty cup lies beside a broken and barren bowl*

*And yet there is a gentle glow, a flicker, not yet bold
As we remember we are not alone, there's a story to be told
There are many who have gone before, if we just look back and see
The faint but warming, tender flames of all those who would be*

*Brave enough to lift their lamp, to step out one by one
Curious enough to weave their way, to see what will be done
In vulnerability, we are strong, together lies our might
Daylight shines when everyone brings forth their little light.*



'Threads'

—Line Drawings : Carly Cassidy

'Chapter Introductions'

—Acrylic paint pours : Carly Cassidy

Check out Carly's video
as she makes "Threads"





Ache



'Tides' : Carly Cassidy
—Acrylic paint pour

Waves of Grief

Abigail Skelly

Overwhelmed, overcome, overdone ...

Grief.

It's like a kick in the guts.

It makes you sad, it makes you mad.

The emotions can wash over you in an instant, but then also ease, and be steady for some time.

The waves of grief can feel like whitewash chaos - waves unpredictably pulling you to-and-fro in the surging tides of emotions.

Sometimes, grief shows up on the tip of breakdown and tears, or through a subtle, 'I'm fine', in an attempt to push away the feelings.

It is a held pain, a deep ache in the body. It's invisible, yet ever present. It's rarely talked on, rarely touched on... but although often unseen, it is felt deep within the soul.

It often doesn't just go away or disappear. It stays, lingers, hovers over us and within us.

Grief for all types of reasons, in all types of seasons.

Grief.



Often, we have strong expectations about how our life will unfold. These imagined plans are in our minds, deep within us, without us even knowing.

We assume life will go a certain way. Marriage, kids, good job, large thriving church. You name it. Expectations of our life subtly set deep into our subconscious. Grief though, can be the whiplash we feel when our expectations crash into the unexpected.

I come from a large family. I am the youngest of five children and enjoyed growing up in a fun, homeschooling, connected family. So, thirteen-year-old me always assumed I could just choose the number of children I could have. Like it was somehow in my control. However, thirteen-year-old me, would never have imagined being diagnosed with premature ovarian failure by the ripe old age of 27.

Life now has definitely not gone how I had planned.

I have learnt how grief can so easily linger, be felt deeply, silently, and can feel never-ending. It seems grief will visit us all in this life. I am learning to hold such pain and beauty all at once. I resonate with Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who wrote: *"I hold it true, whate'er befall; I feel it, when I sorrow most; 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."* (Tennyson, 2022) ...

Grief

So, how do we, as people of God... process and heal, when His plan doesn't look like our plan? Grief also affects us as whole communities, and often this type of pain and grief is hard to name, especially within the church walls.

It can show up as a subtle anger, especially for key leaders in ministry. I was struck by this insight from Henri Nouwen (2016): *"Anger in particular seems close to a professional vice in the contemporary ministry. Pastors are angry at their leaders for not leading and at their followers for not following. They are angry at those who do not come to church for not coming and angry at those who do come for coming without enthusiasm. They are angry at their families, who make them feel guilty, and angry at themselves for not being who they want to be. This is not an open, blatant, roaring anger, but an anger hidden behind the smooth word, the smiling face and the polite handshake. It is a frozen anger, an anger which settles into a biting resentment and slowly paralyses a generous heart. If there is anything that makes ministry look grim and dull, it is this dark, insidious anger in the servants of Christ."*

Can you hear the deep underlying pain of grief here? The hope of so many expectations and dreams of a passionate leader left unfulfilled.

The unreconciled grief of pain, of loss, simmering to anger (Hayford, 2011). Amongst the pain of ministry, of unmet goals, crushed dreams, and longings, how do we still hope and seek for a greater plan? To truly taste and see that the Lord is good. Personally, for our lives, and for His Church. Even when it doesn't feel good, even when it hurts, even when the pain is so unexpected. How do we truly know He is good in our pain? And how do we truly trust that His way truly is the greatest way? As Psalm 34:17-18 (MSG) says...

***"Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see - how good God is. Blessed are you who run to him.... —Psalm 34:8
Is anyone crying for help? God is listening, ready to rescue you. If your heart is broken, you'll find God right there; if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath."***

—Psalm 34:17-18

What I have learnt is that God is listening, even when our hearts are broken. He is right there wanting us to run to Him. Sometimes, it's the only thing we have physically left in us, to be held by love. We all experience grief so differently, but yet we all understand how tough it is to walk through. Shear (2012) writes, "I have never climbed Mt. Everest, but I sometimes think it would be easier than navigating the pathway through grief!" Grief is so very hard. Yet, in the midst of it all, we are invited to let the pain come in, come out, wash over, be still, deepen and find joy and hope once again. Let your soul be ok with holding both pain and beauty within the waves of grief.



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Landscape of the Chronic

Deborah Kim

*This is the story of no change.
of shaking off pressure to squeeze out a
getting better, in me
somewhere.*

*Doors shut in case of tomorrows,
forget favourite pairs left outside.
Pick up reluctant capsules, medicated.
Count in timid possibilities among great fears.
Tuck in free-running thoughts,
turn off blackened checklists.
Wish for the unopened bottle to sparkle regardless.
Silence speaking on behalf of many nows.*

*Life and not life
Is all the same
walking untrodden tracks in this empire of pain.
So shoes I put on,
last suppering each day awake.
Faithfully unknowing,
Outlove to outlive.
Because love and not love
Is not the same.*

*Knocking on the ashes of old fires
Cloudlets come
I can't be what I can't see
So come
Sparkly darkly come.
And sing unto the wilderness places of wellness, of wholeness
As I walk us home.
Take your shoes off.
This too, is Holy ground.*

Sit beside Deb
here as she
reads her poem



This is a personal one. I have lived with a chronic auto-immune condition for 20 plus years, befriending severe symptoms that have crippled and left me bed-ridden for many seasons. This is a cry, a laugh, a sigh, a shout – let out in one sitting. I invite you to read it out aloud if you will, call out the corners in you that identify as the chronic. What isn't chronic in life, was a nod I received the first time I shared this poem.

Winter

Carly Cassidy

*There's a cool breeze coming. You can feel it in the air.
People start to walk faster. Their feet no longer bare.
Some hold on to memories. Of a brighter day.
Others already wrapped in scarves. As the branches start to sway.*

*There are colour changes everywhere. From green, to red, to brown.
Then gradually every leaf. Tumbles gently down.
The tree once proud and full of life. Now heaves a heavy sigh.
Its empty arms now burdened by. The newly homeless bluebird's cry.*

*The wind now strong brings clouds so dark. A storm's about to break.
It comes with so much force you wonder. How much can one tree take?
This tree now paints a picture. That only uses grey.
And every day it cries a song. Of heartache and dismay.*

*There are people hurting everywhere. Their connections have gone cold.
Relationships have frozen. They are feeling lonely, used and old.
Feeling stripped of all their beauty. De-robed of all their grace.
Only a shell of their former self. Suffering etched into their face.*

*Of all the seasons of the year. Winter seems so long.
We use up so much energy. Riding it out until it's gone.
Then just like that poor leafless tree. In rain, hail and snow.
We feel battered, bruised and weary. But somehow, we still know.*

*Around the corner, not far away. A branch shoots a sprout of green.
The degrees will slowly start to climb. The new growth will soon be seen.
So when we feel the cold creep in. When all we see is snow.
Remember it is just for a time. Seasons come and go.*



See Carly read her poem

'Nest' by Tanya Tindale



The Garden of Letting Go

Loani Falconer

*The ground was cool under my bare feet.
There in the dappled light beneath a large tree I sat on a rock
looking up through the gently swaying branches catching dazzling
shards of light as leaves moved playfully in the breeze. Toes tracing
random shapes in the dirt.
Why couldn't I let it go? It had somehow seemed to bring comfort
even in the pain. It was familiar, it was safe, but now in this season
I didn't seem to need it and yet it was proving hard to part with.
My eyes searching for answers my mind could not find happen upon
a single leaf floating down from above. No noise, no fuss, no regret.
Simply becoming unattached, moving almost effortlessly to the next
season, allowing the pull of gravity
to bring it to the garden floor.
In the distance I could hear the gentle flowing water.
It seemed to beckon me so I rose. Rustling footsteps finding their
way through fallen leaves to a simple wooden bridge. Standing in
a space above the centre of the stream I pause.
I find you there.
Following your gaze to the water below.
Watching as it swirls peacefully along and under the bridge.
The object in my firmly clasped hands felt smooth and worn.
It was time.
Open palms. Surrendered heart. Feet solid on a firm foundation.
I cast it off with a powerful force sending it arking up through the air,
hovering momentarily, then effortlessly following the pull of gravity
it splashes down.
Another. Once carefully stored, now ready to discard.
Then more. I pick them up and toss them into the water, and as they
submerge beneath the surface freedom comes.*



Hear Loani guide you through this meditation





Wonder and awe

Informal and simplistic

Liberating

Dreaming

Embrace fear and failure

Resonate with creation

New pattern

Empty, space to listen

Spiritual transformation

Seek his will

Learning in Wilderness Chaos : Vicki Keogh

I was inspired to write this acrostic poem, '*Learning in the Wilderness Chaos*,' after reading about how the wilderness can be a spiritual journey of change. This reading was impactful, as I felt like I had been wandering in the wilderness chaos over the last few years, unsure of what was next for me in my life's story. Reading about how the wilderness can be a time of formation helped me identify that even though I felt like I was walking in the chaos of the unknown, I was actually in a creative space where my Creator was helping me discover more of my true self. Writing a description of this journey using each letter of the word 'wilderness' was valuable in expressing what I had been experiencing. It has encouraged me as I rise out of the wilderness and into the next chapter of my story.



Story

There is Room for Your Story

Wendy Stumbles

I love collage. It is exciting to see a creation evolve as slowly the pieces come together, relate, and find their place. This process reminds me of our life journey where the pieces of our story slowly come together and the creation of us evolves. Pieces of our stories are commonly shared at the table, and in my experience, evolution often occurs when sharing a cuppa. *'There is Room for Your Story'* is an expression of a communal story about God. A story where everyone is welcome at the table, deeply heard, and included.

The collage pieces were taken from artworks created by women I am connected to. Each woman followed a process where they sat quietly and thought about God. They then creatively expressed their thoughts on paper. There was no right, wrong, better, or worse response. Each expression was honest and found its place in the collage.

Take some time now to sit quietly and think about God? I wonder what image comes into your mind. Can you creatively express your image onto the canvas below?

Whether it feels wonderful or challenging, this image is an important piece in the collage of your story. It asks to be deeply heard, included, and warmly welcomed. My hope is that you will add your piece into the artwork on the following page. Feel free to explore colour, pattern, image, and mark the page to make this an expression of your unique journey.

Your story is welcome.

There is room for your story!



Check out the original art used in Wendy's Collage

'There is Room for Your Story'
—Paper Collage



A Tale of Two Churches

Naomi Giles

Generations of faith

If I had to draw a line from where I was as a child in church to where I stand today, it would be anything but straight.

Born into a large family and part of an even larger clan, church was always front and centre – hard work 5–6 days a week, then total buy-in to serving in the local church. As I look around my extended family, this was the way most of us were. Both my dad and mum came from farming backgrounds. Not the kind with money, but the kind that worked for others who owned the farms. The kind that carried crippling mortgages and held off the bank and the council by sheer grim determination.

Of course, as a kid, I was oblivious to all that. On Christmas Day, the clan would gather at my grandparents' farm, high on the hill overlooking the sleepy rural town of Bangalow. In what was supposed to be a large, posh, formal dining room, complete with a dumb waiter, red cedar lining, stained glass windows and a huge fireplace, my grandmother converted the table tennis table and any other table she could lay her hands on – into banquet tables crowded with food.

Through a child's eyes, I knew it wasn't Santa who brought us together for this feast but Jesus. As the grace 'God is love' was sung in full voice in multiple harmonies, I felt warm inside. Large servings of Grandma's trifle and Granddad's creaming soda proved beyond a doubt that God was indeed good!

All of my extended family were attached to some church or another – and although the clan had started out with the Methodists, the family soon became stalwarts of the Churches of Christ. It makes sense that these people of the land were attracted to this renewal movement that called people back to the basics of faith, a shedding of traditions, and an embracing of the 'lay person' as someone who was qualified by God to serve and lead.

As the movement grew, the massive tent missions rolled into rural towns. It was at one of these missions that my dad left behind his tenuous family connection to the Jehovah's Witnesses and embraced the Christian faith alongside my mum.



Image: My Dad, Errol Giles pictured far right, served in different roles including Sunday School Superintendent, Church Secretary, Church Handyman at the Lismore church of Christ. (Photo scanned from "Lismore Church of Christ – 100 years of Christian Witness" 1884–1984)

Putting on the straitjacket

By the time I came along, what started as a grassroots call back to faith and simplicity, was adopting more rigid formalities. In the 1970s, those farmers and pioneers were putting on their Sunday best, and the traditions and dos and don'ts became more defined, or some might say stifling. I remember watching in fascination as the men emerged from a mysterious room at the back of the church. Solemn-faced, they marched out in precision to take their places – one president, two readers and two helpers.

When they arose to distribute communion and collect the offering, they did so with timing akin to the military. If one of the men got out of pace with the others, they quickly adjusted – back into line. Was military precision a sign of holiness? I wondered what terrible thing might happen if they did get out of step.

The music added colour and life to the procession. I loved to sing and hear the enthusiastic voices rising around me. Our hymns and choruses were usually light and bright, and the dirges were left to the older traditional churches down the street. Up on the 'stage' and in the 'heaven-high' pulpit, there were always men. Men in ties and collared shirts, some in full suits. One of those men up the front in a tie was sometimes my dad. He was a man with hands hardened from work, his skin weathered by the elements.

As he stood to 'preside' and lead the worship, I could hear his throat tighten up, his stammering start, and I looked on helplessly, holding my breath in shame. It seemed like torture for him – and it was also for me watching on.

Mum looked up with a smile, willing him on with the words he had diligently practised at home. I tried to sink further into the hard wooden pew.

Why did such an amazingly capable, practical man feel he had to swap his tools for a tie to serve God? His gifts were service and administration. He was the one who fixed the building, mowed the lawns, and ran Sunday school! But there he was up front, and I wished I could save him the pain. The other men in ties had their turns, and I counted the minutes of the long readings, prayers and sermon.

I was grateful for the days when Sunday school would rescue me from the red-faced, fist-slamming pulpit preaching, and we were set free to run and play games.

It felt in many ways like there was a massive gap between the theatre of the church service and the reality of the hard-working life of the people who gathered. While I revelled in the embrace and love of the people and the fun I had with the other kids, the other side of the coin seemed more surreal: a spiritual straitjacket that was put on for Sundays. I took it all in and decided I was happy to cash in on the benefits of being in the church community but would keep my life in my own hands. I could be a good person and enjoy life without surrendering to the great unknown and committing to what I saw as a set of stringent conditions and behaviours.

God had other plans. On the 100th anniversary of the Lismore Church of Christ, the place was full to overflowing. Up front, the visiting speaker was some highflier from Sydney called Gordon Moyes, and I can safely say I can't remember a word of what he said.

What I do recall was the power and presence of the Spirit overwhelming me, and the wrestle to stay in my seat as the final hymn was sung.

Somehow, I found myself standing at the front of the church, weeping and exposed in complete vulnerability. God had won, and I wasn't particularly happy about it. I can't say I 'fell in love with Jesus', but I was compelled by a God who would not leave me alone. Despite my best efforts to resist Him, I ultimately surrendered.

After that, church life beyond Sunday school and youth group remained pretty rigid, and my faith quite static until a young pastor and his family appeared among us. It felt like a window had been opened to let in the fresh air.



Image: Lismore church of Christ youth 1992. One of my first leadership roles was as part of the Youth Leadership team. I am pictured top left (in blue) at age 20.

Finding freedom

Ian Phillips was authentically himself, didn't go near that pulpit, strapped on a guitar, told jokes, and invited me up on that 'sacred' stage to help with worship. He even organised band nights in the basement of the church he and his wife, Marie, opened their home and their hearts to welcome us in. I am sure Ian copped a lot for his push-back against tradition. I remember being at an AGM as a child and hearing one of the conservative stalwarts of the church rail against him. Ian rose and read a simple statement, then sat again.

The air was heavy with conflict, and I hoped someone would rise passionately to his defense. While the complaint was received and acknowledged, no punishment was meted out that day. I remember the stalwart leaving with his feathers still ruffled. However, I also left that meeting changed. It instilled in me a firm distrust of formal meetings and a grim determination that I would never participate in such a pantomime.

Despite my distrust of the formalities, I continued to grow and was keen to respond to any request for help, following my parents' example of serving deeply. I got involved in worship and youth leadership and was encouraged and energised. I remember several warnings from my mum not to get carried away with emotion or excitement, as though those things were somehow of the 'flesh' and not of God.

In the latter years of my schooling, the church became home to an increasing number of students coming to study at the local university. At this time, a young couple introduced a few of us to a new understanding of the Holy Spirit. Although I

was initially frightened by the idea of 'losing control', I knew there was more life to be found. After working things through, I prayed a simple prayer while alone with God to welcome His Spirit. After that time, I began to notice a difference. I could see beyond the surface with people, was sometimes given words and knowledge to share, and amazingly, in worship, sometimes I could see a cloud of the Spirit or different coloured auras glowing around people as they praised. And when I sang, I remember hearing a voice emerge from me that sounded unlike mine. Was the Spirit somehow in my voice?

I parted ways with the interpretation of the scripture that the spiritual gifts had ceased when Jesus came; it simply didn't make sense to me anymore. There was life in the Spirit, and I was riding that wave.

Drifting

In the years that followed – leaving school, working for my gap year and then entering university to study media – my faith took different forms. By the time I started my first job at the local radio station, I was once again finding the church somewhat stifling and wanted to climb further out on some unexplored limbs of life.

I stopped attending worship and started to hang out more with my work friends, moved out of home and began dating a guy who was nominally Catholic (but didn't have a personal grasp of faith). I was drifting in the currents of life and happy to be there. Although being untethered felt scary in some ways, I also felt like going with the flow and simply being okay with that.

By now, I'd made my way into a journalist/newsreader role, and I knew that if I were to progress in my career, I would have to move to a larger city. Then, Canberra came onto my radar as my brother lived there, and a radio station was looking for a journalist.

In May 1996, I kissed my boyfriend goodbye, jumped in my trusty Corolla Seca and transplanted my life away from the north coast of NSW to Canberra.

I arrived as the presence of winter was beginning to be felt. Having come from a subtropical area, I was in deep shock. I discovered how lonely life can get when I disconnect from faith and church community. I remembered the warmth of community and the acceptance and embrace of all people, young and old, found in church communities.

This kind of interconnectedness could not be found elsewhere – it had a richness and depth you could not find by simply hanging out with people your own age. So, I felt drawn back, starting out in the church my brother's girlfriend attended. This church was still in the family of churches I knew: Belconnen Church of Christ (now known as NationsHeart Christian Community).

I first dipped my toes in at a night service. The room was dark, there were stage lights, the band was loud, and the young leader out the front jumped up and down in enthusiastic worship. I didn't know the songs and felt like a fish out of water. It was too much for me. But instead of giving up altogether, I went to the morning service. There was a mix of ages here, and the worship aligned more with what I knew.

I remember one of the ministers, Heather Potter, sidling up to me with a cheeky grin and warmly welcoming me. There was nothing 'straitjacket' about this lady; instead, there was a twinkle in her eye and a sense of fun and hospitality that was something special. I still wasn't convinced, but I was there. An invitation was issued to join with some other young people at her home for a meal. I was not sure if I wanted in.

Around the same time, my long-distance relationship came to a sudden halt in a difficult telephone conversation, and so I decided to go. Being miserable and alone was not working for me. After that, I started to form relationships with some of the younger people in the church, and I began to think this could work out.

A new way

It wasn't long before I found myself deeply embedded in the life of this local church. It was as if I was returning to my faith, putting it on again like a cloak I'd thrown off. But the cloak felt different in this new environment – stretchy, with room to grow. These weren't the same stringent ways of worshipping and understanding life and faith that I learned growing up. There was an invitation to listen closely to God and respond to Him. Worship was less formal and more about sensing His presence and expressing joy.

I felt the Spirit rising in me once more, and those dormant gifts started to take shape as I listened again, eager for His voice.

Alongside this, my career in the media was going well. Among the twists and turns of local newsroom closures, I found myself unexpectedly in the wonderful world of TV – working

for Channel 10 as a producer and journalist at their local newsroom. But while my career advanced, I was also becoming increasingly aware of a tug deep within that had remained latent for many years. Here in this new church, the question always being asked was, 'What is God's calling on your life? How are you going to follow him?'

I grappled with this for months – fighting with God, fighting within, and not wanting to let go of what I was building in my career. Then, one night in my sleep, God spoke to me through a dream. I was standing on the beach with a bunch of people, other people from church, having fun and enjoying being together in the beauty of creation. But then, onto the beauty of that beach, some wreckage washed up.

I examined it and realised it was a sign that people were lost at sea and were dying. They needed help! I said this to the others with me, and some of us went to the Coast Guard and alerted them, but strangely – although they had the resources – they were unwilling to go.

So, I was left with this group of people to work out how to respond to this great need. I started to organise different vessels to go out – anything that was available, big boats, little boats, boats of all different shapes and sizes.

And off they went out into the vast ocean. I stayed on the beach with just a few people and waited. As I watched – boatloads of people started coming back to the beach. There was great celebration and joy among all those who had been saved and those who had gone to their rescue. In the dream, I felt amazed and incredulous as I watched this unfold. Something akin to pride welled up in me when I heard God's voice cut through: "This is for my glory, Naomi, not yours."

This dream began to haunt me. The pressure rose as I fought to let go of my career and embrace the unknown.

The Crossroads

I was working up the courage to speak to my boss when one day he asked me somewhat surprisingly to walk with him down to the canteen for a coffee. He'd never done that before, so I knew something was up. He offered me the Chief of Staff role in the newsroom. It would mean a significant pay rise, a company car, and the prestige of ordering around a suite of journalists and cameramen day by day. I was gob-smacked.

Forced into a corner with rising fear roaring in my ears, I finally found the courage to speak.

Instead of accepting this juicy offer, I told him I had, in fact, been wanting to move in a different direction and go and serve at my church. I had hoped I could remain in the newsroom and work part-time. He was taken by surprise and asked what the offer from my church was. Perhaps he thought he could outbid them? My answer only added to his confusion. There was no offer from the church, no money on the table, no title. In his eyes, this was madness – but he didn't ridicule me; he was simply stunned. He soon moved onto plan B and promoted someone else.

He saw no ongoing role for me in the newsroom as a part-timer, so I put in my notice and kept working, waiting out my agreed final three months. People started asking me about my income plan and how I would pay the rent. I had prepared my resume but had no idea what to do next. I felt like I was just supposed to wait.



Image: My induction as Ministry Team Leader 23 Jan 2011 at NationsHeart

Two weeks before I was due to leave, my boss called me into his office. Could I work as an assistant producer from 4pm to 7pm every day during peak times in the newsroom, ensuring the bulletin aired smoothly every night? He offered me casual work – no holiday pay, no benefits – but it was enough. So, I began serving more at the church in any way I could and working in the afternoons at the newsroom. I remember being so happy, and my boss was amazed when I turned up to work each afternoon beaming and ready to work. He would shake his head, give me a wry smile and then walk back into his office and let me scurry about doing the work that was really his to do. Over the next six years, I somehow juggled studying, working for various employers, and serving at the church. With the support and encouragement of others, I scraped by and made it through my 20s and into my 30s, balancing various roles and responsibilities.

No gender agenda

One unique aspect of being called to serve at NationsHeart was that my gender was never a barrier. Unbeknown to me at the time, the church had been founded in the 1970s with the explicit intention that gender

would not define how someone could serve God. Every person was invited to explore their gifts and serve in the ways they had been gifted. The founding members ensured this was woven into the ethos of the emerging church. I have benefited so much from this legacy. I have never had to fight for what I could or could not do, as defined by my gender. I know this is still an issue in many churches that causes much division and pain in the lives of those directly affected. How much is lost when we close our hearts and fight over issues like this?

All I can offer to those who question the role of women in church leadership is my conviction that I am simply trying to follow God. I know a God who called me by name, a God who was, in fact, relentless in his calling, a God who kept drawing me into leadership and serving even through my reluctance and my rebellion. I am a recipient of much grace bestowed on me by the legacy of women and men who decided such things would not limit this local church.

I saw around me many different women who were following their calling, listening to God and responding. I'm just simply one of them. While this was normal in my context, when I attended

leadership events that involved a greater network of people, I soon discovered that it was not the case for many others. I remember being asked by a woman where my husband was, looking around like he might be nearby. I quipped with a wry smile, "I don't know, I haven't met him yet!" She then asked me about my role, and I explained that I led the church (I was appointed Ministry Team Leader in 2010). She looked embarrassed and uncomfortable, and the conversation soon ended.

It wasn't the only time that I've experienced conversations like this. A young woman visiting our church only a few years ago voiced the same doubts; stumbling over her words, she asked how I was allowed to lead a church. When an older man who also trained in ministry joined our ministry team at NationsHeart, some people from our wider community assumed I would now pass the baton to him. Surely, he's the right one to lead? I mean, at least he looks like a priest! Over the years, I have mainly laughed it off and accepted that others have different ideas and understandings and that I can't change their minds by arguing. I've simply got on with serving and following.

Today, I also thank the people who, in forming NationsHeart, integrated gender equality into the foundation, ensuring it has never become a debated issue.

I am so thankful for that. I haven't had to waste time and energy trying to navigate those difficult waters. There is no straitjacket – I can simply be me. The founders of NationsHeart are amazing people who have suffered and endured a lot.

They continue to serve faithfully, even though the church bears little resemblance to what it started out as. Like me, they fear how this local community church might survive, endure and thrive. But like me, they keep following the call written on our building wall – ‘to worship God and serve the community’.

The underground forest

As I stand among this small, faithful crew, I know (most days!) that God is still doing His thing. We are changing shape, as are many other churches around us, shocked out of the status quo by the ravages of the pandemic. For us, the change had begun before that, but the pandemic made sure that we couldn't go back along a familiar path to a safe haven – that road had been washed away. Instead, we wait and watch and continue in faithfulness.

This year, as we celebrate 50 years of being a local church, we are aware of the fragility and the beauty of what God has shaped among us.

We are called to deeper places of trust as some of our strategies for coping and managing are being stripped away. We are being called into stewardship and partnership – opening up His space to invite many others in. More people come through our church building throughout the week seeking support and care than those who come on a Sunday to worship. Many things have been turned upside down – and the harvest field has expanded way beyond what our hands and resources can manage.

Among all these changes, grief arises. Together, we hold and let go of the memories of the journey so far. But as we walk through the grief and surrender together, there are wide-open spaces for us to enjoy if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear. In many ways, it looks like a barren landscape – with some of our former ministries and the people who filled these roles gone, razed to the ground. And yet He speaks to me of an underground forest – where the roots of a deeply planted tree are still strong, and the branches and the budding in the canopy will continue to flourish under His hand.¹

His church unfolding

In my first church, I witnessed the constraints of rigid tradition but also experienced the beauty of community and God's relentlessness. In my second, I have encountered the freedom of following Him and the realities of my own shortcomings as a leader and a follower.

His church is a gift for those willing to embrace the beauty and frailty of sharing life and faith. It will change you, challenge and stretch you, annoy and frustrate you, make you laugh and cry, call you to uncomfortable places of surrender, forgiveness and grace, and invite you to take risks you'd never consider on your own.

May His church continue to be a place where all people, regardless of gender, age, education, wealth, health, skills, gifts and culture, can find a place to serve.

May it be a place where we can take the long journey together to learn to understand and trust His way, and discover what loving ourselves and each other actually looks like. I'm grateful for the crowd of witnesses who have come before me, those who are standing with me now, and those I am yet to meet on the journey of following Him.

May His Kingdom come among us, around us and within us as we hold His light and share His life wherever He has planted us.



Image: Here I am recently in the foyer of our church, NationsHeart. The symbol behind me was drawn with the artist's permission, by my niece Katrina Giles. The symbol forms the centrepiece of an artwork called "The Meeting Place", which was painted by one of our members, a Wiradjuri lady, Stacey Brasher.

¹ Rinaudo, Tony, "The Forest Underground: Hope for a Planet in Crisis", Icast, April 2022

Fire and Water

Deborah Kim

*Would you sit with me by the still waters
where we quieten our surrounds,
parked long enough
until the right voices amplify*

*In the double up of
all that is here and all that mirrors
or all that is up there and all that mirrors.
Invitation glides on the wings of a Grandpa Pelican
to notice
the editing of Heaven and Earth.
Because attention
is the beginning of devotion.
Because beauty and war sit
on the same table.
To release
what is generously personal and delicately public.*

*It takes ancient anointing to reach the end times
So we offer up
offer out
from this place of the still waters,
a fire in our bellies.*

(Isaiah 43:1-7)



Listen to Deb read here

Photo: Abigail Skelly



Wonder

When Doubt Visits

Wendy Stumbles

*When Doubt visits
We hold hands and go to the beach.
We accept the invitation to participate,
as the mysterious deep and clear shallows
embrace and play,
and celebrate their difference.
We plunge, tumble, and drift,
as water and land argue, wrestle and forgive
in a struggle to understand shape,
and hold position.
We explore with hope,
as debris is snatched from the edges
Then carried, sifted,
and treasure thrown back in return.
We quietly watch,
as the water runs fast
then stops to catch breath,
knowing in this pause,
Her destiny is to return enlarged.*



Do you have a special place which reminds you of God?
When I think about God I imagine the ocean. The ocean is a place which is inviting yet fear-filled, gentle yet powerful, known and at the same time unknown. It is multi-layered and complex. I too, am multi-layered and complex and so are you.

These creative pieces encourage embracing and befriending the complicated parts of self. They are an expression of the journey towards self-awareness and growth. A journey which makes the time to explore, wrestle, and reflect on our complicated parts. God invites you to share this journey together.

Is there a complex part of you that often visits? Have the courage to name that part. What steps can you take to begin the journey of acceptance and befriending this part? I wonder if it is time to hold its hand and visit your ocean!

*'When Doubt Visits'
—Paper Collage*





'Miracles from Mess'
Acrylic paint pour : Carly Cassidy

Miracles from Mess

Carly Cassidy

*If I was an artist, I would create, I would create the most beautiful things
The most beautiful things, that you have ever seen, the most beautiful things
That would make your heart sing, and I would keep creating,
these wonderful works of art...*

*I would create, works of art, works of art, birthed from my heart
Works of art with the most vibrant of colours, the most vibrant of colours
That were all there together, together as one,
in one glorious mess...*

*A glorious mess, right there for the taking
A glorious mess, that needed shaping
It started with an empty page, a blank canvas, a lump of clay
And then with time it took a turn, and it turned away...*

*For what was once a piece of art, forgot its place upon my wall
Forgot its worth. Forgot its call. Forgot that I was not done yet
And yet still it turned away
Now what would I the artist say...*

*For if I was an artist, there would be times of disappointment
Times when mediums didn't match, when all the colours began to clash
It would be easy to stop right there, instead I'd keep creating
I'd keep painting, patiently waiting, waiting for that glorious day...*

*That glorious day, when in vulnerability saw that mess for what it was
A deep longing to find freedom, to bring meaning, into an often-meaningless world
With a tear in my eye and a depth in my cry
A miracle emerged from the mess...*

*For only when the clay is soft, the Potter's hand can feel
Where to press and where to lift, His mastery a treasured gift
His grace plows deeper into our soul, where the soil's been softened through turmoil
And in our mess, you'll find it's best, to turn towards and test...
Our faith in, yes, Our One, Creator God.*



Watch *Miracles from Mess* here



Secret Garden

Loani Falconer

He hands
me a key; a smile
spreads across my face
because I know where we are going.
I have been here many times before. I
turn the key over in my hands, anticipation in
each step as I follow him to this place. Hidden
by trees, an old stone wall, a covering of vines.
He sweeps back some branches and there is the
door. He looks at me with a gaze that invites, and I
turn the key in the lock. Together we go in just him
and me. How long till the sun sets? I want to lose time
in this secret garden, this secret place. I know there
are gardens within this garden and sometimes we
go to those- gardens of adoration where praise
springs forth and angels dance, gardens where
fern fronds uncurl and scripture comes alive,
gardens of regeneration where bark
peels back from the trunks of trees,
tables of revelation where
we plan and dream. Places
where we write and draw.
Canyons where the echoes
of songs and declarations of
promises are heard. Spaces
where daisies grow in fields of
forgiveness. Thick dense forests
which house vats of refining fire.
Gardens of letting go where rocks
are tossed off wooden bridges into the
river below. A healing well so deep that
we dug together - a deep, deep hole
where the water that's trapped between
the sand and rocks now has a place to seep
out. Mountains where we run, and you show
me the view. Waterfalls that thunder where
tears fall and anointing oil flows. And many
more, and in this secret web of gardens joy
and pain can be held together, transformation
exchanges take place, love so tangible. It is home.
Gently you draw me here and now gently you
bring me to the edge of the garden. I know I must
return. Back through the door, I hand you the key.



Come with Loani into the Secret Garden





Hope

Let Us Reframe

Wendy Stumbles

*I long to be beautiful.
To graciously hold my perfect heart
and offer it to the world.
But I have wildly roared,
quietly snored,
scratched,
and grazed both knees in shameful retreat.
I have been too colourful,
held too much,
released too late,
and my scribbled heart feels less than holy.
Still,
in raw confusion,
I hear your gentle presence whisper,
“Yet you are so lovely.”*



This artwork is a preparatory sketch for a more polished drawing. As I reflected on the sketch, I noticed the beauty, energy, and spontaneity of the lines. I fell in love with the authenticity and courage which the woman has in revealing her heart, even though she is not yet perfect or complete. This made me wonder how striving towards perfection masks the beauty, energy, and spontaneity within me.

We are beautifully and wonderfully made by a Creator who loves us, even in our imperfection.

As you reflect on these artworks, consider where you have been striving. How may this be masking the beauty, energy, and spontaneity of your true-self and squashing life out of you?

Perhaps it is time to let God reframe you. Rest quietly and receive from God the courage to reveal your authentic heart.

***“The Shulamite;
I know I am so unworthy –
so in need.***

***The Shepherd King;
Yet you are so lovely.”***

—Song of Songs 1:5 (TPT)

***‘Let Us Reframe’
Coloured pencil on paper***



My Little Boat

Carly Cassidy

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
Surrounded by the sea of grief.
The waves come and go,
I bob to and fro,
But I am safe, afloat,
in my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
As the clouds above me gather.
They turn a dark grey,
much like my day
But I am dry,
afloat,
in my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
As the rain comes
splashing down.
Spilling out from the cloud,
the wind now so loud
Whipping at the side
of my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
And I wonder if it can hold on.
The storm is full force,
it steers me off course
I'm lost, afloat,
in my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
As I am tossed in this
raging ocean.
I cry out, I'm alone,
and I'm soaked to the bone
Then I see it ...
a hand on my boat.*



*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
And the weather
starts to subside.
The rain starts to ease,
the gale now a cool breeze
There is not one, but two
hands on my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
A ray of light dances on top
of the waves
The sun tries to break through,
the sky's back to blue
The hands gently
holding my boat.*

*I sit in my boat.
My boat made of hope.
As more hands build
a mast and a sail
I am no longer alone,
faith and courage has grown
I am so grateful for
my little boat.*



Watch My Little Boat here



Restored Hope

Jo Huntington



While co-leading in the B&B space, God has allowed me to experience a new day – a rebirth of sorts – into an old story that God has been writing for many years in my life as a follower of Jesus and leader of others. This B&B journey, filled with co-creation, has been tenderly woven in healing ways that have personally restored my own sense of vocation, helped me to discover hidden beauty, and provoked a flourishing hope in this season of change.

This story of healing, a continued work in process, is carved here in lino and rolled in ink in two prints: “Beauty in my well-worn pocket” and “Hope Rope.”

I wonder what you will see as you engage with these prints? My hope is that Jesus will whisper strength, grace and courage to you for a new season.



Beauty in My Well-Worn Pocket

Jo Huntington



"... we too, can be on a journey with struggles, where perseverance and endurance are doing a vital work in changing us. It is often during these testing times that something beautiful is being forged within." —Fiona Horrobin, *Healing through Creativity*, 2020, p. 343.

What's in your worn old pocket?

How might this forged beauty impact others?

What is bravely emerging in and through your story?

'Beauty in My Well Worn Pocket'

Lino

Hope Rope

Jo Huntington



“hold fast to the hope set before us....”

—Hebrews 6:18b (NIV)

How active is your participation with God in holding hope for yourself and others, especially for those who are living in the margins of our world?

“It may seem that those who are poor and needy have been forgotten, but God will not forget them. He will not leave them without hope.”

—Psalm 9:18 (ERV)

The Hebrew word for hope הִקְוָה *tiqwāh* found in Psalm 9 is a word that also translates as Rope.

This rope is something that we can both hold on to but also pull on to secure Gods restored vision for ourselves and others.¹ Just like Rahab with her woven, scarlet cord in Joshua 2:18-21, we become participants in hope, connecting and tethering our stories to God’s faithful goodness in the now and for the future generations.

I wonder how you are co-labouring with God in hope today? Are you tethered or holding on, or are you pulling in hope for yourself and others?



‘Hope Rope’

Lino and Collage

¹ Barker, A. No Wastelands: How to grow seedbeds of Shalom in your neighbourhood (Seedbeds Communications 2023).

Re-membering

*The leadership gift of women,
the female face of God, and the beauty of the holy middle.*

Kym Dixon

God spoke;

*“Let us make human beings
in our image, make them
reflecting our nature.
So they can be responsible
for the fish in the sea, the
birds in the air, the cattle,
and, yes, earth itself, and
every animal that moves
on the face of earth.”
God created human beings;
He created them godlike,
reflecting God’s nature.
Created them male and
female.*

—Genesis 1:26–27
(The Message)

*“This is my story
and it’s your story,
tell everybody
because we all
need to live.”*

—Billy Jangala, dhiyaan
(the one meat mob ¹)

It was on our second Belly & Bones retreat with the dhiyaan community at Bethel Farm in Dalby that I was invited into the practice of ‘re-membering’, a process that involves restoring First Nations traditions, languages, stories, ceremonies, and other aspects of spirituality and culture to heal from the trauma of colonisation.

Re-membering acknowledges that parts of First Nations peoples’ spirit have been dismembered and we need to recover what was forgotten through time. It’s a restoration of self and a restoration of belonging. ² Elder and teacher, Billy Jangala, encouraged us to pay attention to the process of re-membering in our own lives. Over the days we spent in Dalby, I watched the Spirit deeply attending to each one of us.

As I reflect on this experience, I wonder if the Spirit is doing a wider ‘re-membering’ work within the Church, bringing restoration to the body for the season ahead? One area in which I sense this re-membering is in the recovery of the original belonging, partnership, and responsibility that was entrusted to women and men in the garden. Woven deeply within this recovery is the re-emergence of the divine feminine.

Somewhere on the journey we have lost the language, stories, and practices that helped us understand and live into this partnership. In the same way, I have come to recognise that colonisation has robbed me of the gift of First Nations spirituality and wisdom.

I am wondering how much predominately male theology and leadership has robbed the church of feminine knowledge and wisdom? For many of us, even the words ‘divine feminine’ might sound foreign, pagan, or wrong. Perhaps, like me, you are wondering why, if male and female are made in the image of God, the divine feminine has been forgotten within much of the Christian tradition and the church?

It was the experience of what I now recognise as an encounter with the divine feminine on the first Belly & Bones retreat, on the lands of the Dharawal nation in Bundeena, that began a search in me. I penned these words as I reflected in my journal.

¹ Williams, B, “Dhiyaan.” (2024) <https://dhiyaan.org.au>

² McLeod, A, “Who’s Your Mob? Aboriginal mapping: beginning with the strong story.” *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. (2017) <https://caan.ca/remembering-documentary/>, <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Whos-your-mob-by-Justin-Butler.pdf>

"How do I take in the beauty and gravity of what has taken place over the past two days and since this project began? The ease, fun, and beauty of collaboration, of women deeply honouring the life, wounding, strength and fragility of each other – allowing it all to co-exist. The beauty of shared strength without competition and not having to change who you are to fit in and contribute. Women, free to be in their sweet spots, crafting and creating from their being. The healing and restoration indirectly flowing, the Spirit igniting something between us and within us."

As I asked God about what I had tasted amongst this group of women, I was led to the voices of others bearing witness to the same encounter.

"I started to notice that women were doing something more than just standing up for themselves and making their voices heard. I saw that there was something tangible in what might be called 'the deep feminine': A profound power that comes from the belly, a creative power, deeply calming, it's safe and nurturing of course, but it also has to do with birth giving."

"What we are witnessing is a sea change in spiritual consciousness – the return of the feminine. The feminine wound is slowly healing. People are waking up, redefining theological concepts and expressing their voices."

Sue Monk Kidd ⁴

"The return of the feminine offers wholeness. She restores lost parts of ourselves to men and women and to our culture. The feminine is returning when she is most needed, for we live in a world that is dangerously out of balance. Wholeness is the joy of rediscovering our holiness, so her presence not only challenges, it transforms by healing the wound of separation."

Phylliss W Curriott ⁵

Directly after this first Belly & Bones retreat, I, along with women leaders across denominations and the country, represented our network of churches at the launch of the Micah campaign: 'A Safer World for All'. Micah is a coalition of Christian international development agencies that empowers Australian Christians to advocate on the most urgent global justice issues facing our world today – extreme poverty and hunger, rising conflict, and climate change. ⁶

In the evening, Leader Reverend Tim Costello shared that "the world has entered a state of 'polycrisis', where severe and mutually reinforcing shocks threaten to derail hard earned progress to improve the lives of millions in our world." He went on to recount that Micah began sending women leaders to Canberra in 2018 when he recognised their unique capacity to engage with and listen to Members of Parliament and gather their input to shape campaigns that can create change, and ultimately a safer world for all.

I listened to Asuntha Charles, CEO of World Vision Afghanistan and global women's rights activist, tell her story of using her voice to listen and create possibilities in conversations with the Taliban. As she encouraged the women present to offer their empathetic leadership and solutions to governments, I saw the connection between what I had tasted within the Belly & Bones cohort and the kind of leadership that the world needs now.

The Leadership of Women

The Bible is full of women who play significant roles in the redemptive story of God. Unfortunately, in the church, many of these examples of women leading, serving, and thriving have been overlooked or minimised in our teaching. As part of the Belly & Bones retreat, we chose to engage with scripture through the voices of female theologians like Kat Armas. ⁷ As an American Cuban writer, Kat awakens us, through her own experiences as a woman of colour, to see with fresh eyes the influence of marginalised women who courageously partnered with God.

In Exodus we meet a cohort of amazing women, whose actions ultimately changed the course of history. The escape from Egypt begins with a desperate mother and includes a group of women including Jochebed, Moses' Mother; the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah; the Hebrew women; Pharoah's Daughter; and a young Miriam, whose resistance efforts served as the backbone for liberation.

In Jochebed, we find embodied wisdom, as she creates a safe space for her son by the work of her hands and the knowledge

³ Elworthy, S. as quoted in Blackie, S., *If Women Rose Rooted: A life-changing journey to authenticity and belonging*. (2019) September Publishing, pg 346.

⁴ Kidd, S. M., *The Dance Of The Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey From Christian Tradition To The Sacred Feminine*. (2016) Harper One Publishing, pg 269.

⁵ Curriott, P. W., "Thou Art Goddess: The Return of the Divine Feminine" in *Women Spirituality and Transformative Leadership* (2012) Skylight Paths Publishing, pg 214.

⁶ <https://www.micahaustralia.org/take-action/women-leaders-network/>

⁷ Books include Abuelita Faith – *What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence and Strength*; and *Sacred 7 Belonging – a 40 day devotional on the liberating heart of scripture*.

and gifts she receives from the land. She is a mother who makes bold decisions turning Pharaoh's means of killing, the Nile, into waters of deliverance. Pharaoh's daughter, a poignant character for those of us who find ourselves in privileged spaces, does not ignore injustice. Her compassion leads her to resist her father and do what is right, taking on the role of co-mother to protect and nurture life.

A young Miriam watches, gaining wisdom as she witnesses the older women live out their calling and work with what they have at hand. When her time comes, despite her young age, she intuitively responds, stepping into her instrumental role in the exodus of God's people. The women of Exodus feared God instead of the powers at hand; they made audacious, courageous and bold decisions. In doing so, God blesses their acts of civil disobedience and deceit; their faith is expressed in the complex reality of what it means to do right and live justly. Their stories are records of embodied wisdom, creativity, and even art making that bring forth liberation, healing and justice.⁸

Turning to the New Testament, we meet Mary 'theotokos', the God-bearer. She is the one who says "yes" to the holy birthing and surrenders herself to something far beyond her imagining.

The story of the annunciation makes clear that God waited for her consent. She is an active co-creator and participant in the divine unfolding. As we continue through the Gospels,

we discover women playing a prominent role. They follow Jesus from Galilee, are alongside Him in ministry, and are the first witnesses to the resurrection. It was women who stood near the cross and when the male disciples slowly recede from the picture, they remain.⁹

Have you ever imagined them? Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others, along their journey, following Jesus, pondering things in their hearts, collecting symbols, catching the meaning beneath the words that Jesus spoke, dreaming, drawing, and weaving a story of hope? In the midst of grief, darkness, liminal unknowing, one world ending and a new one birthing, was there something within them that kept them near, kept them close, watching for what was unfolding? Could it be that God might be using women in the same way right now?

Author Phylis Tickle, in her book 'The Great Emergence', believes the church is experiencing a once in every 500 year 'hinge moment', where one era of religion is ending and a new one is being birthed. I sense that women in our churches are witnessing to what is dying, being faithful attendants in the days between, and are emerging as messengers to us all. We need to pay attention as they give voice to the first signs of resurrection life.¹⁰

Feminist writer Sharon Blackie proposes that for some time, women have had to act like men and play by their rules so they could join their institutions. As a result, she believes we have

lost touch with the wisdom of women, their deep ways of knowing and creative life-giving fire.¹¹ Has the church over time also fallen into this trap, valuing women who can go with the system and don't rock the boat?

I am not advocating for more opportunities for women to walk men's paths, but for churches to invite, nurture, and amplify the feminine dimension of leadership. The feminine is needed, not because it trumps the masculine, but because it has been missing from the necessary partnership of the two leadership dimensions. In bringing the feminine to leadership, women bring the missing dimension of the God life to us all - enabling it in men and fulfilling it in women.¹²

—Joan Chittister OSB

The leadership of women has nothing to do with title. It's a way of life, a way of being in the world, it's open to everyone and can be practiced in a myriad of ways. The feminine is marked by a 'we' consciousness, where the interconnected relationship woven between all of creation is held primary.

Therefore, power is shared, in co-creation and co-action, and becomes a resource for justice and transformation. Women's ways, of being and working with others, need to be honoured as authentic approaches to transformative leadership.

⁸ Armas, K., *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*. (2021) Brazos Press.

⁹ Valters Painter, C. *Birthing the Holy: Wisdom from Mary to Nurture Creativity and Renewal*. (2022) Sorin Books Slee, N., *The Book of Mary*. (2007) Morehouse Publishing.

¹⁰ Tickle, P., *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing And Why*. (2012) Hovel Publishing.

¹¹ Blackie, S., *If Women Rose Rooted: A life-changing journey to authenticity and belonging*. (2019) September Publishing.

¹² Chittister, J., OSB, "God our Father; God our Mother: In Search of the Divine Feminine" in Schaaf, Lindahl, Hurty and Cheen (Eds) *Women Spirituality and Transformative Leadership; Where Grace Meets Power*. (2012) Skylight Paths.

This includes qualities such as creativity, curiosity, openness, nurturing, inclusivity, embodiment, intuition, feeling, fluidity and attachment.

Practices such as shared leadership, collaboration, circle processes, deep listening, and compassionate action are valued. The Belly & Bones cohort were gifted with the freedom to form around these feminine ways of being and working.¹³ Twelve women created a circle, shared stories, and deeply listened for the movement of God flowing between them. They reflected to each other the fire emerging in their bellies, and affirmed the strength and diversity of each other's gifts and voices. They believed each one, from their varied experiences of pain, triumph, and unique contexts, had something of significance to contribute to the work they were entrusted to birth.

There was an ease and a delight to discovering and exploring what God might be forming through our shared work together. Our core task was to simply pay attention and stay with the flow of the Spirit.

As each of us have held each other in this project alongside the competing demands of our families, communities and ministries, we have given each other permission to move in and out of the work according to our capacity, energy and gifts.

Collaborating, trusting and supporting each other in each stage of the process. As we have honoured fellowship and formation first, weaving our communal basket, the work has been generative, taking on a life of its own.¹² Through the faces and voices of these women, I experienced a kaleidoscope of light and colour reflecting the beauty of God.

The Female Face of God

"I am who I am" was God's response to Moses when he enquired "who shall I say sent me?" "I am who I am" are the words of a God who exceeds every limiting attempt of my human mind to nail down the eternal. God says "I am", pure spirit, pure being, source and essence of life. God presents as neither male or female – God is of the essence of both, and both are of the essence of God.¹⁵

However, the influence of patriarchal paradigms would have us believe otherwise. Even though God is Spirit, many of us believe, either consciously or subconsciously, that God is male. Let me be clear that when I use the word patriarchy – I am not referring to men, nor the masculine principle. Patriarchy, instead, is a system in which the masculine has become distorted. It's a way of social organisation that enthrones men, a system characterised by the hierarchy, authority, and supremacy of men and fathers where men and masculine values and power are on the top.¹⁶

Without dismissing or minimising the significant and destructive impact of patriarchy on women and men, I want to suggest that it's not what this sexism says about women that is most damaging. It's how this has confused our understanding of God. The Hebrew scriptures are full of the feminine attributes of God. Beyond Creator, Father and Lord, in the scriptures we meet God our midwife and God our mother who is birthing, nurturing, and nursing her people. We meet woman wisdom or Sophia (the Greek word for Wisdom) in the Old Testament texts, and in the New Testament, Jesus is again and again imaged as God the homemaker; sewing, baking, washing, cleaning, preparing and providing for her family.

We discover the original Hebrew names of 'Ruah', feminine for breath and spirit, 'Rahamin', meaning compassion, that comes from the womb, and 'El Shaddai', which is also translated as God of the breasts.¹⁷

After centuries of feminine imagery and feminine attributes given in scripture being lost in the systemic sin of patriarchy, it is time for us to 're-member' who God is. This is crucial, because the way we see God determines the way we see ourselves, and the language we use shapes public perceptions about God. If we see God only as maleness, then maleness becomes more Godlike than femaleness. If we limit ourselves to the divine masculine, then we will never encounter the divine feminine.¹⁸

¹³ Curry, D., and Wells, S., *An Organic Inquiry Primer for the Novice Researcher: A sacred approach to disciplined knowing*. (2006) Infinity Publishing. Slee, N., *Women's Faith Development* (2004) Routledge.

¹⁴ Judy Brown articulates and explores 12 principles that closely mirror our experience in Belly and Bones in her book *The Art and Spirit of Leadership* (2012). Also recommended: *A Leader's Guide to Reflective Practice* (2008).

¹⁵ Chittiser, J., OSB. "God our Father; God our Mother – In Search of the Divine Feminine" in Schaaf, Lindahl, Hurty, and Cheen (Eds.) *Women, Spirituality and Transformative Leadership, Where Grace Meets Power*. (2012) Skylight Paths.

¹⁶ Kidd, S. M., *The Dance Of The Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey From Christian Tradition To The Sacred Feminine*. (2016) Harper One Publishing.

¹⁷ Mollenkott, V. R., *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. (1985) Wipf & Stock.

¹⁸ Midwife (Psalm 22:9-11, Psalm 71:6, Isaiah 66:9), Mother – birthing (Gen 7:1, Duet 32:18, Job 38:8, 28-29, Isaiah 42:14, 46:3-4. John 1:12,

The beauty of the holy middle

In a post pandemic world, with the feelings of isolation and loneliness that still haunt, we've realised there is no such thing as a single human being. The word I at best only describes half of something. We are hard wired as social creatures for connection, and that's why the message of the gospel is good news. For Jesus, 'you and me' is the basic human unit. We thrive together.¹⁹

*"I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."*²⁰

The truth and beauty of the divine life does not reside in me or you, in the masculine or feminine, but in the holy middle, the space between you and me.

By decentring ourselves, we open to, and stand for, the greatness of the other. The depth of the spiritual life, the beauty and health of the church, depends on whether we can nourish the feminine image of God in and around us as much as we do the fatherhood of God. It depends on how we create structures for both masculine and feminine, whatever gendered bodies they show up in, and how we create communities that honour both

ways of knowing and doing. It depends on creating scripts that reflect the vast and mysterious diversity of the divine and humanity. In this moment, over which we have responsibility, we get to decide whether we go unthinkingly the way we have been programmed to see and position women in the church, or we can choose to throw off the scripts that bind and divide us and embrace unity, mutuality, and partnership.²¹ What do we start with? Here are some suggestions:

- Exploring the differences between the male and female spiritual development.²²
- Learning what healthy and unhealthy masculinity looks like in the church.
- In our preaching, including, referencing, and amplifying the voices of female characters, theologians, Bible scholars, teachers and preachers.
- Creating policies like paid maternity leave for women in ministry.
- Awareness and education on the stages of a woman's life and the impact on ministry, e.g. singleness, marriage, motherhood –postnatal depression, peri/menopause, empty nest.
- Learning about the connections between religion and domestic violence.

- Facilitating healing and reparation for past wounds from the silencing and diminishing of women's voices and gifts.
- Facing the fear of intimacy between men and women in ministry.

My hope and prayer is that we choose the path of remembering and recovering the body of Christ, returning to Billy Jangala's words: "because we all need to live".

I conclude by drawing the thread, if you haven't caught it already, between the practices and wisdom of First Nations spirituality and the divine feminine. Both have been dismissed and diminished, both are inviting us into their embrace. If we are looking for guides in a new era, we might be bold enough to start here.



4:7, 16:21, Acts 17, Gal 4:19, Rom 8:22), *nursing* (Isaiah 49:15, Numbers 11:12, Psalm 131:2-3, I Peter 2:2-3) and *nurturing* (Gen 1:2, Duet 32:11-12, Hosea 11:34, Hosea 13:8, Psalm 131, Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4, Isaiah 31:5, 46:3-4, 66:10-13, Luke 13:34) *Woman Wisdom/Jesus Sophia* (Proverbs 4:13, 8:35, 15, 22-3) *Seamstress* (Gen 32:1) *Washerwoman* (Isaiah 4:4, Psalm 51:7) *Homemaker* (Prov 9:5, Luke 15:8) *Bakerwoman* (Matt 13:33) *'Ruah'* – feminine Hebrew word meaning breath, wind, inspiration or spirit (Gen 2:7, Ps 104:29, Jn 3:8) *'Rahamin'* – Hebrew word for compassion, root word *Rahan* means womb *'El Shadai'* – God of the mountains or God of the breasts. Douglas, S., *Jesus Sophia: Returning to woman wisdom in Bible, Practice and Prayer*. (2023) Cascade.

¹⁸ Chittiser, (2012)

¹⁹ John Owen CEO and Pastor of Wayside Chapel, 'Half of Something' weekly inner circle email 5/9/24

²⁰ John 17:21 NLT

²¹ Kaur, V. *Sage Warrior: Wake to Oneness, Practice Pleasure, Choose Courage, Become Victory* (2024) One World Publishing.

²² The Male and Female Spiritual Journey, diagram adapted from the work of Richard Rohr by Catherine Kleeman and Stephen Smith.



Image: Reflections on dam at Bethel Farm, Dalby – Tanya Tindale

Blaze

Loani Falconer

*I took a deep breath in.
There it was mingled with the fresh morning breeze.
You could easily overlook it, walk right on by, but there it was. So, I stopped.
On the edge of the air just a hint of smoke.
I took another deep breath and caught the scent.
Others might say that it had died, but hope hung on, sheltered underneath
a burnt-out ember from yesterday's fire, nestled away, protected from the world.
So, I rearranged the ashes and gently added a layer of fuel from the basket
marked 'today'.
It was then I saw Him coming, slowly but with purpose in His stride.
In His hands small wooden fire bellows.
He knelt down examining the pile of ash and dead wood,
and delicately positioned the tool in just the right place.
As if in slow motion I watched with anticipation.
His eyes that healed the wounds in my soul locked on mine speaking unspoken trust.
And His craftsman's hands holding firmly the two handles, He expanded them
drawing air into the leather pouch and brought them back together again
shooting out a powerful stream.
A spark of new life glows forth from within, my heart jumps.
A second puff and a third, the small flame licks up and ignites the new fuel.
He stands back and watches as the surrounding shadows now dance with
the light of the blazing fire.*



Hear Loani share *Blaze*



Courage

New Wine

Amy Morrison

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

—John 15:5 (NIV)

Ripe, heavy fruit hangs blissfully from the vine, warmed by the morning sun. The gardener approaches with a hook in hand—his touch gentle yet deliberate. Today is the day of harvest. The grapes are crushed, and their juice is released, each precious drop carefully collected. Not a single drop is wasted in this sweet surrender. As the aroma fills the air, the anticipation of new wine rises.

Have you ever felt crushed by life's pressures? Overwhelmed by hurt or grief? In those moments, it often seems as though everything is falling apart. Yet, a beautiful transformation occurs when we surrender to God and allow Him to break new ground in our lives. Time, much like the fermentation of new wine, brings about healing. And in the end, we realise that what we thought was falling apart, in fact, was falling perfectly into place.

Friend, are you holding on to hurt and pain in your life?

Will you join me today in surrendering it to God? Allow hope to rise as He receives your sweet offering.

Prayer:

“Father, thank you for your patient and gentle care. I lay down my hurt and pain before you now and ask that you use it to break new ground in my life. Thank you for the hope I have in you and for the healing I can receive through your precious Son. Amen.”



'New Wine' Series
Watercolour





Image: Bethel Banquet – Deb Kim

The Banquet

Loani Falconer

The low swaying branches moved like a dance in the slight afternoon breeze. I could almost hear the music in their motion. I knew it was just a little further, my feet followed the dusty path with the same gentle rhythm found in the trees. We had a plan you and me. We were going on an adventure together. I just wanted to make sure I had everything. Everything I needed. I'd rehearsed it in my mind although I wasn't sure exactly what to ask for. "Meet me here" you'd said, "here in the garden."

So I came. As I turned the corner the view opened before me. I caught my breath. It was magnificent. A long wooden table. Laden with gifts. Lavish and rich, overflowing with abundance, and grace, and joy. I slowly traverse the perimeter, my eyes shifting from one item to another, beholding their beauty, and purpose, and power. I glance across to where you stand, a warm smile on your face, your gentle song is singing over me. The air thick with love.

It surrounds all that I can see. It rests its weight upon my hands, my head, my heart. It's too much, and everything that I want all at the same time. Here there is new sight and fresh wonder. I pause to breathe it in. You hand me a basket and extend your invitation. Together we select the perfect pieces from the table and you load them in. Eating from the banquet well into the night. Sleep finds me under the shadow of your wings. Soon we will leave. I have all I need.



Hear *The Banquet* here ...

Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach

As leader of the Biblical Studies Department at Inaburra School, Jessica Meaco has a passion to help young people mine the treasures of the scriptures and explore and grow a faith of their own. She's re-writing the Christian Studies curriculum, dusting off the approaches mired in the past, to find new pathways of learning.

After finishing school, completing a Bachelor of Theology, followed by a Master of Ancient History, Jessica made the decision to wrestle with the big questions of life and faith, which led to a passionate pursuit of theological and historical study, an ongoing journey which has widened and enriched Jess's faith experiences in a significantly meaningful way.

A deep enthusiasm for learning generated a desire to teach young people about religion and history, leading Jess to a career in education.



Jess, can you tell us how you arrived in this role as an educator and leader of your department?

I have always wanted to be a teacher, even from a very young age. Once I completed my Theology degree, I decided to pursue teaching as a career. I worked in the corporate world for a while, and then finally got around to completing my teaching degree when I was on maternity leave after having my daughter. Finishing that degree was the hardest thing I have ever had to do! It was definitely a labour of love, but it was so worth it.

After working as a casual teacher for a few years and then as a history teacher for a year, the opportunity for leading the Biblical Studies department came up, and I was asked to take on the role. I would be responsible for the Christian

Studies curriculum that was taught to every student in the school, as well as managing a team of passionate educators. I felt so honoured, as well as terrified, to be asked to take on this position, especially so early on in my career.

My imposter syndrome definitely kicked in and I worried that I wasn't experienced enough to do the role effectively. However, I felt that it was a position I was being called into for a reason, so I accepted. I'm so glad that I did. It has certainly been challenging, but it is the most rewarding role I have had.

Can you tell us about how you have approached designing a program for your students?

When I first took on this role, I spent time teaching the existing programs and observing students' engagement and attitudes towards faith and

spirituality. As a team, we discussed how we are seeing the needs and learning styles of students changing, particularly in a post-Covid, globalised world, where students have increasing access to information via social media. Further to this, we noticed the rapidly increasing rates of mental health issues in young people and started to wonder whether our programs could help with these issues in some way.

We recognised that the previous programs weren't engaging students in the ways that they used to, that students had questions that we didn't have time to answer due to assessment requirements, and that there were some significant gaps in the content we were covering. Based on these observations, we decided to write and roll out a new curriculum.

We began by observing the backgrounds and experiences of the students in our classes, and noticed how diverse they are. The students who come from faith backgrounds represent a variety of religions and Christian denominations. However, an increasing number of our students come to us in Year 7 having had little to no religious education at all. This led us to reflect on what assumptions we were holding about how our students view the Bible and the Christian faith. We found that many of our students didn't even know what the Bible was, let alone how to read it. This was an opportunity to go back to basics.

What keys can you hand young people to explore their own response to faith?

The programs we have designed, and are in the process of designing, are intended to enable our students to explore and wrestle with their own faith. We are resisting the desire to control what that faith experience should look like. My views on this have been particularly influenced by Meredith Anne Miller's work, where she writes:

"I deeply desire for my kids to know and love God. With their whole heart for their whole life. So, what my kids need is not obedience training, but rather space, time, and experiences that can help them get to know God. Only if they know God can they decide God can be trusted."

We wanted to design a program that would provide space, time, and opportunities for our students to "get to know God", as well as be engaging for all students who represent such diverse backgrounds and experiences.

We essentially had a blank canvas to work with, and had to consider how we could represent faith and spirituality to young people in a meaningful and engaging way.

Some of the considerations we had and subsequent actions we have enacted when designing our programs are as follows:

We wanted our classrooms to be spaces where students could be guided by their interests and be immersed in their learning. We wanted to have the opportunity to divert from the program if necessary and respond to students' questions and wonderings. To achieve this, I decided to remove all formal assessment tasks from our programs, so we have the flexibility to go where the learning takes us.

We wanted our junior programs to build foundational knowledge for our students, not just of the Bible, but of religion and the Christian faith as a whole. We wanted our students to see how and why faith and spirituality are so important to the majority of people around the world. To achieve this, we introduced programs that explored Christian rituals, practices, celebrations, ethics, and social justice issues. We gave opportunities for students to share their own experiences of how they have engaged in these elements within their own lives, which has resulted in some incredibly enriching conversations.

Here is some of the feedback we have received from the students who participated in our junior programs:

"I've always been a Christian, so I've always believed in God, but my beliefs have grown over the past two terms as I have received perspectives from everyone in the class, as well as from what we have been learning." Year 7

"I feel I have been less scared of God and more willing to reach out to Him." Year 7

"I have had a stronger belief in God and Jesus over these past two terms because at the beginning I was still learning what I believed in, but now I believe in God." Year 8

We wanted to address the growing mental health crisis amongst young people, and provide them with opportunities to practise using tools from the Christian tradition that can help them improve their mental health. Removing formal assessment tasks enabled us to create spaces that were less academically pressuring for our students, allowing us to slow down and integrate mindfulness activities such as journaling, prayer labyrinths, mindfulness meditations, and other contemplative spiritual practices. We recognised that the Christian tradition has so much to offer in this space, so we integrated more reflective and experiential elements into our lessons.

We wanted to encourage students to engage in learning as a means of exploring their own faith and reflecting on their own worldviews. For our senior students, we run workshops to provide opportunities for them to wrestle with how faith intersects with real-world issues and the impacts religion can have on society. We also invite guest speakers who adhere to different religions to present about their faith, as well as speakers who can present on topics such as Disability Theology, First Nations Spirituality, and the Persecuted Church.

Here is some of the feedback I have collected from students who have participated in our senior programs:

"My worldview has been further developed after hearing about other religious/philosophical worldviews because listening to these speakers allowed me to still have great appreciation and respect for other religions, but also stand stronger in my own faith as a Christian." Year 11

"I have a greater understanding of the different systems within each religion or philosophy, and these give more context to my own religion. For example, the discussion on transhumanism made me consider what it means to be made in the image of God." Year 11

"Learning about these different religions has been really interesting and good for my own beliefs and knowledge on the similarities and differences of them all. It has raised a lot of questions about my own faith and what I believe on some of these topics, enabling me to make decisions for myself and be actually educated when I do it." Year 11

As we have created space for our students to reflect back to us their own questions, observations and experiences, we have been deeply moved by the rich and energising conversations that have been taking place. As we have provided opportunities for students to hear from a variety of perspectives on faith and religion, we have been profoundly encouraged by their willingness to reflect on their own beliefs and worldviews. We still have a long road ahead and are very much in a trial-and-error stage; however, we have all been encouraged by the level of engagement and the depth of discussion that we are witnessing in our classrooms.

What do they say about the church?

From surveys I have conducted and conversations I have had with the students I teach, I have found that the young people I work with crave connection, community, meaning and a sense of belonging. Some of them find this in a church setting, and youth group programs are a place where they can explore their faith.

When asked about the best feature of Christianity, our senior students, who are from both religious and non-religious backgrounds, reflected that they thoroughly resonate with Jesus' teachings on loving others and find this to be the most attractive feature of Christianity, followed by Jesus as a model of radical inclusion.

For many students, particularly the more senior students, churches are often seen as places of judgement and exclusion, filled with people who claim to follow Jesus' teachings of loving others, but fail to put this into practice. When asked what their biggest barrier to engaging with Christianity is, most students said 'hypocrisy', followed by 'church abuse'.

Here are some of the comments they made:

"Sometimes I find it difficult to follow a faith, when the adherents of that faith are doing wrong by other people, even though their church preaches love." Year 11

"The abuse both within and performed against those outside the church doesn't align with the beliefs of love and acceptance so often discussed in the Bible. It's hypocritical." Year 11

When asked what would need to change about Christianity to make it relevant to a younger generation, most of the students

surveyed stated that the teachings of Jesus don't need to change, but the church needs to do a better job of following them. They want to see spaces that are more inclusive, where differing views are heard and seriously considered, and where young people are respected and given the opportunity to contribute.

They want to see spaces that more actively engage in issues of social justice that are affecting young people and will continue to affect them into their future.

Here are some of the comments they made:

"The church needs to accept an evolution of beliefs to accommodate and respect modern opinions. Whether a person agrees with someone's ideas or not, there needs to be a promotion of respect and understanding within the church for Christianity to be considered relevant by the younger generations." Year 11

"The main thing that divides the younger generation with religion is the issue of social justice, and the fact that it is not maintained due to polarising leaders. It is unfair that a lot of the religious institutions are run by older men, who don't really understand the beliefs and desires of today's young people. I think that the religious institutions should aim to hold a variety of different genders and ages within their leadership, and not treat religion as a hierarchy. Equality is needed and wanted." Year 11

"The ideas and beliefs of Christianity don't need to change necessarily, but the way they are communicated need to change. The way people preach needs to be more interactive and engaging so that young people can share their ideas."

Rituals need to be transformed so that they can be experienced in more contemporary settings.” Year 11

“Churches need to apply their teachings to contemporary issues, such as climate change and the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. The church needs to debunk stigmas and attempt to modernise the religious tradition. There needs to be a more open and accepting culture.” Year 11

These reflections are honest and confronting, and they reflect views from students who are both non-religious and religious. From my observations, I can draw two main conclusions from the comments these students have made. The first is that young people see Christian teachings and beliefs as important and valuable, particularly Jesus’ teachings on love and his actions towards those he encountered. They have observed Christian beliefs and teachings providing people with hope, purpose and meaning in their lives, as well as motivating individuals and communities to better themselves and improve the lives of those around them.

The second is that they are significantly impacted by the growing reputation of the church as a place of abuse and exclusion. They have very little patience for people, especially leaders, who preach about Jesus but don’t, according to their experiences, live out His teachings authentically.

What do you think might be lacking in the resources we have used in the past?

My experiences with engaging students in topics of faith and religion have taught me that young people want the adults in their lives to be honest and genuine about what they don’t

know and what they still have questions about. They want permission to wrestle with the big questions of faith and spirituality. Young people are increasingly suspicious of adults who offer them infallible answers to complex questions and are desperate for the adults in their lives to acknowledge their own doubts. In saying that, young people need us to guide them through their questions and concerns, and we can only do that by contending with our own doubts and questions.

We need to wrestle with the topics that are meaningful to young people – the climate, sexuality, equality, self-image, and mental health – and make it a priority to talk about these issues, while giving opportunities for young people to share their views. Too many churches are either shying away from these topics or are providing polarising views that leave little room for nuance or differing perspectives.

If we want our young people to be engaging meaningfully in faith and spirituality, we need to listen to what they have to say about the things that are important to them and guide them to make up their own minds about what they think about these issues.

I also believe that we need to seriously reflect on the content we use to teach young people about the Bible and Christian faith. The resources I have come across that are often used to engage young people in learning about the Bible and Christianity are usually the same theological content being presented in new ways that attempt to capture young people’s attention. The focus seems to be on the presentation of the message – the quality of the film, the relevance of the music, etc. – rather than the message itself.

An example to demonstrate this is the number of resources that attempt to get young people to consider the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection and how it ‘saves them from sin’. This kind of language doesn’t make sense to the younger generations we are teaching. They don’t see themselves as ‘sinful’, and trying to force them to feel that way makes them defensive. However, recognising that young people are under significant pressures to perform and conform is an important issue to address. Young people are increasingly suffering under the weight of comparison and image in a world that judges them by how successful and attractive they are.

The subversive message of a God who freely offers them acceptance, love and belonging, no matter how intelligent, how athletic, how trendy they are, is a message these young people need to hear. We need to not just question whether the presentation of our content is relevant. We also need to be questioning the content itself.

Can you share a story of when you’ve seen a light go on in a young person?

A recent interaction that had a significant impact on me was when a Year 12 student came to ask me about my beliefs. This student had a fascination with religion and was particularly intrigued with why people are religious, especially as he was an atheist. We sat down for a chat, and he told me about how he had been interviewing many people of different religious backgrounds about their faith.

When I asked him what he had observed from their answers, he was honest and said that he felt most people used their beliefs as an excuse to not think too deeply about the world around them.

He found that most people answered his questions about the creation of the world, the problem of evil and suffering, complicated events in the Bible, as well as the afterlife, with such certainty, he found it unnerving. When he questioned their responses, he was met with an invitation to be more open-minded.

He said to me, *"Miss, I mean no disrespect to these people, but I find it quite hypocritical that they are asking me to be open-minded, when they won't consider the problems with their answers."*

I gave this student permission to ask me any question he wanted about faith, religion, and spirituality. He did not hold back! "Why do Christians insist on believing that the world was created in a particular way when scientific evidence proves otherwise? How do Christians justify the genocide that occurs in parts of the Bible, when the story says that God ordered them to do it? How can you trust an ancient text that was written so long ago and that contradicts itself in many different ways? How can you be sure that what you're giving your life to now is actually the right thing? What happens to people who have never had the opportunity to hear about Christianity?"

I answered his questions honestly, acknowledging that I am still on a journey of wrestling with my faith, and that I have asked these same questions many times. I affirmed his concerns and offered what were my latest explanations, while admitting my doubts.

I gently guided him to recognise that his own worldview has been influenced by a particular social, cultural, and political context, and that we all need to humbly reflect on our own views, to carefully listen to the lived experiences of others in the

world around us, and not be so arrogant as to think we have it all right, and others are wrong.

After talking for over an hour on these issues, he turned to me and said, "Miss, I honestly expected you to answer my questions the same way that everyone else has. But you are the only person who has given me any evidence of actually wrestling with your faith and how it makes sense in the world. I can't believe I'm saying this, but you have made me want to reflect on what I believe." I was blown away.

I hadn't tried to defend the Christian faith, I openly acknowledged the problems he was raising, I admitted to my many doubts; but it seems that my honesty was able to cut through his defences and led to one of the most meaningful conversations I have ever had with a student.

What fuels your fire in your work?

I think the thing that fuels my fire the most in my work are the opportunities I get to see God moving in the lives of my students every single day. It can be tempting, when being responsible for the Biblical Studies curriculum, to think that I am the one bringing God into the lives of my students, as if I am some kind of spiritual gatekeeper, and that they need me to be the mediator between them and God.

What I've found instead is that God is already with them, whether they realise it or not. My job is to help them recognise God in their own lives, and then make sense of how God is working in the world around them.

I am so passionate about cultivating spaces and opportunities that guide students to explore faith and spirituality for themselves. I am so inspired when students meaningfully engage with the programs we are running and feel safe enough to ask big questions about life and faith.

It excites me to see young people calling for justice and equality, and invigorates me when they challenge what they are told, rather than simply accepting it. These young people are the future, and it is such a privilege being able to listen to them, learn from them, and guide them through their journeys of faith.



Belly & Bones

A song by Sarah Su

On our Bellies journey we were blessed to spend time with an amazing singer-songwriter, Sarah Su. As part of the dhiyyaan mob, Sarah graciously welcomed us onto Country, and then listened deeply as we shared our lives and our creative pieces. Their response was a gift of a song, written from the perspective of the land of the spirit encountered in us, penned with deep insight and sung with a haunting melody. Read the lyrics below, or follow the QR code to hear it. You can also find more of Sarah's music @sarahsu22 on Instagram.

*I saw a mother on the horizon / moulding new life from the clay in her hands
/ She breathes a new daughter, holy, divine, / eagle eyes to see where the horizon began
/ and in the new seed, barely hidden inside, / a sacred directive, instructions to find
/ gentle strength in the furnace, a fire refining / a prophets new words, wide awake and alive
/ for a change is coming, so prepare for the flood / there's a fire in my belly and a burning in my bones /
set alight for new beginnings and a turning of the soil / cry for justice and redemption in a world
/ defined by hurt give me courage yet to speak / and yet be humble to receive it*

*There in the garden, a sister of oak / calls from the roof where she bathed and she bore
/ a bellow inviting, the quiet provoked / for the cities to move as they knew once before
/ In the presence of strangers, a sisterhood strong, / an undoing of centuries taught to be wrong
/ from her shame to delight, her relief to belong / to the tears and the joy of a deafening song
/ for a change is coming, and it's bonded in blood / there's a fire in my belly and a burning in my bones
/ set alight for new beginnings and a turning of the soil / cry for healing and for wisdom to remember
/ what's been lost give me courage yet to speak / and yet be quiet still to hear it*

*watch the earth tremble from mountain to shore / as rain pelting down onto saplings below
/ from the infinite midnight to whispering storm / Sees the covenant garden continue to grow
/ the years that I witnessed draws rings in my core / of a woman who stood between beauty and war
/ and the songs that she sang, and the rising I saw / of relentless returning to land and to law
/ for a change is coming, from the drought to the flood
/ there's a fire in my belly and a burning in my bones
/ set alight for new beginings and a turning of the soil / cry for justice and redemption in a world
/ defined by hurt give me courage yet to speak / and yet be humble still to learn
/ there's a fire in my belly and the earth will hear me roar
/ with the redgum as my witness, I will sing until I'm raw
/ cry for kindness and abundance,
/ for my kin to be restored
/ give me courage yet to speak
/ and yet be humble to believe it.*



Listen to the Belly & Bones song here

Overflow

Tanya Tindale



'Overflow' is a visual representation of an internal dam wall breaking, a breaking which happened as the Bellies gathered and shared at our first retreat. The stale, stagnant water represents the feeling of being held back without a voice. The broken dam wall with huge amounts of water overflowing, depicts a new freedom and advocacy for self.



'Overflow'

Woven fibres, recycled clay and digital art

**"God delights in us.
He will delight in you
if you still continue to
play in the shallows."**

**But I entreat you
brothers and sisters
let's plunge in, let's
dismantle the walls,
let the river flow."**

—Kaye Shelbach



Listen in to
connect
Overflow
with a
prophetic
prayer
from Kaye
Shelbach

The Groom Will Still Adore You

Wendy Stumbles

The crowds are reactive.
She is so attractive.
Devotion personified.
Oh! What great treasure,
Held in purse, power,
and pleasure,
Behold the beloved
bride.

She speaks vows from a stage,
Reads truth from the page,
Is clothed in a gown pure
and white.
Has hands that address
Any form of distress,
But something no longer
feels right.

For the guests begin leaving,
Question what they're
receiving,
No longer believing,
And often perceiving,
That sometimes clothes
can be deceiving.

Take off that white dress!
You must now assess
How dust has been greying
the cloth.
That age spots are showing,
The dirt marks are growing,
And damage been done
by the moth.

Bride, take off your dress,
It is time to progress.
Step out of your
romantic trance.
The lace is now dated,
Its beauty abated,
Consider a work shirt
and pants.

Can you walk with the people
Away from the steeple
Into places where you're
not expected?
Go clothed in unknowing,
vulnerability showing,
Listen, and get
re-connected?

Hold onto the charming,
Cut up what is harming,
Establish a re-purpose pile.
For tradition is strong
but a gown now
seems wrong,
And naked may suit
for a while.

Will you take off that dress,
Embrace your distress,
Find a new way to bless
And celebrate mess?
Come on!
Let your answer
be "Yes!"



A Call to My Daughters

Vicki Keogh

After a season of rest, I felt a call from God to arise again. The following liturgy is the call God spoke into my heart and my response to it. May this liturgy encourage you to listen and respond to your call.

CALL

*Arise Talitha Koum**

*Arise, arise, my daughter, get up
Like the morning sun, my Beautiful One
Arise, arise, arise*

*Wake up from your deep sleep
Wake up, wake up, here is my hand
Come with me now, let our journey begin
Wake up, wake up, wake up*

*Be brave, be not afraid
Be brave, be brave, the darkness has gone
Springtime has come, winter's no more
Be brave, be brave, be brave*

*Take courage I am with you
Take courage, take courage, together we go
I am your strength, I am your peace
Take courage, take courage, take courage*

*Lift your voice, for all to hear
Lift your voice, lift your voice, ever so clear
To all that are near, to all that are far
Lift your voice, lift your voice, lift your voice*

*It is time, I will always be near
It is time, it is time, I will never be far
I am with you, together we go
It is time, it is time, it is time*

RESPONSE

*Oh LORD, thanks for taking my hand
Oh LORD, oh LORD, thanks for reviving my soul
Thanks for the fire in my belly and burning bones
My LORD, my LORD, my LORD*

*Oh Father I yield to your will
Oh Father, oh Father, be my internal flame
Your daughter is willing, I'll keep in your stride
My Father, my Father, my Father*

*Oh God a new season is here
Oh God, oh God, from your pressing and crushing
New wine from within will pour out your love
My God, my God, my God*

*Yahweh thanks for your love
Yahweh, Yahweh, thanks for choosing me
You are the truth, you are the way
Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh*

*Send me to tell of your love
Send me, send me, your daughter is ready
To spread your aroma of hope to the world
Send me, send me, send me*

*Let us go, not a minute to wait
Let us go, let us go, before it's too late
To shine out your light, to set the world alight
Let us go, let us go, let us go*



Hear this call and response ...



* Pronounced: TAL-ih-thuh-KOOM
Meaning: "Little girl, arise!"

She

Deborah Kim

*Beauty and war on each shoulder
Side by side, breath to breath
Which side will you turn to?
Which breath will you hold?*

*Walk straight into your monster flaw
And watch it transform
Into a weapon of choice.
Comprehensive authority in view.
Audacious hope pulling the levers
Pushes, up front
faces, generations that fought
sought after promises, foreseeing
redemptive memories that will sing in unison
mountains and rivers thereafter.*

*Mary accepted
Deborah summoned
Rahab risked
Ruth waited
Sarah listened in
Miriam followed
Hannah surrendered
Rachel cried
Jael hammered
Phoebe committed
Lydia revered*

*Every crisis met with a cost
Thoroughly surrendered and utterly victorious.
Lived through,
Handed down,
Esther knew.
So do we.*



Esther - Queen of Courage

Amy Morrison



See Amy paint *Esther, Queen of Courage*



'Esther - Queen of Courage'
Watercolour and ink

Thank You's

The Bellies have been welcomed, surrounded and loved throughout our year-long journey of formation, collaboration and creation. We express our deepest gratitude to the people and the places that have embraced and nurtured us ...

The Midwives three amazing ladies, Jenni Gainer, Colette Harrison and Lesley Haddon – who have stood alongside us in process, prayer and in the prophetic – helping to birth the new. We are grateful.

churches of Christ NSW and ACT who have lent their support, resources and courage to release the voices of those who are often unheard. We want to thank the leaders in Confex who have backed this project, the Grants committee and also the partnership of the following churches and partners for their support – NewDay, Southern Illawarra, NationsHeart, Seechange, Kingsway, Mayfield, Living Hope Coffs Harbour, Heartbeat and Global Mission Partners.

We are also most grateful for the support and encouragement of our highly gifted Network Resource Team (NRT) who have given of their time, skill and heart to bless the churches and the people of our network.

Bundeena House Christian Community whose open doors welcomed us onto the land of the Dharawal people on the shores of Bundeena Beach. At **Bundeena House** the Bellies met and shared for the first time and began to dream together of what might be. <https://bundeenahouse.org/>

The dhiiaa community (One Meat Mob) who welcomed us onto the lands of the Barunggam people at **Bethel Farm** in Dalby, Queensland. Billy and Vicki and the rest of the mob who opened their yarning circle to allow us to listen deeply to the wisdom of the land and of the Spirit who whispers across eternity. Your gift of 'gabanma-li' (Gamilaraay 'to heal, to restore and to make whole') left us changed forever. <https://dhiiaa.org.au/>

Hope's View Retreat tucked up in the hills on Dharawal land behind Nowra (Aboriginal meaning "camping place" or "black cockatoo") at Tapitallee, our editing team were immersed in the generous hospitality and wisdom of two amazing women of our network, Dr Carol Preston and Tammy Preston. Under a canopy of gentle rain, nurtured by foods of their garden, we met to weave the art, poetry and prose of our Bellies into the journal it has now become. <https://www.hopesviewretreat.org/>

This journal was first produced and gifted to people as part of a grant from churches of Christ NSW and ACT. We are thankful our second print run is being sold with profits going to the True Fella project www.dhiiaa.org.au/true-fella run by our friends dhiiaa.

Dedications

I dedicate my piece to our little friend, grief ... a companion who will visit most of us, and leave us changed. —Abigail

My writing is dedicated to anyone who feels like they don't have a voice. It is my prayer that you realise you do, and that you are inspired to use it - in whatever way, shape or form you can. Thank you for listening to ours. —Carly

The selection of my writings here are for the unreached, around us and within us. This life-long search for the unreached people and places was the legacy that my grandparents left behind. A faith, discipline and lifestyle they carried on the mission field. My poems are for those that ache and in their aching, relentlessly continue to carry the baton of love forward. —Deb

To the ones who encouraged me to look a bit deeper & encouraged me to express what's inside, write it down and share it. —Loani

My art piece ... the dot piece ... is dedicated to Billy and Vicky from Bethel. Thanks so much for opening my eyes and heart to the Aboriginal way. And for challenging how and why! —Tanya

New Wine Devotion: Dedicated to my Pastor, Mark and the elders at Living Hope, Coffs Harbour. Thank you for believing in me and for allowing me to serve God with my unconventional gifts. Esther, Queen of Courage is dedicated to Margaret Fox. A faithful woman of God, who spoke words of affirmation over my creativity. Her words helped fan God's gifting into flame. —Amy

I'm indebted to the unseen women leaders of faith who have run the race with me over many years and continue to encourage me (from both sides of eternity) - Great aunty Kath, Robyn, Liz, Ellie, Shell, Lorraine, Katrina and Jak. —Jo

My story is dedicated to the many who have loved, accepted and encouraged me to be who I was created to be - particularly my Mum and my Dad, who sacrificed much to welcome a fifth child into life and set her free to find her way. —Naomi

I dedicate my piece to all those entering a new season. —Vicki

My pieces are dedicated to the women in my life who have listened deeply, shared story, affirmed, encouraged and believed in me. —Wendy

My words and this complete work have become a reality through the deep trust and support of our Network Resource Team who have encouraged me to lead as 'I am', as a woman, wonderer and deep listener. In doing so you have made way for unity, restoration and life. Deepest gratitude. —Kym

I want to dedicate this piece specifically to my children, Lucy and Teddy. They are my everything and my window into the future. I see what I'm doing in my job and in my life as an effort to smooth the pathway ahead so that where I have walked, they may run, and get further down the path than I ever could have. I want them to look into the future and feel hopeful. —Jessica

Image: Carly Cassidy. Back row: (L-R) Vicki, Kym, Jo, Jessica, Carly, Wendy, Naomi, Amy and Deb. Front row: (L-R) Tanya, Loani and Abi.



Meet the Bellies

Abi



brings fun and joy; welcoming and encouraging those she meets along the way. She lives and plays on the lands of the Bundjalung nation in the Northern Rivers, where she enjoys soccer, swimming at the beach, walking and drinking half-strength cappuccinos. Mother (to Chadley), wife (to Jessie), daughter, friend, school counsellor, mentor, get it done gal, bringing visions into life, learner and along-sider, Abi enjoys helping to create spaces where people can find life and faith.

Carly



is a bubbly, friendly, smiley one who hails from the traditional land of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation in Knox, Victoria. She loves being immersed in nature, where she finds awe and rest for her soul. Mother to Chloe, Aaron and Ebony and married to Brad, Carly is also the National Church Relationships Manager for Global Mission Partners, the missional arm of Churches of Christ.

Jessica



is a self-confessed theology nerd, who loves digging deep and helping others to unlock the treasures of the scriptures. She lives on Dharawal Country in the Sutherland Shire, land of the Gweagal people, with her husband Michael, and kids, Lucy and Teddy. A passionate teacher, she leads the Religious Studies Department at Inaburra School and also shares her expertise with the Ethics and Theology Committee for churches of Christ NSW & ACT. Jess loves escaping to coffee shops where she can drink fine teas and lose herself in a good book.

Amy



is a generous, kingdom focused, creative-type who calls Gumbaynggirr Country in Coffs Harbour home. Known for buying and hoarding art supplies for 'yet-to-be-done projects', Amy delights in God's creation and expressing joy through praise. Retired roller-derby amateur, Amy's energy now goes into her family – husband James and kids Samuel (19), Declan (16), Sienna (8), Evelyn (5) and in serving others through her work and her local church, Living Hope.

Deb



often finds herself at the margins, walking alongside and encouraging others who are trying to find their way in life and faith. Right now, she lives at the foothills of a mountain called Ku-ta (meaning honey) on the lands of the Turrbal and Yuggera people in Brisbane. Wherever she is in the world, she is drawn to wild places, where she finds herself renewed body and soul. Social entrepreneur, nature poet and outpost in the wilderness wannabe, Deb is grateful for her husband John, and their kids Irene and Ian, and the Heartbeat church family where she serves as a leader.

Jo



is an encouraging, creative, engaging activator who has just transplanted from Gadigal to Wiradjuri land in the central west of NSW. She loves to carve lino and play with ink, to form works that hold the stories of others. Wife of Pete, mum to Ethan, boss of Maisy the dog, daughter, sister and aunt – Jo serves as an artist and developer of pioneering and marginal leadership within the churches of Christ NSW & ACT network resourcing team.

Kym



is a gentle, kind and wise soul who lives and plays on the lands of the Dharawal People in southern Sydney. Often lost in thought digging down into new perspectives, she finds refreshment walking, swimming and paddling in the waterways and national parks of the shire. Leader Support and Formation for churches of Christ, Mentor, Supervisor and Guide, Spiritual Direction student, Kym does life with Troy and their kids Jesse and Eliza and canine kid Maggie.

Naomi



is a social introvert who enjoys making people laugh, playing with words, and getting her hands in the dirt of Ngunnawal land where she lives in Canberra. She spends her time immersed in community where she enjoys meeting people of every culture and faith as she serves as ministry leader with her church NationsHeart Christian Community in Canberra. To recharge she enjoys immersing herself in nature, gardening, swimming laps and sharing the company of family and friends.

Vicki



is a kind, encouraging, loving and discerning one – who lives and serves on Awabakal Land at Lake Macquarie NSW. She loves to journey with others and immerse herself in God's creation. Daughter, sister, wife of Mark, mother, School Chappy, friend and spiritual mentor, Vicki gives generously wherever she finds herself.

Loani



is an energetic, joyful and adventurous one who lives on Dharawal Country in the Shellharbour area of the Illawarra. She fills her cup by wandering and wondering on the beach or through the bush, noticing God's presence in places and people she meets. Wife and mother, worship leader, prayer walking co-ordinator, prophetic intercessor, and prayer warrior – Loani is grateful to her family and those who walk beside her in prayer.

Tanya



arrives in a whirlwind of whimsy and wonder from the lands of Dharawal people in southern Sydney. She spends her time throwing pots on the wheel, flying drones and supporting people with disabilities. Married to Bruce, and Mum to Noah and Caleb, Tanya also finds joy in nature and her dogs, Whiskey and Patch.

Wendy



says her 'nice' qualities are considered, quiet, gentle, caring, thoughtful and creative, and we're not sure she has any 'nasty' ones! She was born and has always lived in the Illawarra, Dharawal country. She's happiest at home, in a sunny spot, drawing deeply on her life and faith in works of art and expression. Formation group leader, spiritual mentor and piano teacher, Wendy is married (to Dave) with 3 daughters (Amy, Kristen and Sarah) and 7 grandchildren who she adores.



B&B

taste and see



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