



# NEW WAYS OF GATHERING



**In Ballarat and Castlemaine, emerging communities of faith are taking shape – less defined by buildings or tradition, and more by connection, exploration and shared experience.**

**By Marina Williams**

Two new communities of faith in regional Victoria are testing different ways of being church – centred on relationships, shared experiences and openness to those beyond existing congregations. Both sit within the Uniting Church's Faithful Futures vision, which identifies the creation of new communities of faith as one of its five shared goals.

Initiatives such as the Village Church Network, connecting communities across the Central Highlands, and Yandoit Sacred, a small, place-based gathering near Castlemaine in Central Victoria, offer early examples of this goal. Both are evolving in response to their local context.

Bringing together Ballarat South, Creswick-Clunes, Brown Hill and St Martin's Chapel in Blackwood, the Village Church Network grew from a shared recognition that, with fewer congregations and shifting patterns of participation, no single community could respond in isolation. Fiona Ross, who works in a creative ministry role and is involved through St Martin's Chapel, says the network began with a clear aim. "There was a desire to ensure that, within the region, Christian community continues in one form or another," Fiona says.

The network does not centre on a weekly service. Instead, it operates through a shared calendar of events across locations – concerts, contemplative gatherings, labyrinth walks, workshops and community activities. This enables smaller communities to sustain activity without relying on a single congregation, pooling effort and encouraging participation across the region.

More formal coordination began in 2025, though much of the work has developed organically. Fiona, who is also a spiritual director, draws on a background in music and connections in the arts community to organise events. She describes the network as a “mixed ecology”, where existing congregations continue alongside newer expressions of church, including initiatives grouped under The Wayfarer Collective, which draws on the Christian contemplative tradition while engaging with other wisdom traditions. “These are spaces for people who may have no experience of church, or who have moved away from it,” she says. “We create experiences that move gently and offer a pathway into meaning-making and spiritual depth. They can be quiet and reflective, creative and expressive, or conversational and exploratory.”

In Blackwood, where there is no longer a traditional congregation, this approach has been in place for some time. Community is built through events and local partnerships, with ideas and activities shared across the network. Musicians and facilitators move between locations, adapting what works in one setting to another – for example, a mobile labyrinth used in Ballarat has also been set up in Blackwood. Fiona says the model reduces duplication and builds on shared experience. “It’s sharing of resources, sharing of expertise – not reinventing the wheel,” she says. Participation is invitational, with each community working from its own strengths. “We’re trying different things and seeing what resonates.”

Attendance varies depending on the activity, drawing people from creative communities, those interested in spiritual exploration, and others connected to specific events. “It’s quite diverse, because the program of events we offer across the network is varied,” Fiona says. This diversity, she adds, reflects the broader change in the context for church. “There’s such a thirst for places to explore deeper questions of meaning and connection in today’s world,” she says. In Castlemaine, a different starting point led to the emergence of Yandoit Sacred.

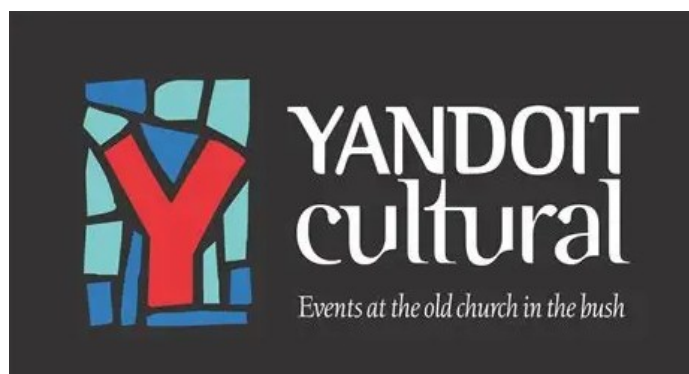
Rev Sarah Tomilson, minister in the region, traces its origins to the closure of the small rural church at Yandoit, between Castlemaine and Daylesford. The building was retained, with the church and local community exploring new ways to use the space. It was one of several church closures in the region, raising broader questions about how Christian community might continue. “Wouldn’t it be lovely if we did something new here – if we still had something of a sacred community and a gathering place,” says Sarah, reflecting on those conversations.



Blackwood Uniting Church



Yandoit Uniting Church



Yandoit Sacred meets alongside the community-led group, Yandoit Cultural, which leases the building and runs events such as music, poetry and film screenings. The faith community began meeting in 2023, following a period of planning and negotiation with the wider church, and remains a developing partnership. “We just opened the doors and said, whoever is interested in exploring the sacred, meaning-making, healing – come,” Sarah says.

Attendance typically ranges from 12 to 20 people, with a mix of regulars and newcomers from Christian, Buddhist and other spiritual backgrounds, as well as those with no faith background. “It really is a place where there’s an absolute

welcome,” Sarah says. Gatherings include prayer, reflection and shared themes, but remain flexible, responding to current events and personal experience. At times, people from other traditions contribute practices, such as silence, candle lighting and shared ritual.

“We’re just being an open place for the wisdom traditions that heal us and offer us sanctuary,” Sarah says. There is also a strong connection to place. “We talk about letting the land heal us as we heal the land,” Sarah says. “People are hungry for ritual and story.” Food and informal conversation are part of each gathering, with meals shared around a table or a fire. “There’s lots of conversation, discussion and laughter – people feel welcome and part of their community,” Sarah says.

Growth has been gradual in both communities, with people and place at the centre of these revitalised forms of church. “It’s about listening and responding to what is already there,” Fiona says. For Sarah, that has meant stepping back from directing the content. “I found that people actually had so much to offer,” she says. “I didn’t have to make it happen.” Creating space has allowed contributions to emerge more organically, shaped by the experiences and perspectives people bring.

**“Something shifts every time we meet,” Sarah says.**



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Fiona Ross is part of the Village Church Network, ensuing a Christian Community continues at Ballarat



Read more in CROSSLIGHT

## Calling all Crafty Knitters!

The Social Justice group discussed homelessness and rough sleeping at our meeting on Sunday. Barbara Shying and Joan Lum suggested that we form a group of crafty people to knit or crochet scarves for these people. We are also asking for donations of wool/yarn.

Those who are willing should speak to Barbara 0407 277 020 or Joan 0437 397 066



## Bible Readings July 2026 *(the readings used in our service may differ slightly)*

|           |             |                                |                                          |                    |                         |
|-----------|-------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| July 5th  | Pentecost 6 | Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 | Psalm 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13 | Romans 7:15-25a    | Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 |
| July 12th | Pentecost 7 | Genesis 25:19-34               | Psalm 119:105-112                        | Romans 8:1-11      | Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23   |
| July 19th | Pentecost 8 | Isiah 55:10-13                 | Psalm 65 (1-8), 9-13                     |                    |                         |
| July 26th | Pentecost 9 | Genesis 28:10-19a              | Psalm 139:1-12,                          | Romans 8:12-25     | Mathew 13:24-30, 36-43  |
|           |             | Isiah 44: 6-8 23-24            | Psalm 86 :11-17                          |                    |                         |
|           |             | Genesis 29:15-28               | Psalm 105:1-11, 45b                      | Romans 8:26-39     | Mathew 13:31-33, 44-52  |
|           |             | 1Kings 3:5-12                  | Ps 128                                   | Psalm 119: 129-136 |                         |

**CROSSLIGHT** is available on the internet - click on the following link or the CROSSLIGHT image to view online. [www.crosslight.org.au](http://www.crosslight.org.au)

Print copies of CROSSLIGHT are available at the entrance of the Charman Church.



### *We pray for all in need especially -*

### *Prayers of the People*



Katherine's cousin David & Family  
Joan Wright on the loss of her brother  
Tina, friend of Joan Wood  
Phillip (Barbara's nephew)  
Barry  
Adrian  
Anne-Maree, Andrew and their daughter, Rachel  
Maria  
Helen Cole

Gloria, Samson & Family  
Jenny and Janine Bartholomeusz  
Anita and Kingsley  
Joyce Curnow  
Stuart - addiction struggles  
Helen & Earle Hosking  
Grace & Van Rensberg  
Joan's friends Robyn & Jemma  
Kath Tondorf  
Susan Hoskin  
Karen

Mark  
Mary  
Margaret Walker  
Joyce Carpenter  
Andrew  
Bronwyn  
Teresa  
Sybil Bond  
June and Grace Fairbank

*We give thanks for those whose prayers have been answered..*

**WEEKLY OFFERINGS:** Thanks to everyone who have continued to make their weekly offering.

**Direct Debit:** Cheltenham / Mentone members note that direct payments can now be made to our Westpac account at Southland, **BSB number is 033 358, Account Number is 664 881** Payee "UCA Cheltenham Mentone Parish"

Although we are now the Charman Uniting Church, we expect banking arrangements to remain the same as before, for the rest of the year.

### **SOCIAL COLLECTION DEPARTMENT:**

**BayCISS** - collection of goods by Graeme & Joan Wood has recommenced. Leave goods with them at 66 Bernard St. Cheltenham, or call them on 9555 0462

**Emerge** - Financial help is the best way to help - Cheques to - GPO Box 420 Melbourne VIC 3001 or donate via the website [www.emergesupport.org.au](http://www.emergesupport.org.au)  
Emerge welcomes vouchers for supermarkets or art materials which children could use at home - materials, pencils, colouring books etc. Margaret Bode is happy to collect items if you leave them at her home, 16 Monaco Street Parkdale. **Donations in an envelope marked EMERGE may be left in the collection plate.**



### **OUR YOUTUBE CHANNEL:**



Click on the YouTube logo to view a selection of **over 200** sermons and service preludes

*This week's video -*

*"Our Church by the Sea" written by Mrs Willett Bevan, for the Golden Anniversary St Andrews by the Sea*

Click on image or [HERE](#) to view



**Church on the Internet - Sunday 10am (virtual doors open 9:45 am)**



If you don't have Zoom on your computer/laptop/iPad/Smartphone, click on <https://zoom.us/support/download>

Then click on this link below or the "Sunday Church" image to join our Service

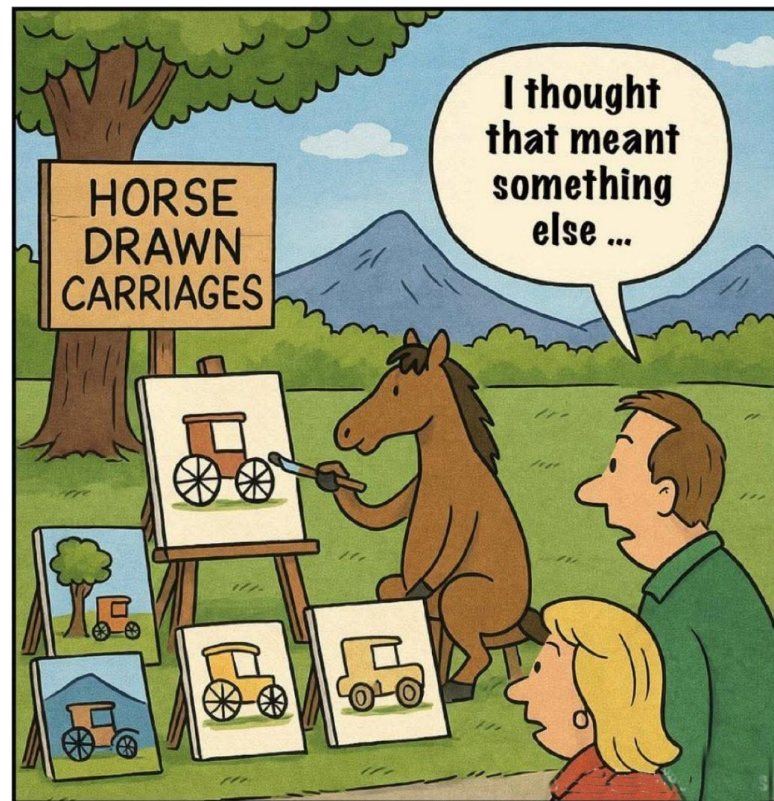
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82004410836?pwd=cU9RWlhVMm8wOUw0TStLV1EvNFdYdz09>

**Meeting ID: 820 0441 0836 Passcode: 665 784**

You can also join us on your phone by dialling **03 7018 2005** and entering the above meeting details.

**Sunday Church**  
on Zoom





**A truck loaded with Vicks Vaporub overturned on the highway.**

**Amazingly, there was no congestion for 8 hours.**

