



The River of Life

February 2026 Edition



The United Church in Australia
LODDON MALLEE PRESBYTERY

Greetings friends across the Loddon Mallee Presbytery.

After four years as Chairperson of the presbytery, I will be stepping down from the role at the upcoming Presbytery meeting, and I look forward to passing on the blue scarf that is a symbol of honour and your trust to the person you select to take up that position.

It has been a wonderful privilege to get to know you and to work with you in many areas including

- ◆ the joys and hopes wrapped in commissioning and induction of people to particular roles, and the sadness and best wishes for people leaving
- ◆ shared hospitality and worship
- ◆ installation and integration of digital technology for worship and wider communications (with special thanks to Rev Gordon Wild for setting up and distributing the Digital Life Packs)
- ◆ online participation in meetings from across the presbytery and patience with lapses in the technology
- ◆ the setting up of the new presbytery office and its lovely spaces for working and meetings in the renovated



building in Forest Street with the help of the Bendigo Central & Axedale congregation

- ◆ working with grace towards different and creative expressions of faithful and fruitful ministry with changing people, energy, financial and property resources
- ◆ coming to grips with changing regulatory and legal requirements and the acronyms that go with them - ESMs, MDs and more
- ◆ the challenges of understanding and contributing to the development of the frameworks for Act 2 and Faithful Futures and recognising that in many ways we are already doing the work articulated in them (well done everyone!)

The many hats of responsibility for the various tasks across the presbytery are and have been



worn with style and grace by a variety of people. Sometimes the hats are heavy and hot, and the brims either too narrow with not enough protection or flopping down over your eyes. Thank you for

putting them on despite that.

I'm particularly thankful to these current, resolute hat-wearers in the presbytery - the ministers, pastors and chaplain in placements and places, the Presbytery Minister Rev Gordon Wild, the Standing Committee and the Deputy Chairperson Rev Bruce Gallacher, the Pastoral Relations Committee and Chairperson Rev Di Esbensen, the Treasurer Rev Grahame Pogue, our Bookkeeper Ms Belinda Smith, the Property Liaison Officer Dr Dean Shirley, and at the hub of our communications, the Presbytery Secretary and Administration Coordinator Ms Katherine Wall Dobson.

When I was commissioned, I read a poem to the meeting that I'd written for a long ago 'God conversation' and challenge, and here is part of it

You've got to be joking
if it's me you're poking
and prodding and pricking
to do your bidding...
Surely you're not meaning me?



*Oh no! Can't go!
Can't be. Not free.
This choice you are making,
you must be mistaken.
Surely you're not meaning me?*

Now I recognise it was just as much a leap of faith for you as for me, and you might have been just as nervous and thinking 'Surely you're not meaning **we?**'. It has been a joy and honour to have taken the leap with you.

With your kind and thoughtful support, and your commitment to one another as people of God in your communities and across the presbytery, we land together at this point enriched and stronger for all we've encountered together. Thank you for your trust, encouragement and help for me and the work and life of presbytery.

With warm regards and many wonderful memories

Libby Gregory

Charlton Uniting Church.

Our small congregation of 5-7 meets weekly for worship and we prepare our own services or use the Presbytery ones. We have a roster plan to include folk for readings and door duty and share at St. Martin's Anglican on the first Sunday of the month.

We have three Presiders and celebrate Holy Communion monthly on the second Sunday and share fellowship over morning tea. Sadly, we have just had the death of one of our regular members.

Joy Freeman.

Education and Training Opportunities in 2026

Gaining wider insights and skills.

Uniting Learning units are Synod-accredited units designed to provide formation and learning for anyone in the Uniting Church wishing to grow in their understanding and skills around the Bible, theology, preaching and worship.

This includes:

- [ULVT1 – Orientation to Uniting Learning](#)
- [ULVT2 – Understanding the UCA.](#) Essential for anyone undertaking learning units · Ministry of Pastor · Continuing Education · Worship Leaders · Period of Discernment · Ministers and staff new to the UCA. Online on Tuesday nights, February 24, March 17, April 21, May 19, July 28, August 18, September 15, October 20. 7-9pm via zoom.
- [ULVT3 – Exploring New Testament.](#) Monday nights, March 2, 9, 16, 23, April 13, 20, 27, May 4. 7-9pm via zoom.

- [ULVT4 – Exploring the Old Testament](#) Monday nights, August 3, 10, 17, 24, September 14, 21, 28, October 5. 7-9pm via zoom.

See these courses and more at <https://pilgrim.edu.au/unitinglearning/>

Training within our Presbytery for Lay Leaders and Ministers.

- **Ethical ministry 2025 catch up** Tuesday 17 March 10-12 presbytery office.
- **Lay Presider Training.**
 - Lay Presiding Info Session Monday 16 March, 4.00 to 5.30pm via zoom.
 - Lay Presiding Training Session 1 - Monday April 13 4.00 to 5.30pm via zoom.
 - Mentoring and Supported Leadership sessions - between April 21 and May 30.
 - Lay Presider Training Session 2 - Monday June 1, 4.00 to 5.30 pm via zoom
- **Ethical Ministry Workshop 1 2026** Tuesday May 5, 10-12pm.
- **Sound and Screens on Sundays** - tech refresher. Friday forum 1 - Friday March 20, 10-12pm online.
- **Faithful futures - first steps for church leaders.** Friday April 17, 10 - 12pm online.
- **Safe Church Training - Friday June 19** - 9.30 to 12.30 - online. Note three-hour block.

Contact Gordon at Gordon.wild@victas.uca.org.au or on 0413 455 856 for more information

Advent Service at Kerang

On the 1st Sunday of Advent Pam Scott and Ros Maplestone led our Fifth Sunday Fellowship Service.

Ros spoke of the story of Advent and explained the meaning of each candle on the Advent Wreath which she had beautifully decorated. The Bible Readings were Isaiah 9:42 then 6-7, Matthew 9:1-3, Romans 13:11-14. Ros spoke briefly on each reading linking the message of Isaiah to Matthew.

Pam's focus was on the origins of some of our most favourite carols with a reading of a children's book "Baby Jesus is Born".

A table filled with delicious food we enjoy on Christmas Day next to the table with the Advent Wreath reminded us of the commercial side of Christmas and of the true meaning of this festive time



– the coming to Earth of our Lord and Saviour.

Our prayer for others reminded us of the needs of many who have so little and we here in Australia who have so much.

Thank you, Di and Ros, for helping with the technology that brought the music and the beautiful voices and faces of the young folk who sang into our service.

May the Blessings of the Christmas Season be yours and flow out to all across the world.

As we sing again 'O Holy Night', 'Away in a Manger', 'O Come all ye Faithful' and 'Joy to the World' let us rejoice and be joyful as we celebrate this special gift of love – Jesus the Messiah, King of Kings, our Saviour and Friend.

Pam Scott and Ros Maplestone, Kerang Uniting Church



Vale Pastor Barry Page

We were saddened to learn of the passing of Pastor Barry Page on January 29th.

Barry served as part-time Pastor to the congregations of the Eastern Mallee Rural (EMR) cluster for a little over 5 years - a role which he treasured because he loved God and he loved people.

Barry came from a Pentecostal background and had been an active member of the Lake Boga congregation for several years, where he enjoyed preaching and sharing his love of his Lord with members of the congregation and the wider community.

In 2020, recognising Barry's leadership and passion for service, the Pastoral Relations Committee challenged him to consider taking on the role of Lay Pastor to the EMR congregations: Lake Boga, Meatian, Nyah West and Manangatang.

Barry was both humbled and excited by this invitation and recognised in it the call of God. With the support of the then Presbytery



Minister, the Rev Siotame Paletu'a, he undertook the studies and learning required by the Uniting Church and was commissioned as Pastor in November 2020. He was forever grateful to the Uniting Church for this opportunity and practiced his ministry with great passion and enthusiasm.

Despite periods of ill health in recent years, Barry provided warm and sensitive pastoral care and friendship wherever he went - whether it be in hospital, at the pub, in the community or in his congregations. He was determined to continue to serve his Lord as long as he was able - in whatever ways he was able.

Barry recorded his mission statement to be shared at his funeral: "To bring the Gospel to unsaved people, showing the love, grace, forgiveness, mercy and truth of Jesus Christ".

We give thanks to God for Barry's faithful and passionate service.

Written by Judy Causon on behalf of the Loddon Mallee Presbytery.

Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry.

Summary of Henri Nouwen's seminal paper from 1995.

I've held on to this for nearly thirty years. It has guided and strengthened, challenged and turned me. This is a summary of an article by the late Henri Nouwen (with thanks to Microsoft Copilot).

If I'm asked "Gordon, what is your clearest longing for people in Loddon Mallee", it is this. You can read the full article here:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cc4c65dd7819e7af1cad8d9/t/5cf1d1ce47f85200018560d1/1559351758886/From-Solitude-to-Community-to-Ministry.pdf>

Copyright 1995 Henri Nouwen. Reprinted from L EADERSHIP, Spring 1995.

Cheers, Gordon.

Henri outlines a simple but profound spiritual framework for Christian life and leadership, shaped by the pattern of Jesus in Luke 6:12–19. He observes that Jesus first withdraws in **solitude**

to pray, then gathers his disciples to form **community**, and finally goes out with them to heal and teach in **ministry**. This order—solitude, community, ministry—is essential for a faithful, fruitful life with God.

1. Solitude: Hearing the Voice of the Beloved

Solitude is the place where we sit with God and God alone. It is not about isolation but about creating space for God to speak. In solitude we hear the deepest truth of our identity: "**You are my beloved.**"

Nouwen insists that unless we regularly return to that voice, we become vulnerable to the world's competing demands to prove our worth, relevance, fame, or power. Solitude grounds us in God's unconditional love, freeing us from living anxiously for affirmation.

It is difficult—our inner world is noisy and restless—but slowly God’s truth moves from the mind to the heart, becoming a stable centre. Solitude becomes the “hub of the wheel,” anchoring all the activity of life.

2. Community: Forgiveness and Celebration

True community flows from solitude because only people who know they are the beloved can live with others without demanding from them what only God can give.

Community, for Nouwen, is not primarily an organisation but a way of living with others who share the same truth of belovedness. It is challenging, because human beings cannot give perfect love. Therefore, community requires two disciplines:

Forgiveness

Forgiveness means releasing others from the impossible expectation of being God for us. It also means acknowledging our own limits and asking forgiveness in return. Community becomes possible only when people accept each other’s brokenness.

Celebration

Once forgiveness is practiced, we can celebrate each other—not superficial talent-praising but recognising the sacred humanity and God-given gifts in every person, even the vulnerable or socially marginalised. In this way community becomes a place where people call forth one another’s belovedness and gifts.

3. Ministry: Trusting God’s Healing Power

Ministry arises naturally from solitude and community. It is not primarily something we do,

but something we **trust**—that God’s healing power flows through us when we live as the beloved.

Jesus healed not by technique but because “power went out from him.” Likewise, Christians are called to trust that God works through them even in weakness. Ministry is shaped by two attitudes:

Gratitude

Gratitude transforms resentment and reveals God’s presence even in pain and loss. Life’s wounds, disappointments, and vulnerabilities become places where God’s grace can be discovered.

Compassion

Compassion means entering into the suffering of others, trusting that God is hidden in the places of pain. Ministry leads us to stand with those who mourn, struggle, or feel lonely—not to fix them, but to be present with them in love.

Conclusion

Solitude teaches us we are the beloved. Community allows us to share that belovedness through forgiveness and celebration.

Ministry sends us out to reveal God’s love in a hurting world through gratitude and compassion. Together these three disciplines shape a life of deep joy and lasting fruitfulness.

*This is a **one-page summary** of Henri Nouwen’s “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry,” based entirely on the text you provided. All insights are drawn from the PDF content*

SAVE THE DATE!

Presbytery U.C.A.F. Fellowship Day
Monday, September 7th, 2026
10:00am
Chum Street Uniting Church
68 Chum Street, Golden Square
MORE DETAILS TO FOLLOW



Harcourt Uniting Church



← On the Sunday the bushfire prevented worship at Harcourt, Rev Sarah Tomilson conducted a service at their usual time of 9.00am in the Castlemaine UC Chapel before the usual 10.30am service.

→ George Milford rings the Harcourt bell when the church reopened after closing for a week because of the bushfire.



Photos by Rev Jim Foley.



Why 'We Are A Multicultural Church' matters more 40 years on

Honouring history, embracing the future

Rev. Dr Paul Goh

Advocate for Being a Multicultural Church, Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

2:30pm Sunday 15 March 2026 | Free event | Attend via Zoom link
mobile: 0418 317 942 or email: ken.barelli@bigpond.com



Uniting Church
Historical Society
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Chaplain's Report



New year greetings to all. I would like to make a correction to the letter that went out regarding the funding of the Hospital Chaplain. The correction is that I am **NOT a Reverend**. I have been recognised for my gifts as a Pastor.

I would like to thank you all for your support of my ministry it means a lot to know you are all behind me as I go into each encounter. I visit our Uniting Church People and referrals including people of no faith.

This is my passion and I feel privileged to serve in this ministry.

Blessings,

Pastor Tanya Dunbar
(Hospital Chaplain)

Chaplaincy Appeal

Hospital Chaplain:

I would like to send a grateful thank you to all those individuals and congregations for your prayers and for your response to our January appeal for funds for the Hospital Chaplain.

Since our appeal was launched January this year, an increase in donations of almost \$10,000 has ensured that we can continue to provide this valuable service to patients well into this year.

However, at the current level of giving, we are still \$10,000 short of our annual target of \$50,000 which will enable us to continue to employ the chaplain for two days per week.

As a general guide, each congregation might consider adopting a mission to raise \$1,500 to \$2,000 from each congregation for the Chaplain each year. For smaller congregations, even \$1,000 each year would be a valuable contribution. congregations, even \$1,000 each year would be a valuable contribution. Individual donations given as a once-off, or by regular direct

debit, would be more than appreciated and would significantly help us to reach our goal.

These modest donations would ensure that we can continue to provide such a valuable service for patients in the Bendigo Base Hospital and for St John of God when requested.

Donations should be clearly identified for the **Hospital Chaplain** and can be made to the following Bendigo Bank account:

BSB: **633000**

Account No: **132832148**

I will regularly report on our progress throughout the year and commend this appeal to your prayerful consideration.

Grahame Pogue

Rev. Grahame Pogue

On Behalf of the Presbytery of Loddon Mallee
Uniting Church in Australia

**This letter was sent to congregation secretaries prior to publication in the River of Life*

New Assembly Strategy for 2026-2031

This year, the National Assembly has commenced its new strategy for the period 2026–31, centred on the vision *Uniting in Christ: Flourishing Faith – Thriving Communities – Liberating Justice*.

The first Strategic Goal is **Flourishing Faith**. It says, “*We extend the table to everyone, inviting them to follow Jesus with courageous faith*”. As a Uniting Church, over the past nearly 50 years we have worked hard to extend the table to all within our communities. We have entered into a Covenant with Congress, declared ourselves a Multicultural Church, extended ministry to the most remote parts of the country through Frontier Services, welcomed children to the Lord’s table and extended welcome to people regardless of their identity or background.

The second Strategic Goal is **Thriving Communities**. It says, “*We work together so that we can be a truly national Church and local communities can thrive*”. As a Uniting Church we believe that the local congregation is the heart of

our Church. We believe we are called to serve our local communities as we bear witness to God’s love and grace. This Goal is particularly focused on the role the Assembly can play within its responsibilities to encourage thriving communities.

The third Strategic Goal is **Liberating Justice**. It says, “*We use our voice and our actions to confront injustice in Australia and the world*”. Since 1977 we have been a Church committed to justice. In our Statement to the Nation we said, “*We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur*”. As a national Church we have sought to live out that commitment throughout our history. This new strategy renews that pledge.

This new Assembly strategy imagines a more deeply connected Church which works together for the wellbeing of us all as we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ across the length and breadth of this Church. It will absolutely guide and shape the work of the Assembly, its agencies,

commissions, committees and staff – however it is also an invitation to all to be living out a shared vision of *Uniting in Christ: Flourishing Faith – Thriving Communities - Liberating Justice*. For

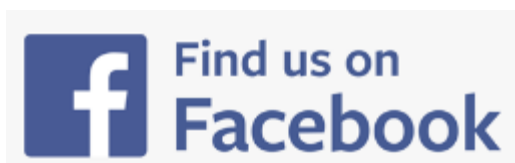
more information on these goals, head to the Assembly website:

<https://uniting.church/assemblies-new-strategy-for-2026-31-third-strategic-goal-explained/>

Acknowledgement of Country

The Presbytery of Loddon Mallee pays respect to the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters where we gather and worship. They were the first inhabitants of these places from time beyond remembering. We pay our respects to their elders past, present, and emerging and to all descendants who have cared for these lands since creation. We honour them for their custodianship of the land on which we gather and worship.

Social Media Corner



We have our own private group on Facebook. This is a great place to catch up on Presbytery news, between editions of “The River of Life”. Invite your friends to join (Please note this is a closed group).

Search for “Loddon Mallee Presbytery” or use the link:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2302440563408439/>

Cover Photo

The photo in the banner on the cover is from a series of photos taken of Mount Moliagul in different seasons and at different times of the day. These were taken by the Rev Gordon Wild in his travels throughout the Loddon Mallee Presbytery.

Presbytery Contact Information

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Presbytery Minister Southern Region/eLM

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NEXT EDITION—May 2026

Please write to the Presbytery Office by email or snail-mail and send us your contributions (Impresbytery@lm.victas.uca.org.au). This is a chance for you to share your news and happenings to unite our mission and connection and the River of Life is all the richer for it! Please note that the cut-off date for article submissions is the **6th May 2026**, they can be sent to the editor, Katherine Wall Dobson.