



# Manna Matters

QUARTERLY OF MANNA GUM

**Edition 51**  
**Summer 2026**

*Manna Matters* is a publication of Manna Gum. Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation which seeks to help Christians reclaim and practise biblical teaching on material life, and promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others, and the earth.



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# NEWS FROM LONG GULLY

As we enter a new year, the world feels an increasingly dangerous place... again. Many of us are running out of expletives as we watch Australia's premier ally descend further into autocracy, and as it thumbs its nose at international law and basic morality, unembarrassed by the naked use of power for crude self-interest. Most damning is the ongoing support of Trump from what is the new 'mainstream' of American evangelicalism. Ironically, or perhaps, predictably, given the Christian Right's shamelessly politicised eschatology, Trump is increasingly looking like a figure from one of those end times texts they love to quote:

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. (2 Thess 2:3-4)

Back home, the floods and fires this summer are, I suspect, but a hint of the changing climate to come. For a long time I have been of the opinion that bushfire is actually Australia's #1 threat to national security, far greater than that posed by China. But I am now wondering if bushfire has now been pipped by the USA. Meanwhile, the diabolical politics of Israel/Palestine continues to play out in our own politics in ways that no one could have predicted a decade ago. The awful horror of the Bondi shootings has not served to caution the need to attend to such a complex minefield of an issue with care and clarity. Rather, in the face of all of these enormous challenges (not to mention housing, mental illness, and rising inequality), our political class seems incapable of careful thought or deliberative dialogue, paralysed in the glare of swinging polls and backbenchers, and completely unformed in the disciplines of moral courage.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

(W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

That, at least, is how the world looks from Long Gully at the beginning of 2026. And yet, as I look out the window, our garden continues to grow, providing a lovely crop of stone fruit and, latterly, cherry tomatoes. So far, the damage from fruit fly seems less this year. And the bushland next door continues to thrive as we watch native grasses, long absent, slowly begin to return to our hill.

It is my view that one of the primary tasks of Christian witness—both evangelical and political— in the coming century will simply be to maintain hope in a darkening world. But hope cannot be found in optimism, which is a fool's gold destined for despair. Neither can hope be found in joining a side and seeking their victory. Rather, hope can only be found in trying to see clearly where the good lies, however inconvenient to the current discourse, and trying to live according to that truth, whatever the rest of the world may do.

To see clearly means to comprehend the structure of reality in its deep spiritual, ecological, social, and moral components. It is the crazy conviction of Manna Gum that the key to seeing into the structure of reality lies in the good news revealed by Jesus: 'in him all things hold together' (Col 1:17). Trying to articulate this good news will continue to be our ongoing work through 2026, and we hope you can join us in the great labour.

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. (Matt 9:37-38)

**Jonathan Cornford**

All written and artistic contributions to *Manna Matters* are graciously provided for free.

**Editorial team:** Jacob Garrett & Jonathan Cornford  
**Production & layout:** Jacob Garrett





# OUR WORK FOR 2025

by Jonathan Cornford

I often find it difficult to account for the labour of Manna Gum. Our guiding vision is to reclaim a practice of Christian faith that embraces all of life, and that is good news in the midst of a world facing deep and manifold challenges. But this is slow work, pieced together by fractions at a time. Much of the work is reading, thinking, and talking. For this to really bear fruit it needs to be joined to a lived practice of material life that itself takes time and labour. I often liken the work of Manna Gum to that proverbial iceberg: only one tenth of the work surfaces as some sort of visible 'product'. This was certainly the case for 2025: the number of activities was not large, but the labour invested was great, especially in the case of the new podcast series (see below). Thank God Jacob and I don't have managers demanding efficiencies and KPIs!

In 2024 I signalled that two major themes for Manna Gum over the coming years would

be to stimulate thinking about the economics of churches and rethinking Christian political witness. As will be seen below, both of those themes were evident in our work in 2025, although, once again, they represent mere beginnings in a larger work.

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A significant event in 2025 was the moment in October that Manna Gum ran out of money... and the incredible response to our subsequent appeal.

There is a fuller report on our financial situation below, but the short story is that the wonderful response to the Advent Appeal has well and truly put us on a firm footing for the coming year. In fact, given the response to this emergency appeal we have been unsure of whether we should continue with our usual New Year Appeal. However, there is still a need to expand Manna Gum's income base, so we have gone ahead with the New Year Appeal with a bit of a different spin (see enclosed insert). To be honest, I am a little intimidated by people's generosity and hope and pray that Manna Gum's work can prove worthy of it.

## **Manna Matters**

*Manna Matters* remains the flagship of Manna Gum's communications and represents the largest investment of our time. In 2026, articles in *Manna Matters* covered a wide range of issues and styles, all joined by a consistent thread that seeks a coherent way of inhabiting our world in forms that express the good news revealed in Jesus. We are immensely thankful for the many writers and artists who have contributed to keeping *Manna Matters* vibrant, diverse, and interesting.

We are conscious of a trend towards longer, more heady articles (there is so much that needs to be discussed!), but we would really love to include more shorter, practical articles focussed on practices of household economy or alternative life choices people have made. We are also always on the lookout for artwork that can complement the articles. So, if you feel you have something to contribute, please get in touch!

Last year's spring *Manna Matters* was our 50<sup>th</sup> edition—a milestone worth celebrating. Over that time, our readership has crept up to just over 900 recipients. But we feel that the views and thoughts expressed in *Manna Matters* deserve a much wider readership, and our goal in the next season is to try get that up to 2000 readers. If you have thoughts on how we can get there, let us know!

## **MannaCast**

The podcast continues to be a very effective way of connecting with people beyond the readership of *Manna Matters*. In 2025, our podcasting schedule was dominated by embarking on a series exploring 'Legacies of Colonisation'. Initially this was going to be four- or five-part series, but it has taken on a life of its own and is now looking like being a ten- or eleven-part series. Perhaps this is appropriate, as the moral questions and present-day legacies of colonisation are fundamental to the task of rethinking Christian economic ethics in Australia.

More personally, undertaking this series has been something of a homecoming for me: Indigenous justice issues were my first social justice passion back in high school in North Queensland in the 1980s. I pursued this through my undergrad study in the 1990s, majoring in studying colonisation in history, and I have continued to read consistently on this subject over the intervening thirty years. As this podcast series expanded in scope, it struck me that perhaps this was what all that work was *for*. I hope this series is useful for others, but for me it has been important to honour the deep moral, spiritual, and intellectual struggles involved in coming to terms with the history of our nation.

If you have enjoyed *MannaCast*, it would help us enormously if you left a review and rating on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, etc. and perhaps shared an episode or two with some friends.



### **Legacies of Colonisation (MannaCast series)**

*Listen online at [www.mannagum.org.au](http://www.mannagum.org.au)  
or on your preferred podcast platform*

1. Colonisation and Culture Wars (Ep.36)
2. Alien Invasion I (Ep.37)
3. Alien Invasion II (Ep.38)
4. The End of the World: Van Diemen's Land (Ep.39)
5. The End of the World: Victoria (Ep.40)
6. The Conquest of Australia (Ep.41)
7. Conquest Considered (Ep. 42)
8. From Control to Citizenship (still to come)
9. Christianity and Colonisation (still to come)
10. Building relationships between First and Second Peoples – Interview with Safina Stewart (still to come)
11. Truth, Treaty, & Voice in Victoria today – Interview with Aunty Esme Bamblett (still to come)
12. And maybe more... !

## Webinar

In June we ran a four-part webinar series on renewing the church in Australia, with a focus on renewing the church as an economic community. The webinars discussed some of the challenges facing churches in post-Christian Australia and some of the deep questions about structure and form that this is prompting, as well as how these relate to our understanding of the gospel. Underpinning all of these things are questions of economic structure. These are enormous questions, with big implications for the future of Christianity in this country, and this webinar series was really just the first shot in what will be an ongoing exploration over the coming years.

You can watch the recordings of the webinars via our website: go to the Resources menu > Video and audio > Kingdom Communities.

## MG Evening Conversations

A new initiative this year has been trialling a couple of 'evening conversations' that get people together to discuss topics that don't normally get aired in churches. These came about as Jacob and I were reflecting that we were really hopeless at doing social media and had little desire to get better, so we decided to lean into a much more substantial but numerically limited form of communication: meeting in person. Initially we were thinking of a 'politics in the pub' format, but couldn't find a pub that would work as a suitable venue. Then we were offered use of a funky basement space in the Melbourne CBD owned by the social enterprise ValueLab. Manna Gum's Evening Conversations were born.

We ran two events, both discussing political themes: the politics of place, and 'Why I am a left-wing conservative radical'. I shared some thoughts at both evenings and I was joined on the first night by Shiung Low from ValueLab, and for second event by Robyn Whitaker from the Wesley Centre. There were 20-30 people at each event and the cosy atmosphere was supplemented by drinks and nibbles generously supplied by ValueLab.

We think the format worked pretty well and will look to run a couple more evening conversations in Melbourne in winter this year, and possibly one in Brisbane in June or July.



## Kingdom Communities (Webinar series)

1. Church in Australia – Context and Critique
2. The Community Founded by Jesus
3. Church as Economic Community
4. Renewing Church as an Economic Community Today

*Find the recordings online at [www.mannagum.org.au](http://www.mannagum.org.au) or on Manna Gum's YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@mannagum2937>)*

## 'A Different Way' Exposure Week

In November we ran our 'A Different Way' exposure week here in Long Gully, Bendigo, with twelve participants. This is the first time we have run this week since 2019, so it was great to get back into it. The exposure week is by far the most high-impact activity that Manna Gum does. There is ample scope for breadth, depth, and complexity in discussing the challenges of reclaiming a Christian mode of economic life and, moreover, it is grounded in the realities and compromise of what that looks like here in Long Gully. We studied what the Bible has to say on themes such as creation, salvation, work, money, and poverty, applied these to topics such as standards of living, economic cooperation, vocation, and mission amongst the marginalised, and engaged bodily in activities such as garden building, running a community food pantry, bush walking, making cordial, and chasing dogs.

An invaluable part of the week is what the participants themselves bring to it, and this year was no different: it was an engaged and thoughtful group who connected beautifully with each other and were fun to be around. All things being equal, we anticipate running the next 'A Different Way' week in 2027. (You can read a brief reflection on ADW from Bernadette on p. 11).

## Show me the money

A number of years ago, we decided to expand the work of Manna Gum, spending down our bank balance reserves while trying to grow our income to match the new cost basis. Our income base has been growing over the last few years, but not fast enough, and last year this caught up with us when we ran out of money. The response to the subsequent emergency appeal was awesome. We raised over \$20,000 and signed up a bunch of new monthly supporters. In the space of a month, what was going to be a rather large annual deficit turned into a healthy surplus (see table below).

We are now back on a strong financial footing for the coming year, but we still need to grow our supporter base in order to be sustainable, and even more so because we are beginning to think about ways in which we would like to expand the work further! Our short-term goal is for 80% of

our annual expenses to be covered by regular monthly supporters. We bumped closer to this target with the Advent Appeal but we still have a way to go.

But we don't want to ask any more of those who have been supporting Manna Gum. We have been stunned by people's generosity. Rather, if you already contribute to Manna Gum, don't give any more money but help us by expanding our base: instead, pass on *Manna Matters*, share our podcasts with your friends, and give them ratings and reviews.

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Below is our income and expenses for 2025. Our accounts are pretty simple, but in light of people's generosity I thought it would be nice to provide some more detail (next page), for those who would like to better understand where the money comes from and how it is used.

| <b>INCOME</b>        | <b>\$</b>     |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Supporters           | 47,923        |
| Donations            | 35,690        |
| Other revenue        | 1,750         |
| Book sales           | 954           |
| Interest             | 0             |
| <b>TOTAL INCOME</b>  | <b>86,316</b> |
| ASSETS (Books held)  | 820           |
| LIABILITIES          | 0             |
| ASSOCIATION'S EQUITY | 0             |

| <b>EXPENSES</b>                | <b>\$</b>     |
|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Wages                          | 59,807        |
| Superannuation & workcover     | 7,012         |
| Printing, stationery & postage | 4,850         |
| Computer software & equipment  | 558           |
| Book publishing                | 486           |
| Web services                   | 2,123         |
| Conferences & webinars         | 495           |
| Travel                         | 1,075         |
| Hospitality                    | 14            |
| Phone & electricity            | 252           |
| Events                         | 1,141         |
| Meetings & resources           | 294           |
| <b>TOTAL EXPENDITURE</b>       | <b>78,492</b> |
| <i>Net Profit</i>              | <i>7,824</i>  |

### ... more detail

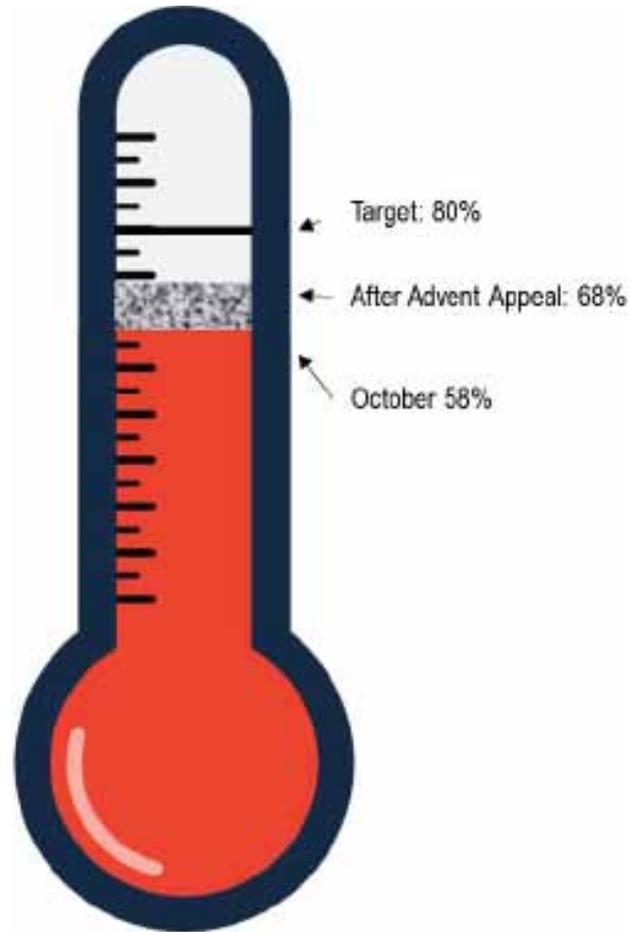
All of Manna Gum's income comes from individuals like you, both regular monthly supporters and through *ad hoc* donations. Obviously, the more monthly supporters, the more stable our financial base. That said, we will always depend to some extent on once-off donations that tend to fluctuate from year to year.

In the last five years Manna Gum's income has grown from \$42k (2021) to \$86k (2025). Currently we have 65 monthly supporters who make up for 68% of our income and, on average, are giving \$65 per month. That is some seriously heavy lifting from our supporters, and we don't want to ask any more them! Our great need is to broaden the base and spread the load — our short-term target is to get monthly support to cover 80% of expenses.

Manna Gum's primary expense (85%) is employment costs. In FY 2025, Jonathan was paid \$40,000 (3 days/wk) and Jacob was paid \$13,000 (1 day/wk), both at the same rate of \$34/hr. This hourly rate has been pegged to inflation (increasing yearly with the Consumer Price Index), but given our costs are rising faster than income, we decided to skip the CPI increase going into 2026.

Beyond wages, the next main expenses relate to the cost of producing *Manna Matters* and maintaining an online presence — the core vehicles of our work. The cost of these things has tripled over the last three years.

Looking forward, our hope is to be able to expand Jacob's role. There is no shortage of things to be done, and he has already brought enormous added value to Manna Gum's work. But for this, we definitely need to broaden our income base. If you don't currently support Manna Gum financially but find benefit in our work, please consider our New Year's Appeal.



## MANNA GUM'S MONTHLY SUPPORTER TARGET

# AGAINST THE MACHINE

CAN WE REMAIN HUMAN IN OUR BRAVE NEW WORLD?

by Jacob Garrett

Paul Kingsnorth used to be an environmentalist: the chain-yourself-to-bulldozer-to-stop-a-new-motorway kind. He grew up an atheist, but nevertheless harboured a deep sense of the sacredness of the wild earth. In time, his activism led him to a sustained critique of any human culture which systematically destroys natural places in the name of Profit and Progress, and he's the author of multiple books chronicling resistance to these forces in his native England and across the globe.

For most of his life, as far as he could tell, Christianity—if it was relevant at all—was part of the problem: it was the religion of *dominion* after all. Yet he was a spiritual seeker, clearly recognising our desperate need to be grounded in something greater than ourselves. For ten years Kingsnorth practised Zen Buddhism and even spent time in a neo-pagan nature religion. Then, out of the blue, he suddenly found himself pursued by Jesus: friends came out of the woodwork, he had dreams, received strange and cryptic messages... what was going on? He did not want to become a Christian, but it was happening all the same, and he felt unable to resist. In January 2020 he was baptised into the Romanian Orthodox Church. Since then, he has continued to try and articulate the predicament of the world, but now from the perspective of Christian faith. This book, *Against the Machine*, is the culmination of these efforts.

*Against the Machine* is an attempt to give voice to a feeling: a feeling that something is shifting—or has already shifted—in humanity's relationship to, well... pretty much everything: to nature, to place, to history, to culture, to technology, to imagination, to each other, to ourselves, and to the Divine. Whether we trace the first stirrings

of these changes from 10 000 BC or 1500 AD, it long pre-dates any of us, but it has been building conspicuous momentum recently, at least since the modern period. What is this force which is reshaping all of life, portending either our final liberation from all limits or the unmaking of our humanity (depending on your perspective)? Following earlier thinkers and writers, Kingsnorth calls this thing The Machine: the ever-tightening net of money, technology, power, and ideology drawing us all in like a catch of fish.

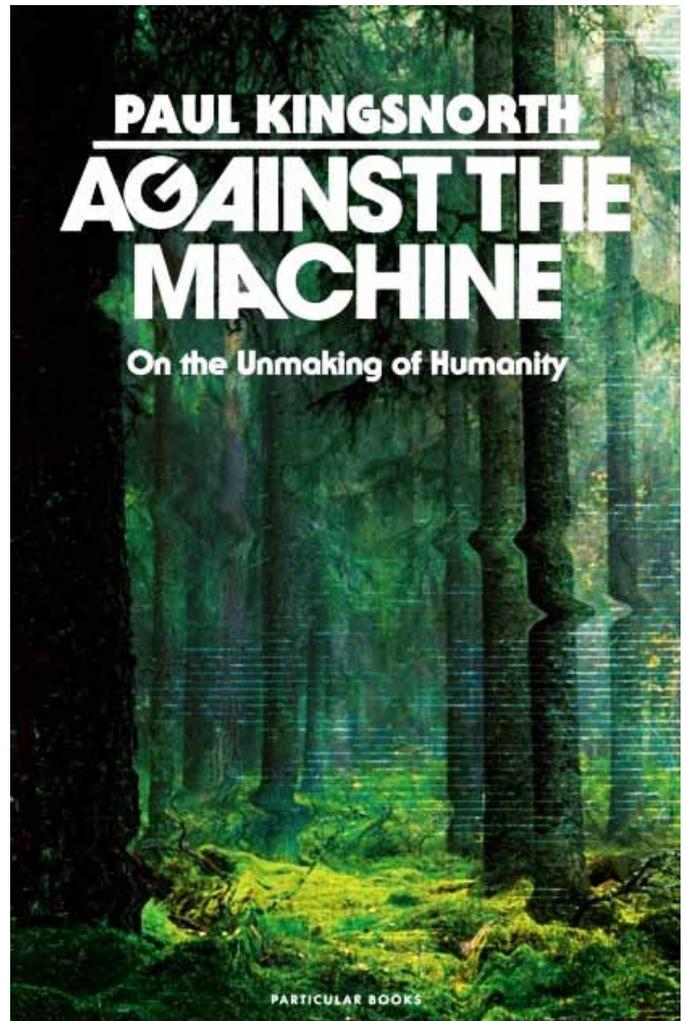




Image credit: Andy Kelly on Unsplash.

For Kingsnorth, this is no conspiracy: there is no dark cabal secretly pulling the levers of power. In its broadest sense, The Machine is the restless quest of humanity since our exile from Eden. The Machine is the logic of Babel and the logic of Babylon. The Machine is what we try and build any time we seek to oust God from his world so we can rule it by ourselves. The Machine is what we enthrone in God's place when a culture loses its sacred centre.

The Machine is what we get when we throw off all spiritual restraints.

The book's chief subject is the rise of this Machine in modern times, for

Kingsnorth observes that, in post-Christian and post-Christendom societies, we are possessed of both unprecedented technical power and perhaps a unique spirit of rebellion against the sacred story which anchored the diverse cultures of Europe for so long. While sympathetic to certain strands on each side of the West's resulting culture war, Kingsnorth ultimately rejects it as hopeless squabbling amid the ruins. For him, the contemporary West (and its colonial progeny like the US and Australia) is not a true culture so much as a spiritual vacuum into which

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**[Paul Kingsnorth] would have us do what we can to preserve and build something real in a society essentially at war with reality.**

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the monsters of consumer capitalism, materialist scientism, and self-worship have eagerly rushed. Worse still, the West has by now well and truly exported its new Machine 'culture' across the globe and it is nearly impossible to find a people or a place untouched by its corrosive influence. All societies and all nations have been woven into its global economy and either convinced or compelled to accept its terms—to become nodes in the Grid and bend the knee to Growth at the cost of their people's welfare and the devastation of their local ecologies and cultures.

In Kingsnorth's telling, this Machine inherently rejects

all traditions, boundaries, and limits, it accepts only forward movement and acknowledges only what can be measured and quantified. 'Its endgame is the replacement of nature with technology, in order to facilitate total human control over a totally human world.' However, he warns the result will not in fact be liberation but enslavement, as any totally human world turns out to be totally anti-human in the end.

Paul Kingsnorth is not known for his optimism.

What do we do? Can we roll back the damage already done? Can we turn aside from this bleak trajectory? Without despairing, Kingsnorth holds limited near-term hope. However, in place of the Machine anti-culture's values of Science, Self, Sex, and Screen he counsels a rediscovery of an older way of being: a return to an emphasis instead on the Past (where we come from), People (who we are as a culture), Place (our specific local region), and Prayer (our direction and relation to God). He would have us start with *who* we are and *where* we are 'without giving in to the *nihil* of the age'. Instead we must do our best to retain a sense of wonder at the world, remaining alert to opportunities to practise love and to the necessity of self-sacrifice, all the while avoiding getting drafted as a soldier in the culture wars.

Outside of a miraculous worldwide change in direction, Kingsnorth believes the best we can hope for is to try to live as sanely as possible through this mad time in history. He would have us do what we can to preserve and build something *real* in a society essentially at war with reality.

Thus far I basically agree. After all, I am the ideal audience for *Against the Machine*: a lover of wild creatures and places, an admirer of much in pre-modern cultures, techno-cautious and suspicious of Progress, uninspired to culture war but certainly not a-political, and rather romantic and pessimistic (or is that realistic?) in mood. If this isn't you, you'll likely find the book at least as frustrating as you will helpful: Kingsnorth is largely writing for people who are already (generally) predisposed to see things as he does.

Also fair warning: Kingsnorth's specific views on this or that issue make him impossible to categorise as either on 'the Right' or 'the Left' of package-deal politics. While I found this wonderfully refreshing, all the same I could not help feeling his tone was often a little too dismissive or harsh when it came to certain

topics. It's also worth saying that some elements of his perspective don't directly translate Down Under, while some suggestions for what to do remain slightly nebulous.

All the same, the book is eminently readable, especially given the sombre subject matter. Kingsnorth is a writer first and foremost, and he seems to know it, for he draws on a wide range of other thinkers throughout the book to help him with the conceptual heavy lifting. For those unlikely ever to read Lewis Mumford, René Guénon, Jacques Ellul, or a host of others, this is a real service.

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**Despite easy criticisms of romanticism, when read sympathetically, I find the book's gaps or insufficiencies as provocative as its insights.**

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For me, the main achievement of *Against the Machine* is the way it draws together a vast array of ideas, observations, and intuitions into a coherent, accessible, and lucid analysis of our situation. I am indebted to Paul Kingsnorth for giving me words and a

frame for something I always dimly felt, and for offering a wide-ranging cultural-spiritual diagnosis and prognosis which continues to stimulate valuable discussion among my friends and family. Though easier said than done, one thing he helps make clear is our essential need to find others of like mind and to act together if want to chart a substantially different course (see Bernadette's reflection on p. 11 and the letters from Jim and Andy on p. 13 for more).

All in all, despite easy criticisms of romanticism, when read sympathetically, I find the book's gaps or insufficiencies as provocative as its insights. If I wish Kingsnorth's advice for how to live through these times was more specific, or actionable, or felt more likely to succeed, what would I add to it? If I sense there are blindspots, where are they and how do they change the overall vision? If there is greater hope for the human and planetary predicament than that offered here, what grounds this hope?

We would all do well to ask such questions, so we need more books like this one.



# REFLECTING ON 'A DIFFERENT WAY'

by Bernadette Young

As soon as I saw 'A Different Way' (ADW) mentioned in *Manna Matters*, I knew it was the closest thing to a perfect fit for me.

After five years working in journalism and seven years in teaching, in 2023 I had taken a year-long sabbatical to reconsider my place and purpose in the world, and to reconcile the nagging feeling of unease with how I was acting: I wanted to live differently but didn't think it was possible.

During that year my world was blown wide open as I discovered so many examples of different ways: Dorothy Day, voluntary simplicity, Ngatiawa River Monastery, Dave Andrews, and some bloke called Jonathan Cornford. I came away from that time with a commitment to live a simple life dedicated to the service of others.

Every day since then, I have relearnt how difficult this is to do whilst still living in mainstream society. The pull back to 'normality' is hard to fight unless you are surrounded by like-minded people. This is why I jumped at the chance to be part of ADW.

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I had studied Jonathan's book *Coming Home* with a book discussion group, so had already been exposed to many of the themes covered during ADW. However, I think my understanding was deepened and broadened

during the week: we looked at each theme from multiple angles, including a hands-on activity that allowed us to put our values and ideas into practice. Standing side-by-side with someone chopping up branches for compost, digging a garden bed, or picking berries allowed

conversation to bubble up, meander, and flow down paths sparked by our learning but perhaps in a way that was unexpected. One take-away is that there are many different ways to live in a different way — definitely not one size fits all!

I must admit that I was apprehensive before coming to ADW. I describe myself as an atheist sort-of-Quaker who tries to follow the radical way of Jesus the teacher, not a Christian in the usual sense of the word. I wondered: is it the right place for me? Am I crashing someone else's party?

But the group was enthusiastically welcoming, diverse, and focused on shared values whilst learning from differences.

It was refreshing to be with people who didn't question my life decisions and morals, where I didn't have to make a calculation of what aspects of myself to hide to be socially acceptable. Our group and all the Seeds community members we met didn't hold back their generosity: it was natural, authentic, and given without grumbles or hesitation. There were also bucketloads of joy — who knew that talking about climate change would be so much fun and so funny!?

It's hard to reflect on what ADW has changed within me and how I live, because it's one more step in my ongoing journey; one more reorientation towards and refocusing on the life I want to live and the person I want to be.

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**There are many different ways to live in a different way — definitely not one size fits all!**

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I have decided that it's time to shift my focus to relationships, people, and community, as opposed to grand ideas and big projects. Recently, I moved into a neighbourhood close to friends who share my vision for communal living, and it is exciting to be on the cusp of putting some of what I saw and experienced in the Seeds community into action.

Part of a song we sang regularly during ADW connected straight to my heart when I think about work that prioritises relationships and connection over achieving outcomes: 'Our work

is slow and humble, and the world does not give its praise'. Yes, tangible changes and goals also need to be achieved in our world to raise up the marginalised, but ADW reminded me that we

must not forget the joy, meaning, and goodness (what some might call holiness) that comes with generously giving of our whole self to the people whose life paths cross ours.

*Bernadette is able to feed her cat because she works as a high-school teacher in west Melbourne, but she also fills her time with learning Auslan, community gardening, volunteering with bushwalking organisations, and working towards getting an intentional community off the ground. She is part of Melbourne's Quaker community and is particularly active in getting younger people more involved in Quakerism and in guiding others towards lives that align with their values.*



# WHAT HAPPENED TO INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES?

*[Editor's note: in the winter edition last year I asked: 'what has happened to the idea of intentional mission communities? Twenty-five years ago, there were quite a number of such communities just in Victoria, and a network that meshed them all together. Now there are few left. How are the next generation out there in the church world thinking about discipleship, mission, and community these days?' We had a couple of responses from readers which are published below. If you have thoughts, we would still love to hear from you. – JC]*

## Response from Jim Dowling, Qld

In 1982 I joined the first Catholic Worker (CW) community in Brisbane: only five of us. We were in common purse, did hospitality, resistance, gardening, made and sold soap, and a few other things. At the time The House of Freedom community was thriving in Brisbane. They had a small subgroup also in common purse. Our community folded after 2 ½ years (the HOF soon after) and we started a new one nearby, in 1986, which went till 2003. The second community was

also in common purse the whole time, and had three to seven adult members at any one time. The problem of money was remarkably not a big problem for members of either community. Personality clashes were much more a problem, of course.

My wife and I and, by now, five children moved to Dayboro in 2000 and started Peter Maurin Farm with John Pettit, while the Brisbane community struggled on. The Brisbane community was closed when the landlady sold the house in 2003.

Now a CW community has been going in Greenslopes (5km from the CBD) for over ten years.

Now I think, in one way, the decline of communities is pretty obvious. People cannot live together anymore! We could blame the devil or capitalism (close allies). Too much affluence is an obvious culprit also.

In the 60s and 70s, uni students lived in share houses and shared rooms. These were not Christian communities, just ordinary folks living with little income. In our CW communities we



all shared rooms. In my second CW, there were five of us men in a room once, with two bunk beds and a single. It did not seem that difficult. But now it would be almost totally unheard of for young people to share rooms. (Folks at Greenslopes still do).

The simple fact is, we have become more isolated/selfish/individualistic. Is this a pessimistic outlook? As Thomas Merton said, is it pessimistic to diagnose cancer as cancer?

I don't know if you get the *Plough* magazine, but here is a paragraph from an article by Peter Mommsen, discussing survey data which suggest 'money can't buy you happiness. Love can':

It's a research result that ever fewer people are taking to heart. That, at least, seems to be the takeaway from a survey on American values by the Wall Street Journal and NORC at the University of Chicago that was released in March 2023. The poll collected the responses of more than one thousand US adults on the values they considered very important and compared their answers to a similar survey in 1998. Over that twenty-five-year span, the share of "very important" responses for several survey questions dropped precipitously: "community involvement" fell from 47 percent to 27 percent, "having children" from 59 to 30 percent, "patriotism" from 70 to 38 percent, and "religion" from 62 to 39 percent. (Viewing such results side by side with [George] Vaillant's research, it's striking that the four declining values are all ones that, if acted on, seem likely to encourage the building of relationships.) In contrast, the share of respondents who viewed money as very important rose, from 31 percent to 43 percent, beating out all the other four values.

Of course the internet has skyrocketed what was already becoming a problem in the 80s: alienation, loneliness, narcissism, nihilism.

In the early 90s, a few of us saw the coming destruction of community and relationships with the new phenomenon of PCs. We went to the biggest computer shop in Brisbane and did an

action outside where we smashed screens and keyboards (I think we were short on the real things, and smashed a few TV screens as well, TVs perhaps being the adolescent demon). This action was not my idea, but I was happy to join it.

Now I am writing this on my own laptop, so I have little high moral ground to brag about. (I do hope to die without ever owning a mobile phone though).

The problem of children on screens is nothing less than child abuse in my opinion. But that is perhaps another topic. But then again, is it not perhaps the major cause of alienation and lack of community in the modern age?

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**In our abstracted thought world of the 2020s, I suspect people believe it is enough to just believe the right things, and to not be one of those bad people who believe the wrong things.**

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Of course, as a Christian, I do have faith that all this can change. How? I do not know. Hopefully not with a total world-shattering disaster.

Bruderhof community are a light in the darkness. And there are probably others in Oz I do not know. My eldest daughter lives on a Catholic

Worker farm in NZ, which is also a light. They do not have computer screens on the community at all, and 'til recently all phones were banned. (There are a few, rarely used ones, allowed now I believe. It is a joy to see lots of beautiful free-ranging children there).

## **Response from Andy Paine, Qld**

Firstly, I think these types of communities always have a bit of attrition because people burn out, their beliefs change over time, or they have kids/career and don't have the time. So it's necessary to have some kind of channel for younger people to keep getting involved. For a long time this existed in the immersion type courses that would be run regularly — I think you are still doing something like this at Manna Gum, but most others seem to have fizzled out. For a long time these were important not just for the longevity of the communities, but also as a part of the ministry: showing young Christians alternative ways of living out their faith. From what I can see, there was just gradually less interest from young people in this kind of thing.



*An Amish barn raising: now that's embodied community! Credit: Randy Fath on Unsplash.*

Why might that be? Well here is my theory. It has to do with a broader cultural change of what I call 'disembodiment'. I put a lot of the responsibility for this to social media and smartphones. What I think it looks like is that because we spend more and more of our life around abstract information (socially, but also in our work lives and even in what culture we absorb) and less of it concerned with physical tasks, we are undergoing a bit of an ontological transformation, where we start to see the abstracted thought realm to be as real, or more real even, than tangible physical action.

I think this is visible across our culture in different ways. One is of course the endless online arguments about what people believe; and the increasing tribalisation that comes with it.

In terms of what it means for Christian communities, I think at one time young people who believed in alternative ideas would have been driven to try to put them into practice, e.g. by forming or joining an alternative Christian community. But now, in our abstracted thought world of the 2020s, I suspect people believe it is enough to just believe the right things, and to not be one of those bad people who believe the wrong things. It certainly does seem like the rhetoric of progressive social change is

everywhere, but these tangible efforts to live out alternative beliefs are harder to find.

Another phenomenon, which I see as linked, is that 'progressive' Christianity has suffered from a bit of an identity crisis, and now has little to offer besides parroting the abstracted politics of secular progressive ideology. In this case, why would anybody bother taking on the name and praxis of Christianity (which, it must be said, comes with a bit of baggage), when it doesn't look any different?

I should add here that while it is worth critiquing progressive Christianity for this, it is not nearly as guilty of giving up on the gospel to be willingly enlisted in a culture war as conservative Christianity is!

My belief is that Christianity has something vital to contribute to our broader culture at this time precisely because of the Christian notion of 'incarnation' - an embodied religion that calls us to actively live out our faith, to physically go to places of injustice and pain, and to be co-creators in God's plan for the world. That is, if we can find some way of cutting through all the noise, or indeed of being a church that is able to live up to that calling.

# READING & LISTENING

Here are some of the things stimulating thinking below the hood of Manna Gum, going into 2026.

## Jon's top picks

- Fleming Routledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* — at 600 pages this is not a light read, but it is surprisingly accesible, and profound! It is the sort of book you can read bits at a time.
- Christian Wiman, 'The Tune of Things', *Harpers Magazine* — this article will blow your brain.
- Pankaj Mishra, 'The world after Gaza', *Big Ideas*, ABC Listen.
- 'Stan Grant's Spiritual Re-Awakening (interview)' *Life & Faith* podcast, CPX.
- *The Joe Walker Podcast*, especially his Australian policy series. — OK, this is pretty nerdy policy stuff, and generally fairly orthodox centrist views, but in-depth interviews with experts in their field.
- 'Engineering with Rosie', YouTube channel — helpful for understanding the renewables transition

## Jacob's goodies

### Podcasts

- *The Great Simplification* — our global predicament from a systems perspective, connecting the dots of energy, economy, ecology, human behaviour, and more.
- *Your Undivided Attention* — accessible, expert discussions about the most pressing issues surrounding social media and AI.

### YouTube videos (two primers on AI)

1. 'The A.I. Dilemma', Centre for Humane Technology (06/04/23) — a bit dated, but still an excellent introduction to the stakes.
2. '2026 Ewan Lecture', McDonald Institute (29/01/26) — Geoffrey Hinton, the 'Godfather of AI', explains the basics of modern AI systems and gives his take on the risks and philosophical implications (as an atheist).

### Reading

- Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World* — a compact classic of Christian political witness, still (almost) as relevant as ever.

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Manna Matters is produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, both members of the Kulin nation. The 'wurun' of the Wurundjeri refers to *Eucalyptus viminalis*, a sacred tree whose leaves are required for a 'Welcome to Country'. The early Europeans colloquially named this tree the Manna Gum for the sweet white gum (lerp) it sometimes produces, which reminded them of the biblical story of the manna in the wilderness. In doing so, they unknowingly associated a locally sacred tree with one of the foundational lessons in God's economics: collect what you need; none shall have too little; none shall have too much; don't store it up; there is enough for all!