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## In an Outback Town, Praising the Lord and Improvising the Details



A view of Australia's Northern Territory, where many roads are dirt and towns few and far between. Matthew Abbott for The New York Times

*The Australia Letter* is a weekly newsletter from our Australia bureau. This week's issue is written by Julia Bergin, a reporter based in the Northern Territory.

The brick building and gabled roof of the Baptist Church was the backdrop for the service in the outback town of Yuendumu on a recent Sunday. Twenty parishioners — eight men and 12 women — sat out in the full sun, as they often do, in plastic chairs, flipping through a 64-page booklet of songs looking for the next hymn.

“Number 34!” suggested one worshiper, which was followed by whispers of “What page?” and chuckles of “No idea.” There was no formal choir but everyone sang, while one parishioner accompanied the music on an acoustic guitar.

Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal community about a three-hour drive north from Alice Springs, has a population of roughly 750. It is home to two churches: the Baptists, who took up residence in 1947 after Yuendumu was established by the Australian government as a ration and welfare settlement, and the more recent United Pentecostal Church.

The community is a microcosm of Christianity in Central Australia, where many denominations, including the Catholics, Lutherans and Mormons, are present. And like elsewhere, they diverge in how they practice their beliefs in remote Indigenous settings.

For some, it’s all about music. Others translate scripture into Indigenous languages or enlist local artists to depict Bible stories in their own way. And overall, churches are far more unstructured, relaxed and D.I.Y than their big-city counterparts.

At the Yuendumu Baptist Church, the pastor is Eddie Jampijinpa Robertson, an elder from the local Warlpiri tribe. As the congregation worked through the songbook, he kept musical time, tapping his heel on the ground and tapping his knee with his hand.

Everyone volunteered for prayers and readings and the parishioners took turns — a woman, then a man — to recite in both English and in Warlpiri.

“Who’s reading it?” asked Tess Napaljarri Ross, another community elder. There was no response. Ms. Ross suppressed a smile and said, “Oh, I’ll do it.”

When she finished, it was the turn of Clancy Jangala Watson, the guitar player. Everyone waited patiently for him to open his eyes, raise his head, and start reading, but it soon became clear he was deep in silent prayer.

“Clancy. Clancy!” several people piped up. “It’s not time for prayer, you’ve got to read.”

Danny Hunt, a Melbourne-based missionary, was seated among the congregation. He and his wife, Beth, have visited three times a year over the past three years as support workers for the church. Their role, he said, is “simply to be there” and assist with whatever local leaders have planned, which he adds, is typically decided during service.

“While the missionaries in the past would have been seen as the pastor or the leader, that’s not the case now,” Mr. Hunt said, pointing both hands toward Mr. Robertson. “We’re not the permission givers and we’re not the experts. We learn more than we teach.”

Other denominations have also had to adapt. The Mormon stricture against [hot drinks](#), for instance, is hard to apply in settings where cups of tea are consumed in abundance. In some Pentecostal denominations, women are [not supposed to cut their hair](#), but in Indigenous culture, when someone passes away and the mourning rituals known as [Sorry Business](#) ensues, women are culturally obligated to cut it off.

Despite the differences between Aboriginal culture and Christianity, community members said the two were complementary, and straightforward to practice because they were eternal and fixed — in contrast with government policies, which were sometimes frustratingly mutable.

“Our culture never changes. God’s law never changes. But government law, there’s too much change,” Mr. Robertson said.

As the Sunday sun set in Yuendumu, the Pentecostal congregation gathered for its own evening service. There’s no building as such, just a motor home, two raised shipping containers strung together with a tarp, and a circle of 15 chairs around an open fire. Only were are occupied.

Reading in English directly from the Bible, the Rev. Col French recited to his audience of three the story of David and Goliath. He paused plenty of times to explain things like the size of the giant — “Nearly as tall as that container” — made sweeping hand motions to signal rivers and valleys and signed off all explanations with either “Does that make sense?” or “Praise the Lord.”

Murmurs of “mmm” and “yea” were just audible over the loud hum of a generator. It was noisy yet peaceful, and very different from the teaching style and tone of the Baptist church.

But that too, had rapidly changed since the morning service.

A keyboard, an electric guitar, a sizable amplifier and a portable microphone had all been enlisted for an impromptu gospel night referred to as singalong. Mr. Hunt said it was exactly what the church had been designed for.

“It’s like an open performance space. They might open the windows or set up a fire outside, someone will take the microphone, maybe talk about the song, then they’ll crank up the volume and just jam. They really love their music,” he said.

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