

Ferne, a former addict who's come to talk about how he quit drugs with the help of a higher power – but he doesn't mean God.

The Weekly Service is a secular ceremony created by Elliott and his friend Henry Churchill. It counts its heritage in months not millennia, though what its founders are looking for is perhaps even older than organised religion: a sense of community and a space to contemplate life's existential questions.

The idea was conceived when the two men met at a barbecue and realised they both harboured the unusual dream of becoming agnostic priests. With church congregations shrinking as they fail to attract youngsters, and charities reporting an increase in loneliness, they decided to give it a try.

So what does a 21st-century non-church created by a pair of millennials look like?

In the place of a chapel, there's a small auditorium at the back of an open-plan co-working space; instead of hymn books they've got a MacBook and projector; for pews they've got colourful IKEA cushions on oversized astroturf steps; and instead of tithes, guests, who range from their 20s to 50s, pay a small fee of \$5 or \$10 to get in.

"One of the main reasons I started the Weekly Service with Henry a year ago was that I felt disconnected from myself, from the people around me and from nature," Elliott tells the gathered folk.

Just as he's describing how he'd first tried everything from meditation to alcohol to porn to get over this feeling of isolation, there's an almighty screech from the laptop in the corner. It's a loose audio cable.

He jumps up to fix it. "That's the sound of disconnection," he quips.

Then it's over to Ferne, a thespian-looking 31-year-old dressed from fedora-clad head to toe in black. It's the first time Ferne has told his story in public. He explains how feeling like he didn't fit in as a youngster led to drugs and partying, and then to addiction, crime and contemplating suicide.

In the end, it was the intimate human connections Ferne found through a recovery group and workshops that helped him heal, he tells the congregation. He went on to co-found his own Melbourne-based group – the Men's Collective – where "guys can share their feelings, share their emotions and be vulnerable without fear of ridicule".

After he's finished speaking, Ferne invites the audience to talk to one another about their own experiences of connection and disconnection.

Cecile, a 32-year-old French sustainability officer with wispy light-brown hair and leaf-shaped earrings, tells me that the superficial relationships she has with others online can make her feel "a bit shit".

"We're connected to our phones, but social media just shows us these perfect lives of other people, and TV advertises holidays that no one can afford," she says. "People, they say 'yes, I'm great, everything is fine', even if they are struggling. Coming here is about meeting other people and talking about what's actually real in life."

Other topics of conversation in recent weeks have included grief and loss, the mystery of the self, and cultivating a character-building hobby.

Each week there is a singalong at the end of the service, and today the lyrics to 'Society' from the soundtrack of the 2007 film *Into the Wild* are projected onto the back wall. But nobody really knows the tune, and we end up sounding like a poorly rehearsed protest choir. One of the perils of creating new rituals is that sometimes they can feel a bit forced.

After the service, people linger to continue their conversations over a cup of tea.

"I love sitting still for an hour and a half on a Saturday morning, 'cause I don't do that otherwise," says 36-year-old Jane. "It gives me a bit of ritual in my life."

Thea and Lawrence, both 29, have come down from Sydney with a view to setting up a new Weekly Service back home. "[Having] a place to be your whole self however you are feeling is deeply appealing to me," says Thea, while Lawrence says he longs to "find a community within the city that you can rely on to be there".

As guests arrive for the next event, members of the congregation take their cue to leave, stepping back out onto the busy high street and into the rest of their weekend. **M**



Back from the dead

ANTHONY HAM

When it comes to endangered species, unsolved mysteries rarely end well. Take the paradise parrot: once described as the "thylacine of the avian world", this long-tailed bird with red shoulder patches and a turquoise rump has intrigued Australia's

birding community for decades. Save for a celebrated case in the 1970s when a naturalist named John Young claimed to have found a possible breeding population (despite numerous expeditions, the claims were never substantiated) the paradise parrot hasn't been seen since the 1920s and remains the only bird species to have fallen extinct on Australia's mainland.

The night parrot, a stout, green bird with yellow-and-black markings and a short tail, seemed the most likely candidate to follow the paradise parrot into oblivion. The last confirmed sighting of a live night parrot in the 20th century was in 1912, at Nichol Spring in Western Australia.

Enough tantalising accounts ensued – an unconfirmed sighting of a night parrot along the remote Canning Stock Route in 1967, four possible night parrots flushed from the spinifex by a camel expedition in South Australia's far north in 1979 – to ensure that no one was quite ready to write off the species. In 1989 Dick Smith offered a \$25,000 reward to anyone who found the bird.

And then, in a moment of extraordinary serendipity, in 1990 two museum ornithologists stopped – reportedly to relieve themselves – by a remote roadside near Boulia in western Queensland. There in front of them was a dead night parrot.

Possible sightings followed: in 1996 at Newhaven Station, 350 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs, and in 2005 in Western Australia's Pilbara region. In 2006, another dead specimen turned up on a barbed-wire fence in Diamantina National Park in south-western Queensland, which only added to the bird's mystique. In 2012, the American Smithsonian Institution put the night parrot at the top of its list of the world's most mysterious bird species.

Such was the state of affairs when John Young stepped back into the spotlight. Young was no stranger to such mysteries or to the disappointments that so often surround them. There had been some difficult years for him since the controversy surrounding the paradise parrot back in the 1970s. In 2006, Young claimed a spectacular discovery – a new species or subspecies, the blue-browed fig parrot – that was later challenged amid allegations of doctored photos. Young's reputation was tarnished, and many wanted nothing more to do with him.

Which, as it turns out, was a pity.

Young and the night parrot were always going to be strange but somehow apt bedfellows: the gruff, old-school naturalist-in-exile, and the bird that no one could find. And soon their stories would be entwined forever.

Despite the claims and accusations, there is little doubt that Young is one of Australia's most experienced naturalists. His quest for the night parrot began in 1989, and in the almost two decades that followed he would cover more than



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325,000 kilometres and spend some 17,000 hours looking for the night parrot in some of Australia's most remote corners. There can be few Australians who have seen as much of the country as Young.

"This is such a great big country, and there was no way known the night parrot could totally disappear," Young tells me. "No one can say anything is extinct until we prove it is."

And although he doesn't say so directly, Young's past experiences doubtless drove him onwards. "The more people said it couldn't be done, the more determined I was to find it" is all he will say.

When the dead night parrot was found in Diamantina National Park in 2006, Young narrowed his search. A year later, on Brighton Downs, a cattle station north of the park, Young heard a distant call, which he recognised as that of a parrot. When he mimicked the call, two birds appeared in front of him. Young knew instantly that they were night parrots. In failing light, he made the first known recording of a night parrot call.

But he had only seen the bird in silhouette. He hadn't taken a photo. And he knew that he would need cast-iron evidence if an already sceptical world were to believe him. Despite being certain that he had solved one of wild Australia's great mysteries, Young kept his own counsel. "I was convinced I had it. I knew I did," he recalls. "But there was no hard evidence. I had no intention of going off half-cocked."

Five long years later, also on Brighton Downs, Young saw another night parrot, but again his evidence was inconclusive.

Finally, on 26 May 2013, Young made the discovery of a lifetime when, once again on Brighton Downs, a night parrot came to investigate Young's playback of a night parrot call. For 35 minutes, Young and a birdwatching friend observed a night parrot hop in and out of the spinifex. Just as importantly, Young took photos.

"I was lying on the ground. The sweat was pouring out of me. Then I started to shake and I thought, *Christ, we've got this thing*. We didn't speak for half an hour. We walked back to the car. I had tears streaming down my face. It was the most incredible experience of my life. I could have died on the spot."

When Young announced the finding later that year, no one could argue with his video and photographic evidence, although it is clear that many wished they could. Whatever people thought of him, no one could dispute that John Young had found the most sought-after bird on the planet.

It was, said Sean Dooley, managing editor of *Australian Birdlife*, "the birdwatching equivalent of finding Elvis flipping burgers in an outback roadhouse".

In the years since Young's announcement others have taken on the task of protecting the night parrot. Bush

Heritage Australia established the 56,000-hectare Pullen Pullen Reserve, which is close to Diamantina National Park. A team from the Night Parrot Recovery Team found night parrots on neighbouring Mt Windsor Station, significantly increasing the bird's known range. And Steve Murphy, one of Australia's foremost experts on the night parrot, captured, tagged and released two night parrots, adding greatly to our understanding of the species.

In the process we learned that so much of what we thought we knew about the species was incorrect. The bird is not, it seems, nomadic, and it rarely goes to water. It inhabits old-growth spinifex, but not areas of unbroken spinifex, which would be vulnerable to the fires that are a common feature of Australia's north.

Young largely disappeared from public view, but in spring last year he resurfaced, reincarnated as the senior field ecologist for the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC). The AWC, which is working with Queensland National Parks to manage Diamantina National Park, announced that Young and his colleagues had discovered a population of night parrots, including a nest with four eggs, that "represents a major expansion of the known population and distribution for one of Australia's rarest birds".

In his element, Young now spends much of his time out in the spinifex looking for and studying a bird that he describes as "a nocturnal princess of the desert" and "one of the most beautiful bloody birds on the planet".

AWC's chief executive, Atticus Fleming, says the work the conservancy is undertaking in Diamantina National Park gives hope that the night parrot is more elusive than endangered. "But that's a question that still needs to be answered. And there's another question, and that is to try and unlock the secret as to why a bird, why an animal that in many respects fits the pattern for an animal that should be extinct is still there. And if we can answer that question - how it has survived the threat posed by feral cats, foxes and fires - not only does it help us protect the night parrot, it actually might give us some clues to how we protect and restore other species."

More than that, the rediscovery of the night parrot is a rare good-news story on a continent with the worst record of extinctions on earth, and for Steve Murphy it represents what he calls "an opportunity for redemption".

Fleming agrees. "We've lost 30 mammals since European settlement. To put that in context, the US has lost one or two. We're off the charts. We've gone from a bush that is alive with animals to one that is a ghost town. The night parrot fits into that story, but it adds another chapter of, if you like, hope and redemption."

Redemption, it seems, can take many forms.

One man, one bird. And, for once, a happy ending. **M**