An understandable fear of any traveller is joining a tour and finding obnoxious people in the group who are going to spoil the trip. Through the roll of a dice we are thrown together with people we did not know, and under normal circumstances may not mix with or talk much to. The same dynamic happens in churches — Christians worship and share life with other people they may not normally choose to mix with. But this “sociological impossibility” (quoting Hoekendijk) is part of the good news of Christian community, bringing together people from diverse cultural backgrounds for like-minded purposes.

But what about a church tour group? Instead of spending just Sundays and other occasions together, a group is thrown together for a week or two or more? And what if something goes wrong?

Lynne Baab is used to grappling with church dynamics, conflict and spiritual practices for groups as a practical theology lecturer and writer on spirituality. An American by background, she is currently based in New Zealand teaching at the University of Otago and over the last decade has written a dozen books and resources for personal spirituality and help for congregations (see www.lynnebaab.com). One of her most recent books, however, is a novel — Dead Sea.

Baab’s foray into fiction is set around the Dead Sea, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Masada, Ein Gedi, Petra and the Sea Of Tiberias as part of a church tour to Israel and Jordan. Baab had enjoyed these sites herself when she lived in Tel Aviv in 1979-1980. She lets her readers see these biblical sights through the eyes of Samantha, the last-minute recruited tour leader. The first twist is that most of the group are not churchgoers, but enjoying a work trip as part of research for an archaeology computer game. The second twist is that one of them dies in the first week of the trip.

The novel turns into a classic “who-dunnit” murder mystery complex with complex characterization, a handsome detective, complicated conflict dynamics. Samantha wonders what she has got herself into, but learns a lot about herself and sees surprising elements of assertiveness and friendship, and a little more, emerge from the episode.

Along the way, as well as enjoying the twists and turns of working out who did the deed and who was involved in other ways, Dead Sea: A Novel shows the reader insights into archaeology, confidentiality, Jewish messianic Christians, gender issues in decision-making, family of origin issues in conflict styles, and how conflict can lead to creative productivity. The victim seemed to have been in conflict with just about everyone, so unravelling who had the motive and means is a fun read.