

# RUMINATIONS



March 2011



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able to be in the ministry and mission to which God has called us.

Another response is to slip into a model of faith which is equated with the culture around us, something we call “*Christian values*”, which usually has more to do with being well-behaved and adhering to Victorian social patterns than the discipleship to which we are called. There is usually little talk about reconciliation, loving our enemies or blessing those who persecute us...

We also respond by “*keeping things going*” – whether it’s the Couples’ Club formed in the 1960s, a faltering worship event, or a Kids’ Club with exhausted leaders. We are adherents to immortality, when our discipleship is to a God of resurrection. Sometimes we need to let things die and trust God for our future.

The Uniting Church, like many others, welcomes *new ideas*, so we engage with leaders like Callahan, Bandy, McLaren or Roxburgh and transplant their model onto ours, with little regard for context – precisely what they advise us NOT to do. Or we discover *Emerging Church/Fresh Expressions/New Monasticism* and believe that will save us, when it can’t.

My generation and the ones which follow, talk about “*making worship relevant*”, which often leads to us tending to the peripherals and falling for cosmetic change.

My understanding of discipleship is that Jesus calls us to make

ourselves relevant to the gospel and not the other way around. Similar to Paul’s readers, we like to have wisdom and signs, because that will reassure us; what happens when the ground has changed and the old maps don’t work? The only sign we have at the foundations of who we are is that of Christ crucified.

What is the measure of our faith? A God who invests – *risks* – everything with us. A God who leaves nothing in the tank.

Paul writes that most of us weren’t too flash, wise or powerful when we were called – yet Christ still called. Right now, in the rural church, much of what we see is neither flash nor powerful, but we have the one sign we need to remind us who we are: Christ crucified. This story defies every HR measure, strategic vision or traditional stance others would foist upon us and gives us our bearing for the days ahead.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong – in our church right now does any sign make more sense to us than the cross?

Can we believe that God can use us? Can we believe that God wrests life from death? Can we believe that the crucified and risen Christ can be seen in the lives of our congregations?

This is how we find our compass in the world in which we live, and in which we move forward as witnesses to this story of God.

Rev Simon Hansford is Chairperson of the NSW Rural Ministry Unit

# Resetting our GPS

Simon Hansford

This article arose from Devotions I led at the Joint Rural Presbyteries Conversation, held at Wagga, in January.

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. [1 Cor. 1:22b-29]*

In recent weeks, I have driven from Moree to Wagga and have seen the considerable changes to the country - because of the rain - some of which have been devastating. There were headers in paddocks in late January, and green feed almost everywhere I looked. There is a water course outside Dubbo, Butler's Falls, which was completely transformed in the 1990 floods, and has, once again, following the recent flooding, been extensively 'renovated'.

One of the many challenges confronting farmers is negotiating new seasonal patterns, and discovering what works now, when we have relied on the wisdom, tradition and experience which have served us well for generations. One of the greatest achievements of Australian farmers is the ability to learn, adapt and move ahead, but many, following these recent

seasons, are confronting a sense of confusion and even failure.

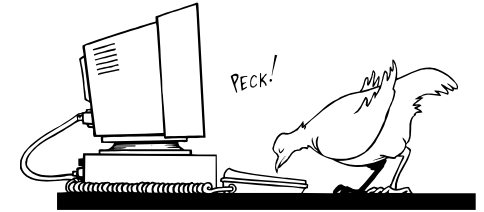
The country, quite simply, has changed.

If the terrain has changed, will the old maps work? What happens if the ground continues to change, and we don't update our GPS regularly?<sup>1</sup> The Australian church is facing new ground, and the old maps seem to have little bearing on both where we stand and where we need to go.

There are a number of responses into which we often fall in our congregations. One has been to *work harder*. If we put in more time and effort, the difficulty will be resolved and we can move forward. The consequence of this, especially now, is that people grow more and more tired, while being less and less

<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making*, Jossey-Bass 2010

# EDITORIAL



## Pilgrim People or UCA Inc?

The Rural Ministry Unit has discussed, at its meetings, the forthcoming merger of the NSW Synod Boards of Education and Mission.

Members expressed concern that some of the process seems to have been based on corporate, rather than theological, perspectives.

In the wake of these discussions, I was reminded of thoughts that have been wandering around my head for some 20 years or more.

I want to try to articulate them here, in the hope that others will respond and offer their wisdom.

Since at least the late 1980s, I have had this vague feeling that the Uniting Church (at least in the national and state sectors) has acted as though we are a "Coles Myer" type organisation – whereas, in the local sector, we are much more akin to an "IGA" type organisation.

Sadly, a small number of congregations seem to operate out of a "corner store" mentality.

In a Coles Myer type organisation, every branch or store complies with the vision, the

advertising, the pricing, the supply chain, the employment policies, etc handed down from on high.

It is all one organisation and everyone is expected to be loyal to, and compliant with, the ethos and processes.

In an IGA type organisation, individual "stores" combine to purchase their supplies and maybe advertise their merchandise.

But in most other ways, they retain their independence and their separate ethos.

My experience has been that UCA congregations do not want to be part of a top down, "one in all in", homogeneous institution.

Yes, they want to share the vision and solidarity of something beyond their local horizon.

They want to be able to choose some services from the denomination, and to contribute some of their passions – but they also want to be relatively independent.

After all, our Basis of Union emphasises the centrality of the congregation:

The dilemma for Assembly and Synod Agencies and Presbyteries is *how to give effective leadership and support in an IGA type organisation?*

How to tap in to the goodwill and the passion of the congregations, so that the wider church can serve the congregations – and the congregations can, together, as well as separately, become an effective church at mission.

In my experience, there are some excellent examples of ways in which the wider church has offered effective leadership within our IGA type ethos

Some extraordinary changes have been wrought in our church, many of which would not have happened without the inspired leadership of Presbytery, Synod and Assembly agencies, leaders and staff. Let me mention just a few:

### ***Sexuality.***

The process has been painful and costly in terms of membership, reputations and relationships.

But I believe we are in a far better place now, in respect to our processes for addressing sexual misconduct, in reducing the occurrence of sexual misconduct, and in changing the attitudes of congregation members to a range of sexuality issues, not least being inclusiveness of homosexual people.

I am but one of those whose attitudes were vastly transformed by the process.

### ***Risking the Way of Jesus.***

Back in the late 80s early 90s, the Mission and Evangelism

Committee of the Assembly proposed this phrase as part of the “Forward Together” vision for the church.

The work of that committee, and in particular of John Mavor as staff person responsible for promoting the vision, helped many in the church to catch the vision.

I still hear people use the phrase with passion! For me, and to many others, *Risking The Way Of Jesus* encapsulates the meaning of discipleship.

### ***Mission Areas.***

Back in the 1990s, Lloyd Vidler in Victoria, and Frank Measday in South Australia, pioneered the concepts of both Lay Ministry Teams and Mission Areas.

The NSW Rural Ministry Unit brought Lloyd and Frank to its Conferences at Ridgecrest to help envision us.

In 1998, Central West Presbytery sent its then Presbytery Minister, Terence Corkin, to Vic and SA to learn about their experience and to advise the presbytery on ways forward and pitfalls to avoid.

One result was formation of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area.

This would never have happened without the vision and persistent negotiation of Terence.

Nor would it have survived for 11 years without the perseverance and encouragement of presbytery members on the MLMA Council.

Central West (now Macquarie Darling) and several other

# JANUARY WAS VERY WET!

Julie Greig

In January 2010, I was busy running around southern NSW, visiting people impacted by fires. What a different story this January.

Over two weeks in January I was the acting Synod Disaster Recovery Coordinator and it just happened to be the two weeks of floods in Queensland, northern NSW and western Victoria.

While most of the attention was focused on the horrendous flooding in QLD, there was quite significant flooding across the top of NSW.

During one of the weeks we had 2000 people in evacuation centres in NSW, many of whom were going through their 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> flood in the last couple of years.

The role that churches play in these situations is, I believe, a vital mission role.

Even though most floods in Australia are well managed and we have plenty of warning, to take people from their homes and put them in evacuation centres for up to a week, while they worry about what is happening with their houses and other property, is traumatic.

As the people of God in these places we have a role to play in practical support & encouragement.

One example of this was Moree. 850 people were evacuated from Boggabilla and Toomelah into Moree

and 500 ended up at the evacuation centre.

Of course, in January, everyone is on holidays, so the local Uniting Church mobilised to help provide meals etc, while Rob Buchan, the minister there, provided some chaplaincy services.

It was a wonderful example of the church being at mission in their community and their contribution was very gratefully received.

In NSW we have a wonderful system of Peer Supporters to provide assistance for churches who are working in these situations.

Kel Hodge, one of the Rural Chaplains, was able to go and support the Moree church and Rob.

This system is unique to our Synod, but the events of the last month have demonstrated its value and the need for training in other Synods.

Over the next few weeks, Stephen Robinson, the Synod’s Disaster Recovery Coordinator will have a number of trips to QLD to help train some Peers to support their churches who have been through floods and cyclones.

It is great to see the Uniting church not only recognise the need for us to respond to crisis, but also to commit resources and personnel to making it happen.

Julie Greig is one of the Rural Chaplains in NSW

# ETHICS CLASSES OFFER CHRISTIANITY AN INVITATION FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

Brian Stewart ©

New South Wales Government proposals that Ethics classes be an alternative to Scripture classes in schools represent an official cry for help in addressing declining social standards, values and absolutes.

Having been present in N.S.W. schools for more than 120 years, it is irresponsible, therefore, that Christians regard these suggestions as an enemy to be resisted. It's time for Christianity to see these proposals as an invitation to undertake self-examination – to identify its own culpability in allowing things to reach this point and to do something about it.

Today's Christianity, for example, defines its message in terms of Sin. But despite Christianity's claims to follow Jesus of Nazareth's teachings, sin wasn't the central message of Jesus' teaching.

His message was about Love, the basis of all ethical behaviour.

Jesus didn't call people into a relationship with God; he called them into relationships of love with others, even with those who were

different to the point of being enemies.

The Christian message of love as a gift from God is nice, but it's a privilege.. By significantly failing to similarly emphasise that this privilege brings responsibilities of extravagant love towards others, Christianity merely creates elitist communities lacking ethical clout.

This kind of elitist, ethical-free Christianity has been around for a long time: in 1746, after George II's English army bloodily defeated Prince Charles' Scottish rebels, English soldiers trampled over the dead, meticulously and mercilessly slaughtering every wounded Scotsman.

A contemporary historian describing the scene, added: "How could good English Christian gentlemen act like savages? Oh, for some generous heathen!"

It's a plea not unlike what our community utters today.

Christianity would do well to hear it.

Rev Brian Stewart is a retired Baptist Minister who writes a weekly column for the Dubbo *Daily Liberal*. Reprinted with permission. [bstewart@ispdr.net.au](mailto:bstewart@ispdr.net.au)

presbyteries in Australia, have now decided that Mission Areas are the way forward for the rural church.

## **Lay Education and Formation.**

I know people who attended the week long intensives for lay people at the ELM Centre way back in the 80's.

They were transformed by the experience and gained courage to become leaders in their congregations, and often in Presbytery and Synod too.

ELM has continued to resource lay education and formation to this day.

Sadly, with the impending closure of the ELM Centre, lay education and formation is at risk.

The hope is that under-resourced presbyteries will pick up this role.

## **The future**

I believe that there is a real need for continuing leadership and resourcing from Assembly, Synod and Presbyteries.

But, it needs to be in a style suited to the Uniting Church Ethos, not to a Coles Myer ethos.

Rev Chris Udy poses the dilemma succinctly as: *Pilgrim People or UCA Inc.*

The worry is that, at the other end of the spectrum, the "Corner Store" people in congregations simply refuse to be inspired and refuse to be led.

They want to disparage all, and any, work of the other sectors of the church.

In some congregations, there are a few powerful and influential people who intimidate others into silence.

Their attitude is "don't tell us that crap!"

WE KNOW how to run a church and WE KNOW what God wants!"

It is inevitable that the "Coles Myer" concept will clash with the "Corner Store" mentality of some in the congregations.

But where the IGA type leadership has prevailed, I think it is no less than a miracle that Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly have been able to envision and to enable theological and spiritual growth in so many people in the congregations.

Contributions to this discussion are eagerly sought.

## **2011 NSW Rural Ministry Conference**

National Conference 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> August

Sustainable Ministry for Ministry Teams 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> August

Location

Dubbo

# Murray Darling Basin Guide

Ross Neville, Julie Greig and Kel Hodge recently wrote to all rural congregations, inviting responses to the Murray Darling Basin Guide (MDBG).

At the request of the Macquarie Darling and Riverina Presbyteries, Julie, Ross and Kel, in consultation with several other people, made a submission to the Government to meet a narrow deadline.

Further submissions were then called for, by both houses of Federal Parliament, with an April deadline.

So, Julie, Ross and Kel have invited rural congregations to offer their insights, so that a supplementary response to the Guide might be submitted.

In her Guest Editorial in the December issue, Audrey Mann asked for help, so that all of us in congregations might address issues like the MDBG.

Unfortunately, there are no “experts” who know and understand all there is to know about the MDBG.

In fact, many rural people claim that the MDBG is based almost exclusively on environmental concerns, with no consideration of the potential social and community impacts.

This invitation is an opportunity for people to express their concerns about social and community impacts and to try to provide some balance to the ongoing conversations.

The invitation is to:

- a) Gather small groups to have a discussion.
- b) Invite neighbours or non UCA persons who may be interested.
- c) Talk through the questions and discussion paper, and provide a group answer to suggested questions.
- d) Ask someone to record the number of people in the discussion and the group responses to the issues.
- e) Send the responses to the Rural Office, PO Box 70, Orange 2800 or email responses to [bomrural@bigpond.net.au](mailto:bomrural@bigpond.net.au)
- f) Responses need to be returned to the office by 4<sup>th</sup> March

The invitation is accompanied by a summary of the response already made, and some theological perspectives that could be used in discussion.

Because we are a diverse church which, with grace, understands accepts and respects a diversity of opinions and theological perspectives, all opinions and perspectives should be received and reported on.

By the time this issue of *Ruminations* reaches your letterbox, the deadline will be almost upon us. **It is urgent that you act now, if you want to be heard**

Amongst his list of 20 key demands, Bob Katter wants the next Australian government to reduce the market share of Coles and Woolworths down to 22.5%, i.e. a 75% reduction on their current share of around 80%.

It's worth recalling that only 35 years ago the market share of the duopoly was around 40%, so their rise has indeed been meteoric.

We only have to look at the issue of milk price at the moment. Who else in Australia is taking price cuts?

It's also worth recalling that over this same 35-year period around 45,000 Australian farmers have left the land as a result of the ‘cost-price’ squeeze, and the power of the supermarkets to depress farm gate prices has played a major role in this exodus.

The Murray Darling Basin Guide has some analysis that indicates that approx 5% of farmers are leaving farming every year. More than that in some regions and industry sectors.

It is easy to identify that approximately 15% of growers in Australia are producing 80% of Australia's export produce.

The socio economic effect is not understood but the related socio economic input of the smaller farms and businesses who produce only 15% would have to be more significant.

**Surely our church's mandate is to stand up for justice, feed the hungry in our country and the rest of the world as well as care for the environment.**

The representation and voice of the other 85% of smaller farmers in Australia is very difficult to get heard in all agri-economic discussions.

I know! I have been on the Farmers Association councils and other agricultural groups as a smaller farmer - and I can say that the bigger farmers definitely set the agenda.

It is commonly argued that 90% of farmers in Australia are still family farms. Defining family farm is an issue because many family farms are really corporate agribusinesses.

We have in Australia now Chinese, Arabian, Brazilian, Philippines based corporate or family businesses buying farming land in Australia to help maintain food supply sovereignty for their own country.

**Why should the church be involved?**

The draft mission statement of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance is:

*“Our mission is to enable all Australians to participate in and control a vibrant food system that is diverse, equitable, and resilient, which supports our well-being; and is socially, economically and ecologically durable / sustainable”.*

- The need for senior levels of government to support local food initiatives: ie decentralization of food distributors and mandatory local procurement for state institutions to provide a stable and secure market for farmers.
- The negative impact of trade agreements on our ability to control our food supply and our food sovereignty: ie NAFTA rules that allow our markets to be flooded with cheaper goods during harvest are forcing our farmers out of business.
- The desire by many citizens to have access to good quality local produce and the positive effect this has on our collective health.

Other examples include the Campesino a Campesino Sustainable Marketing Project and the Farmer's Pollinator Project in Mexico and Central America.

Farmers Forging Food Sovereignty focuses on farmer alternatives to corporate control over production and consumption.

The strategy is to help farmer movements for food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture document and share their alternatives among broad sectors of the rural and urban population, in order to advance peasant-led food system alternatives.

### **What are these Food Alliance groups advocating for?**

It depends on each country but two things are common.

1. A return to protection of the national food production of nations, both against the dumping of artificially cheap food that undercuts local farmers, and against the artificially expensive food imports that we encounter today.

It means rebuilding the national grain reserves and parastatal marketing boards, in new and improved versions that actively include farmer organizations as owners and administrators of public reserves. (Rosset, 2006).

2. A change away from dominant technological practices in farming, toward an agriculture based on agro-ecological principles, that is sustainable, and that is based on respect for and is in equilibrium with nature, local cultures and traditional farming knowledge. (Altieri, 2008, <http://www.landaction.org/spip/sip.php?article315>, July 2008).

It has been scientifically demonstrated that ecological farming systems can be more productive, can better resist drought and other manifestations of climate change, and are more economically sustainable because they use less fossil fuel. We can no longer afford the luxury of food whose price is linked to the price of petroleum (Schill, 2008).

### **Do we need an Alliance in Australia?**

Bob Katter has identified just one similar reason in his list of 20 demands made in 2010

# HOLD YOUR NERVE

Graeme Gardiner

It's a word of advice from political leaders to nervous members of parliament as major policy changes are made.

It's a word of advice to investors during times of financial upheaval, and a word of advice to sportspeople that they might not 'choke' on the verge of victory.

During recent catastrophic disasters of flood and cyclone in Queensland it may very well have been a common thought for those who had made the decision to stay in their homes and 'ride it out'.

As the storms raged they needed to hold their nerve and stick with their decision, as any last moment change of heart to run would be disastrous.

Holding our nerve may also be important advice for all leaders within congregations.

All effective ministry and leadership in our time is 'transitional ministry'.

We well know that the way that we 'do' church and mission needs to undergo transition to new practices.

In many rural congregations this need to change has become obvious, no longer being able to sustain the kind of 'church-focussed' and 'ordained minister-centred' life and witness of past generations.

A few congregations may be privileged to retain sufficient residual

resources to not presently be driven to the need for radical change, but nevertheless leaders will do well to be ahead of the game and facilitate transition, because the need is surely coming!

Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement may apply here: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is the slogan of the complacent, the arrogant or the scared."

Like effective political leaders, astute financial advisors or seasoned coaches, leaders of congregations will need to strengthen weak knees, and urge nervous congregations to hold their nerve as they journey through times of transition.

To encourage us to hold our nerve perhaps we would do well to ask (and answer) a few fundamental questions:

- Was the old way of being and doing church working well for us? (No)
- Will a return to the old way of being and doing church be likely to suddenly become successful again? (No)
- Which is the riskier – to stay with the unfruitful old ways – or to try some untested new ways? (Sure - the outcome of the untested new ways is largely unknown, but the outcome of the unfruitful old ways is certain – we have the concrete evidence that it no longer works!)

Calm and determination to 'stay the course' are qualities that are crucial for contemporary leaders.

In a series of statements highlighting the cost of following Jesus, I am reminded of Jesus saying, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for

Rev Graeme Gardiner is the Resource Minister for the Cudgegong Cluster, NSW

## SYNERGY

Kel Hodge

One definition of the word *synergy* is: "two or more agents acting together to produce a result not possible from the agents acting alone or independently".

While this definition is accurate as far as it goes, I believe it to be a sparse and inadequate definition when harking back to my experience of working with others in a creative way.

Over the years I have worked on many committees or task groups.

Many of the committees met out of habit and were going through the motions of institutional conformity.

Such gatherings are inhabited by stalwarts who are usually happy to maintain the status quo and are suspicious of change.

The security found in the process of the meeting is often enough to keep these well meaning souls

*service in the kingdom of God*" (Luke 9:62). I am also reminded of Jesus' encouragement to his disciples that "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt 24:13). So come on church! Let's hold our nerve.

satisfied that they are doing the "job", so to speak.

On the other hand I have worked with groups who have come together in a spirit of hopefulness and creativity.

There is one group of people in particular I would like to mention in this article, as they have provided vision and hope for the rural church.

I prefer to speak of them as a group of people instead of a specific committee, presbytery or task group, because, over the years, members have come and gone, as well as there being a number of committees involved.

This group of people have served in their own congregations, The Presbytery of the Central West (now the Macquarie Darling), the Rural Support Service, the Rural Ministry Unit, the Riverina Presbytery, the Presbytery of New England North West.

## What do you think of an 'Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance'?

Ross Neville

I have just spent a day at a discussion about forming a Food Sovereignty Alliance in Australia.

There were people representing a wide range of groups and interests from Victoria Queensland and New South Wales. Some Farmers, plus representatives from Food Connect, Slow Food, Gene ethics, Chair of Social Ecology, Community Gardens of Australia Network, Food Cooperatives, plus others and myself the Rural Consultant from the UCA.

Food Sovereignty is a growing world wide movement. There have been International gatherings, as people in each nation around the world are realizing that Transnational and Multinational corporations are gaining power and ascendancy over even nations.

International trends of agribusiness farming are also disenfranchising smaller farmers and businesses, and influencing the trade, distribution and production of food around the world.

Food Sovereignty groups have formed in the USA and Canada who are Australia's equivalent partners in food trade.

In the USA – on the eve of the final Department of Justice/USDA public workshop examining the

effects of corporate concentration in food and agriculture - a coalition of farm and food activists submitted almost a quarter of a million (nearly 240,000) petitions calling on both the Justice Department and USDA to take swift action to curb the abusive market power that a handful of corporations exert over farmers and consumers.

In Canada they have been conducting a National 'Food for Thought' tour to develop a Canadian National Food Policy.

One of their polities said: *I have had the opportunity to participate in forums in over 25 communities across Canada.*

*It has been truly worthwhile to listen, and to learn about, people's real concerns over food security and food sovereignty.*

*I have seen, first hand, how many are promoting local food initiatives in their communities.*

*They are not waiting for governments to act but have initiated various projects on their own.*

*Many examples of this can be found here in the BC Southern Interior.*

There are a few themes that seem to run constant right across the country:

For others it would be a shared purchase, with some rent paid but also with the chance to “buy out” the Fund if circumstances allowed.

For others, though, it would ever be the case of renting a property.

In every case, though, the family would be the driving partner, making all the local arrangements about a property, with the Fund entirely in the background.

We all knew that, just like each one of us, our applicants had their pride.

The Fund has also kept a “Trustees’ Discretionary Fund” so that, if any other crisis hit, grants could be made again.

Swine Flu and floods have come and have been the trigger for grants and so we continue to raise money for this part of the Fund in particular.

I have often been asked about the experience of the crisis.

I will never forget two particular nights when my phone rang at about 11.15 p.m.

The first led to a 45 minute conversation, which led to the preparation of an application to the panel meeting the next day and emailing it.

48 hours later the same farmer phoned. I groaned (in silence, I hope) as I was exhausted.

He thanked me for listening to him, for arranging for a grant that he had received that morning (we aimed to send out within 24 hours).

Then he told me that he had been holding a shotgun in his hand during our previous conversation, intending to use it if his call had not been answered.

Even as I write this the shivers go down my spine. How could I be exhausted or complain?

The Fund goes on, I have retired from rural Wales to the City of York and from being a Trustee of the Fund, but the need continues and the pastoral care by chaplains and local Christians goes on in rural communities up and down the country.

Thank God!

Michael Cruchley is a retired minister of the United Reformed Church. He served as the Rural Officer for both that and the Methodist Church for ten years and was then rural officer in Wales for a further seven. Most of his ministry was spent in rural parishes. Whilst based at the Arthur Rank Centre he helped establish the International Rural Church Association and participated in the Trans Tasman Conferences in 1996 and 2000.”

### From the Pew Sheet

Eight new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.

Although scattered geographically this group has come together over the years to great effect.

As an observer of this group I have witnessed what can happen when people of considerable talents and goodwill work together.

The list of their achievements include, The Rural Ministry Conference, the Mid Lachlan Mission Area, Resource Ministry in the Macquarie Darling and The Riverina Presbyteries, Rural Chaplaincy and Patrol Ministry in the Cobar-Nyngan area.

The flavor of the above ministries has often challenged the concept of what the church should be and what it should do. Understandably there has been resistance along the way, and still is.

The leadership, energy and faithfulness of the “group” has seen to the above ministries being given life and sustenance.

Over the years there has been momentum generated that has caught the attention and imagination of the whole Synod and further afield.

The models of ministry that have been explored in rural NSW have been investigated in metropolitan NSW and in other Synods.

It would seem an appropriate time to pay tribute to the various individuals who have shared of their gifts and talents over the years.

If you are familiar with the history of the area I am sure that some names will come to mind.

Apart from embarrassing certain individuals, I believe that what has been achieved has come to pass through relationships, so names will not be mentioned.

The relationships that developed over the time generated energy, creativity, support and real outcomes.

The outcomes generated were, and are still, important.

For me the relationships and the involvement with these people was the real transformative process.

In every meeting, gathering, conversation, there was that undeniable presence of God, brought through the lives and experience of the people present.

All of our combined experience and talents, and the Spirit of God, allowed us to dream, to do and to be.

Synergy, I don’t know.

Kel Hodge is one of the NSW Uniting Church Rural Chaplains

### From the Pew Sheet

This evening at 7 PM there will be a hymn singing in the park across from the Church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.

# National Rural Ministry Gathering

Ross Neville

Ministry in rural areas is changing.

That is a fact of life across Australia and across the world.

Rural churches are being challenged to rediscover what it is to be church in this new developing environment.

Being a worshipping congregation, with a paid person to represent us at activities, is not an option for many places across Australia any more.

So, if being part of a worshipping congregation isn't enough on its own, what is?

This is one of the questions raised by the National Rural Ministry Gathering in WA in October 2010.

We heard from ministers and congregations across WA, struggling with the issue of identity and purpose within their own communities.

The WA Farmers Assoc. talked about the changes in farming in WA and the ways farmers are dealing with climate change. Each state said ditto.

A Rural Financial Counsellor spoke about the number of people retiring to rural towns, and the number of women in paid work, that is changing the dynamics of many communities.

She also indicated how the rural crises that are happening are highlighting the lack of collaboration between existing services.

Julie Greig and Kel Hodge, Rural Chaplains in NSW, have been spending a considerable time addressing that very same issue in NSW.

Jan Colburn, the Financial Counsellor, summed up by saying: *"The rural message of hope needs to be repeated by those with long memories to those struggling with issues today. 'You can survive'".*

The head of the Rural Ministry Working Group in SE WA, Malcolm Watson, spoke about the demographic shift, and about how farm practices have been changing and influencing communities.

He spoke especially from the local government perspective, about cost shifting from state to local govt. to provide services for these new developing communities.

Margaret White, a retired school teacher, now leader in a lay ministry team for the last twelve months, spoke about the excitement of the change from a Minister led congregation to a lay team.

Some of the struggles she mentioned are: acceptance, pessimism, withdrawal by some, the worry about 'spiritual dryness'.

The Welsh Assembly Government had recognised the importance of the churches in asking for me to be part of their special FMD task force, and to be one of the small "inner core" advising ministers and civil servants.

I learnt that sleep could be a luxury and that such things as video-conferencing existed.

At the same time, the "day-job" with churches continued.

I did have to ease up on the number of preaching engagements in local churches as there was no time to prepare services and sermons.

But to have the daily contact with so many outside the church was mission on the front line.

Some applicants asked where the money came from, and some of them even expressed surprise that the churches cared.

What did that say about our profile, I was forced to ask – of myself and of local churches, as the opportunity arose?

Thank God the appeal was heard by so many beyond the churches.

HRH the Prince of Wales became a great supporter of our work and spent time with us and asked his friends to help us; (and many did, with quite generous sums).

However, it was the small gifts that came in the post – the "widow's mite" that became "the cruse of oil".

I commented at one Trustee meeting that we ought to remember

how many cups of coffee at the coffee morning we were now offering to others.

So, what happened to the Fund?

Well, in 18 months (until the worst immediate effects of the disease were diminishing) we received about £15 million and gave out over £10.5 million in over 28,000 individual grants.

In Wales we distributed over £3.5 million to some 8,000 farms and businesses.

However, during the crisis and as it eased somewhat, we realised that there were many farms that were really not viable, and that the farmers (and some business owners) needed to get out of the business.

Yet for many of them, their homes were part of the business.

Where could they go? What could they do?

For some, the possibility of realising the assets of the farm would become their pension- but if there were no assets, what happened?

So, the Fund gradually developed a strategic housing scheme.

Still working with a local pastoral contact (now usually face to face), the situation would be examined and all aspects debated in depth.

For some there could be the chance of a loan (like a mortgage) from the Fund to help see the family to a new life.

The then Archbishop of Canterbury raised the possibility of the churches launching a fund, offering emergency help to farmers under increasing financial hardship.

A group of people, including me, were called together by the Arthur Rank Centre (the ecumenical rural resource centre) to try to respond.

An appeal was made to the churches via each denomination's system, as well as through the religious and secular press.

Farmers were invited, by similar means, to contact the newly established fund for small financial grants.

News spread fast and at the first meeting of the fund's putative trustees (charitable status was already being sought) there were requests for help but no cash.

God was good – within a few weeks large sums of money had come in from people all across the country – and from far across the world as well.

The Trustees realised that rural businesses outside farming were also being hard hit, so funds were sought to make grants to them.

Every request for help was referred to an experienced person relatively local to the applicant – in many cases it was local clergy or lay leaders.

No religious questions were asked – need before creed!

Careful thought was given by that local person, who forwarded the request to panels meeting at the Arthur Rank Centre (soon, though, in

a separate office) who made decisions.

No individual grant would be for more than £2000, although the applicant could apply again if need be.

The grant was really to help meet costs of feed for the additional livestock on the farm, but we knew it was being used to provide food for some families.

The "contact person" was also to provide pastoral care for the applicant and dependents – initially by phone rather than personal visit, due to movement restrictions within areas where infection was known.

Within a very few weeks, movement restrictions covered large parts of the United Kingdom.

In Wales it was difficult outside rather narrow urbanised belts across the south and north of the country.

Mid-Wales, with its mountains and very scattered population almost entirely dependent on sheep farming, became almost a no-go and ghost area.

My role rapidly became one of pastoral contact with applicants, advocating for them and the fund with the Assembly Government and being a Trustee of the Fund.

I had never been as busy (or stressed) in almost 40 years' ministry (nor had my wife!)

We had to have a separate phone line installed so that we could speak to family as the phone seemed never to stop ringing.

The 3 members of the Rural Ministry Working Group, a minister, a deacon, and a lay person, explained how their resourcing role is working over the 60 worshipping congregations who will never again have a Minister of the Word in their own right.

The wisdom they shared is summed up in the saying: *'If you want to go fast – go alone. If you want to go far - go together'*

The most significant dilemma they frequently face is identity.

Identity is a really important issue with ministry teams.

*'What does it mean to be a church?'*

*'What does it mean to be Uniting Church'*

Some of the other issues they encounter are:

- Sacraments (language, authority to conduct)
- Leadership (training, authority)
- Accountability (especially with mixed denominational congregations, or some councils withdrawing from Presbytery)
- Property (ownership, maintenance, community identity)
- Lack of common protocol for preachers
- The ecumenical mish mash developing in rural communities.

South Australia also explained their strategy for providing ministry supervision and support for

congregations no longer able to have a Minister of the Word in placement. The formation of clusters, each with a Resourcing Ministry agent, is the next stage of a program begun 5 years ago by the Synod Rural Ministry Team.

They anticipate they could have between 8-10 clusters by 2011.

Each cluster will include 6 -10 congregations, within some geographical proximity.

This team has been working at establishing Lay Ministry teams in congregations around the state of SA.

At the end of the conference, some issues remain unresolved. These include:

- The formation and sustainability of rural ministry teams. It was suggested that teams should not be called Lay Ministry Teams but Ministry Teams.
- The role and function of ministry teams needs to be valued and recognized as a normal ministry option, especially in rural areas. This recognition will change the approach of Theological Colleges, Synods and Presbyteries.
- New expressions of church are developing and it is important to network and support these initiatives across Australia. These new 'Churches', are sometimes "non congregational" or outside normal church interpretation of regulations.
- Accepting the fact that regulations are only guidelines.

- There need to be short courses for induction into the ethos and ethics of the UCA, so that councils and congregations, as well as non church people, can understand who we are.

The National Rural Ministry network conferences have been held annually for 5 years since 2006 - at Culcairn NSW, Donald Vic, Clare SA, Longreach QLD and Hayden WA

In 2011 it is NSW's turn.

The NSW Rural Ministry Unit has decided to hold its bi-annual Conference in tandem with this national gathering.

Ross Neville is Rural Evangelism Consultant, NSW Board of Mission

The dates are 11<sup>th</sup>- 14<sup>th</sup> August 2011, in Dubbo

The theme will be "2011- Church"

We will be discussing:

- Forming, Resourcing and maintaining ministry teams
- Churches Dealing with Societal and Community Issues

More specific details and application forms will be available soon.

Note the dates in your diary and come for 1 or 2 days, or come for all 4 days

# THE ARTHUR RANK CENTRE ADDINGTON FUND

Michael Cruchley

In January 2000 I moved to become the Rural Officer for the United Reformed Church in Wales.

This was a new post with few defined parts, just that I would examine the rural situation, the rural church and see what could be done to help the church in its mission.

Little did anyone think that early in 2001 the United Kingdom would be hit by a very severe outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD).

Indeed, ten years on, some of the effects are still being felt.

Let me explain a couple of matters to help – Wales has its own National Assembly – a devolved administration responsible for some government actions, although without legislative or tax-raising powers.

Due to the history of Wales, the churches (of all denominations) were in touch with the political structures in ways that I had not experienced in England.

I had already become the "lead person" for the churches in talking with the Welsh Assembly Government on rural matters, through the ecumenical body "Cytun" – Churches Together in Wales – as I was the only full-time rural officer in Wales.

In February 2001, FMD was identified in various parts of England – spread through the transport of livestock between farms, markets and processors, at a much greater level than many realised.

The U.K. Government immediately stopped the movement of livestock. Farmers across the whole of Britain were affected.

No animal could go to market, therefore no income.

Late winter meant that fodder stocks were often low.

The practice of moving stock, especially sheep, from higher ground to lowland areas for winter meant that many farmers in upland Britain had stock at a distance that they could not move, and movement restrictions on people in infected areas meant that it was extremely difficult to provide care for the stock.

For the Welsh sheep farmers, lambing was a few weeks off, but the farmers where the sheep were in lowland areas might not necessarily have lambing skills.

Add to this the fact that many more animals had to stay on farms with diminishing fodder resources and no income to buy more, and it was easy to see that the situation raised already high stress levels.

A man and his wife were awakened at 3:00 am by a loud pounding on the door. The man gets up and goes to the door where a drunken stranger, standing in the pouring rain, is asking for a push.

"Not a chance," says the husband, "it is 3:00 in the morning!"  
He slams the door and returns to bed.

"Who was that?" asked his wife..

"Just some drunk guy asking for a push," he answers.

"Did you help him?" she asks.

"No, I did not, it's 3 in the morning and it's bloody pouring rain out there!"

"Well, you have a short memory," says his wife. "Can't you remember about three months ago when we broke down, and those two guys helped us?"

I think you should help him, and you should be ashamed of yourself!

"God loves drunk people too you know."

The man does as he is told, gets dressed, and goes out into the pounding rain.

He calls out into the dark, "Hello, are you still there?"

"Yes," comes back the answer.

"Do you still need a push?" calls out the husband.

"Yes, please!" comes the reply from the dark.

"Where are you?" asks the husband.

"Over here on the swing," replied the drunk..