



Conference Report

Christian Research Association, Rural Roundtable, June 2009

“They couldn’t give a damn about us”

The Emergency Situation of the Australian Rural Catholic Church

Desmond Cahill, RMIT University

Rural and remote Australia has always been at the centre of the Australian psyche since European settlement began in 1788 and, later on, through the finding of a passageway through the Blue Mountains in 1813 to reveal the Western plains of NSW – in our poems, in our short stories, in our art and in our films. These days, however, it is less at the centre of national attention because Australia has become more urbanized; less and less do the so-called city slickers have direct contact with regional, rural and remote Australia through family connections except to have the occasional holiday in some rural beauty spot or to drive speedily through it along such roads as the Pacific or Newell Highways on the way to some beach destination.

Incoming migrants and refugees do not appreciate the harsh realities of living and working in the Australian bush even though many have come from small farming backgrounds, from food growing and animal grazing pastoral contexts in other countries. It has been said that Australia does not like people such as the harshness of the bush with its droughts and its bushfires, and the occasional floods. These realities are, of course, not unknown to urban Australia but the bush has become mythologized away from the actual reality. Catholic Australia’s eyes have been partly filtered through the poems of John O’Brien, *Around the Boree Log*, but even these reveal the travails of the bush as symbolized in Hanrahan’s lament of ruination. Australia’s bush people are not whingers nor complainers and that is part of the current problem. Rural towns are characterized by rapid population outflows, a greater exodus of women and an aging of the remaining population.

This paper, written from an Australian Catholic Church perspective, wishes to outline the emergency situation that exists in the rural Catholic Church and rural Churches generally, Catholic and Protestant. It draws completely from the work of Dr. Philip Hughes at the Christian Research Association, including the pamphlet, *Sowing and Nurturing: Challenges and*

Possibilities for Rural Churches (Hughes & Kuncinunas, 2009) and suggests a range of pastoral models.

The recent physical collapse and resignation of an Australian church leader, charged with the pastoral care of his flock in one of the world’s geographically largest dioceses, provides an opportunity for the Catholic Church in Australia to pause and reflect on the present predicament of the rural Catholic Church. Many parishes and schools have closed or are in grave danger of closing. It might be appropriate to convene a conference or roundtable in the coming year or so to address the current scenario, perhaps in a place such as Broken Hill or Renmark or Wagga or Dubbo.

These thoughts are triggered by the **Roundtable on Rural Church Life**, sponsored by the Christian Research Association and held in Geelong at the Salvation Army’s Conference Centre in June 2009. This paper is essentially a report on the contents of this conference. Nearly 100 people attended, led by several Anglican bishops, many clergy and lay pastoral leaders from the various Protestant traditions. Many women attended, including a good representation of Catholic nuns now working *in loco sacerdotis* in the parishes of rural and remote Australia. Yet it is instructive that only one parish priest was in attendance, a city-bred boy recently appointed to a regional centre outside Melbourne.

Left: Ss Alex & John Nepomucene’s Catholic Church Wilmington, SA.



Special points of interest:

- OF LAST 10 YEARS, ONLY 2001-2002 PROFITABLE FOR AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE.
- ETHICAL & MORAL ISSUES ABOUT CARING FOR OTHERS —SHARING WATER.
- POWER OF SYMBOLISM OF WATER AS SOURCE OF LIFE NEEDS TO IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC PSYCHE.
- “GIVING A DAMN” ABOUT RURAL CHURCHES.
- MODELS OF HOPE FOR RURAL CHURCHES.

Inside this issue:

The Environmental Context in Rural Australia	2
The Conundrum of Murray-Darling Basin	3
The Situation of Regional, Rural and Remote Catholic Australia	3
The Current Psyche of Rural Australia	4
Models of Rural Church Life and Min-	5
REFERENCES	6



“They couldn’t give a damn about us”

Even today, though their numbers have dwindled, rural church buildings dot the rural landscape. “They tell stories of pioneering farming families who cleared the land, grew crops and raised animals, and were the foundation of many rural communities. They also tell stories of brave clergy who walked or rode on horseback from town to town, giving encouragement and nurture to these people, often in the most difficult conditions” (Hughes & Kuncinans 2009: 3).

According to ABS figures for 2008, in 2006 agriculture was worth \$37.3 billion to the Australian economy with the average farm having a profit of just \$41,000. Of the last ten years, only the 2001-02 year has been genuinely profitable. Just over a third of Australians live outside the capital cities, according to Philip Hughes, as compared to two-thirds (63%) one hundred years ago. Yet change is occurring in the midst of decline as new crops are grown and new agricultural projects initiated.



Above: typical main street of Australian country town

The Environmental Context in Rural Australia

Professor John Williams, former chief of CSIRO Land and Water and a leading expert on sustainable agricultural practices, outlined the agricultural and environmental context of rural Australia. Both farmer and consumer had to realize that the era of cheap energy for agricultural pursuits has finished. The price for fuel, fertilizer and pesticide had become increasingly expensive and the impact of the emission trading scheme was about to be felt, also increasing the cost of agricultural inputs. As a consequence, the era of cheap food and fibre was also over even though more food would be needed as the world population headed towards peaking at just under 9 billion by 2050 before then declining. But food and fibre needed to be produced with less damage wrought on the environment. The challenge was to manage all our water, land and

biodiversity resources which underpin our life support systems. Embedded in all this is the issue of food security in a context of climate change and shift. Only the 1940s provide any guide. By 2050, the temperature over land areas will increase by 3 degrees Celsius and by 2070 it would be 5 degrees.

This raised the issue of water reform and rural community sustainability. How does one continue to build communities with only half the water that used to be available? All this implied a fundamental redesign of agriculture. Firstly, there was the need to become landscape literate, and this required a change in the scientific and technical services for the agricultural sector. Professor Williams noted that the past education of agricultural experts had been significantly at fault. Secondly, part of landscape literacy was the recognition that ecosystem processes differ on every farm. Thirdly, there was the necessity to cure ‘the drought delusion’ – there will be decade-long dry sequences, and this has been and will remain the norm. Fourthly, in our paying for food and fibre, the cost of ecoservices has to be factored in. “We might like our new cotton shirt, but at what cost to the environment was it produced?”, remembering the large cotton farms that were allowed to be built in southern NSW.

Australia needs both new and old agricultural enterprises. As well, (1) hidden subsidies need to be removed (2) the paddock has to be replanned, and the farm re-visioned (3) new industries will have to be built (4) the native flora and fauna need to be better utilized – why eat beef when we can eat kangaroo? And (5) we need to create new knowledge and new partnerships.

The Conundrum of the Murray-Darling Basin

It is firstly necessary to raise the issue of the Murray-Darling Basin which directly touches the four States of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. Very old-timers well remember the 1940s with its droughts across eastern Australia, and the Snowy Mountains scheme was a brilliantly engineered response. The Basin, together with the Goulburn Valley, became known as the food bowl of Australia. Whether one believes in global warming or one remains skeptical, or one believes in long-term climate cycles like the Biblical seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, there is no doubt that rainfall has been less right throughout the Basin as well as being less in the Australian Alps resulting in less flow in the Murray, the Murrumbidgee and the Darling as well as in the Victorian rivers that flow north into the Murray.

There is no need to go here into the technical detail, but the issue is fundamentally an ethical and moral issue about caring for one’s fellow human beings and caring for the rural and even urban communities that depend upon the sharing of the water. As we all know, the issue dragged on for several decades until, to the credit of the Howard government, an

The Emergency Situation of the Australian Rural Catholic Church

agreement of sorts was reached after being continually lost in the political and bureaucratic maze games played by the States and the Commonwealth.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference has over the years made statements on the issue, usually in the context of social justice and the common good, but these, to be blunt, sank with little trace. It is now timely that another, more forthright statement be made and read from every pulpit. The symbolism of water as life is at the heart of the Catholic faith, and the power of this symbolism needs to be deployed to make an impact upon the psyche of the Australian Catholic.

The Situation of Regional, Rural and Remote Catholic Australia

The following research findings, combined with some projections and predictions, need to be highlighted from a Catholic perspective.

In the 2006 National Church Life Survey, rural church leaders, Catholic and Protestant, identified the following community issues as **the most anxiety-creating**:

Drought	46%
Decline in nos. jobs	21%
Decline in nos. churches	21%
Decline in government services/agencies	12%
Decline in local business	10%

In these rural communities, access to aged care and pre-school care was generally good whereas access to youth facilities was very poor.

A rural city/town is defined in NCLS terminology as one with less than 20,000 people whereas a regional city centre is one with more than 20,000 people. In the rural churches of all denominations, 40 per cent of the parishes surveyed have fewer than 25 regular attendees and another 20 per cent had between 25–50 such attendees. This represents a very different situation from the regional and urban churches. Attendance is especially low in mining centres. Thus, the sustainability of rural congregations is extremely problematic. The rural church attendees are older than those attending regional and urban churches, their level of education is lower, they are more likely to be retired or unemployed and they are very much less likely to be born in non-English-speaking countries than the Australian norm.

The decline, and the quickness of the decline, are reflected in the leadership and financial structures. About half of the congregations have a single ordained leader while another 31 per cent have a mixed leadership team. Almost two thirds of these rural church leaders have two or more congregations or parishes while 45 per cent of rural parishes have undergone

some structural change such as amalgamation or sharing an ordained leader or having a non-ordained leader. A consequence of all this is that parishes and dioceses have a declining financial base, especially those serving areas devastated by drought in the last decade.

The concept of lay leadership, so common in pastoral strategy rhetoric for the past forty years, is problematic. Often, particularly in small communities, lay leaders may not be accepted; they function best when strongly supported by 'an enabler', usually an ordained minister though, in some multi-denominational settings, a Catholic nun exercises the role. The ordained minister can become very stretched as can the lay leadership itself as it balances working for the church and earning a living. However, in overall terms, lay teams have usually contributed to and reinvigorated the local church.

From a Catholic perspective, in the 28 Catholic dioceses of Australia, Mass attendance is worst in the rural and regional dioceses, including the Tasmanian archdiocese of Hobart even though in decades past Mass attendance, because of the tight local Irish Catholic networks, was historically higher than in the cities. The decline is dramatic; as Sunday Mass declines and with no priest or even a nun to lead a communion service, the Catholic community will die or active Catholics will join with other Christians for a Sunday Christian service, thereby losing their distinctive Catholic identity. This, of course, has happened in some Eastern European Catholic communities where priest-less communities have utilized the services of Lutheran pastors for their funeral needs.

The Current Psyche of Rural Australia

In a well-researched presentation, Dr. Philip Hughes, executive director of the Christian Research Association who has conducted intensive case studies of church communities in places such as North-West Tasmania, the Southern Flinders Ranges and outback New South Wales, spoke of the current mentality of people living in rural and remote Australia. He firstly noted that rural people value friendships and in a rural community, 'you cannot hide' as your movements are always known. Rural cultures are primarily oral, based on trusting each other in face-to-face contact. Their togetherness is based upon locality, not so much upon common interests.

Firstly, there is much anxiety combined with a feeling of helplessness. There were the million dollar debts on farms, the planted crops that come to nothing through lack of rain. All wondered about the future of the local community, and even those who rarely darkened the doorstep of a church, were concerned and anxious that the church not leave as government agencies, banks etc. had left.

Secondly, associated with this anxiety was much grief for a diminishing community: the friends that have moved far away, the sons and daughters that have gone and are very unlikely to return, the families that are temporarily divided as

the father moves away to seek work elsewhere.

Thirdly, considerable anger was directed at the city, “the city couldn’t give a damn about us”. One of the consequences of globalization is that the city disempowers the rural hinterland; increasingly there is a lack of genuine face-to-face contact between city and country; there is the failure to build trusting relationships e.g. with the local bank manager now replaced by an ATM.

Fourthly, pain may be hidden through alcohol or, in the extreme, a farmer’s life ended through suicide. There is fear that neighbours under financial pressure may commit suicide. There is a generalized anger at the loss of independence and of control over their lives, resulting in an increased incidence of psychological breakdown. As one community worker put it: “We are looking down the abyss”. Young people are also feeling the pain. They know they will have to leave for further education or employment, and it is usually the most talented among them.

Models of Rural Church Life and Ministry

Over the past two decades, various pastoral models for regional and rural Australia have been developed.

Ecumenical Ministry: Christine Thompson, a Uniting Church Minister, reported on the joint Anglican-UCA ministry in



Above: Ecumenical blessing of town’s new sculpture, Wudinna, SA

“They couldn’t give a damn about us”

Ouyen in Mallee Victoria. She began with the comment, “organists are like gold in the country”. The idea of joining together an Anglican and an UCA congregation to form the one congregation was resisted by each church’s authorities. It required the UCA minister to learn how to celebrate an Anglican communion. It was important that in each church on the alternative Sunday the normal protocol was honoured in each place.

Area Team Ministry: The Anglican Bishop, Peter Daniher, reported on the concept of the Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd which he had established in 2002 in his work across rural NSW from Dubbo to Bourke. In these small towns, most of the Anglican ministers work part-time, perhaps as a teacher in the local primary or secondary school, perhaps as farmers, perhaps helping out in their partner’s business. “I have seen an extraordinary decline in our towns – 15 teachers left Bourke at the end of last year”. The bishop added, “We have centralized the accountancy work for 15 of the parishes”. Speaking of the Brotherhood which had become a form of team ministry is “our commitment to Christ and our commitment to each other”. The members keep in constant contact with each other, usually by phone and email, but they meet at least once every six months face-to-face.

Resourcing Ministry: A report was given on the Uniting Church in rural South Australia where there were many, many very small congregations, struggling to survive, especially in retaining the Sunday service. Placements are increasingly being filled with lay people. A significant number of congregations were now led by lay ministry people. The significant issues that arose for these lay teams were (i) to free the team from operating on survival mode and to be on mission mode (ii) to move them beyond the lowest common denominator of just keeping the basic worship service on a Sunday happening (iii) the tension between endurance/burnout versus call/spiritual growth and (iv) the transition to the second generation of leadership.

The question was asked, How is a sustainable ministry resourced? How do we provide oversight of lay ministry? A Cluster Model of Ministry had been developed with 6–12 congregations centred around large regional centres. Each cluster was oversighted by an appropriately trained Resourcing Minister who acted as educator, facilitator, catalyst and mentor for these congregations. Issues were the transition from individual congregations to clusters, the filling and funding of Resource Ministry positions and the move outwards beyond existing congregations.

Rural Chaplaincy: Julie Grieg reported how in rural NSW she was employed by the NSW UCA Synod in a whole-of-rural-NSW Ministry. She is stationed at Hillston while her colleague is stationed at Canowindra. She mentioned the small town of Ivanhoe with less than 250 people with no organized

The Emergency Situation of the Australian Rural Catholic Church

church communities – the town survives because of a prison; the last fruit and vegetable shop has closed and there are no aged care facilities. The aims of the chaplaincy are (1) to support churches in community building (2) to work intensively with about 10 communities (3) to support and enhance the work of other service providers and provide pastoral care as needed (4) to develop the gifts and capacities of individuals across financial, social, emotional and spiritual areas (5) to affirm and advocate for rural people and (6) to support, as when necessary, the UCA disaster response. She referred to www.ruralchaplains.blogspot.com. It was difficult to get the congregations to think about community development, and it was often not perceived as a real church ministry. But the model did contain the freedom to adapt, and the capacity to increase networking and to tell the story of the bush.

Other variants of the models were lay-led ministries by the Lutherans in different parts of Australia such as the Northern Territory and South Australia where there were 200 small congregations. In the Barossa Valley alone, there were 34 congregations. This had developed the notion of the PWHAT (the Pastor with Alternative Training), who had less training but still exercised leadership. Second was the Integrated Ministry of the Salvation Army in Ballarat and the Western District where the pastoral ministry was integrated with the other services provided by the Army.

A final session focused on online education. Sister Margaret Ghosn featured the courses offered by the Broken Bay Institute which could be delivered using the medium of Skype, telephone and email for people working in rural areas. Sister Eveline Crotty spoke of Transforming Practices which is a group of autonomous practitioners who foster personal and social transformation through their skills in adult education, mediation, spiritual direction, and pastoral and professional supervision. This session highlighted the different roles that nuns are fulfilling in rural Australia.

Conclusion

By global standards, Australia is a relatively infertile country. Much of its land has always been marginal. As Philip Hughes and Audra Kunciuonas comment, “Many rural communities are now facing unprecedented levels of change, including the types of agriculture that are and will be viable. Many of the drivers are global, beyond the control of any local action. Changes are occurring in rural communities which will never be reversed... churches of all denominations are facing similar issues.” (Hughes & Kunciuonas, 2009)

Desmond Cahill, RMIT University

Professor of Intercultural Studies, School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University. Also, board

member Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research.

References:

CRA’s Rural Roundtable, presentation from Dr John Williams, Commissioner, Natural Resources Commission, NSW. <http://www.cra.org.au/pages/00000299.cgi>

Philip Hughes and Audra Kunciuonas, *Sowing and Nurturing: Challenges and Possibilities for Rural Churches*, Christian Research Association, 2009.

All photos: Courtesy Christian Research Association



Left: Ecumenical leadership. Wilmington, SA. Uniting and Catholic churches represented in this photo.

Where can they find suitable leadership?

How do they effectively engage the younger people who remain in rural areas?

How can they give hope in such difficult times?”

(Hughes & Kunciuonas 2009)



ACBC PASTORAL PROJECTS OFFICE

Contact details:

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
ACU Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy VIC 3065

Phone: 03 9953 3457

Fax: 03 9415 1196

E-mail: office@ppo.catholic.org.au

We are on the web: www.ppo.catholic.org.au

We are exploring the pastoral, cultural, social and personal dimensions of the Catholic church in these changing times.

Your Notes:

