

RURAL MINISTRY NETWORK



THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW NETWORK

A recent iteration of Rural Ministry Conference (RMC), hosted by the Diocese of Bendigo the delegates (representing 18 dioceses and BCA), desired that there be a Network established under General Synod to progress the relationships, sharing of resource and discussions that had begun at the conference.

This was thought desirable for three reasons:

1. Relational – The 47 attendees at the conference universally noted how refreshing it was to gather with those engaged in like ministries, but in diverse contexts. There was a clearly stated desire that conversations begun, and encouragement given should continue and that it would be a loss if this did not occur. Many of the attendees do not have other networks within which to debrief, share resources and receive encouragement. A Facebook group was established, and the conference has resolved to gather again in 2021.

The Network will help to provide for continuity and coordination in these initiatives as individuals move to other situations or face waning energy. It will also help to give clarity and minimize misunderstandings facilitating fellowship across the whole of Australia.

2. Systemic – The Rural Ministry Conference was designed specifically to engage with those who have some hand in organizing for ministry to occur within dioceses (e.g. Archdeacons, MDOs, Bishops). The task of maintaining and growing effective ministry and ministers across large areas was the explicit aim of the gathering. While coal-face practitioners will gain benefit from general training and retreat processes there is a dearth of opportunity to consider the systemic challenges posed by sparse (and changing) demographics, and distance. These issues loomed large as part of the Viability and Structures Report.

The Network will continue to work on the issues raised by General Synod over the past decade to preserve viability and vitality in the greater part of Australia.

3. Developmental – Like many Australian ministry initiatives, work done in the rural context is often beset by amnesia and a poor evidence base. Distance, turnover of personnel and the independence of dioceses combine to militate against a robust testing of ministry practice and indeed the focus on strategies for periods long enough to assess their usefulness. By working together in a disciplined way our collective memory and capacity to track the reasons giving rise to certain practices, and their fruitfulness (or otherwise) will be enhanced.

The Network will help to underpin plans to begin to develop an Australian corpus of literature reflecting on the theological, contextual and practical aspects of ministry in rural, regional and remote Australia.

The General Synod Standing Committee established the Rural Ministry Network in response to a request from the attendees of the conference at the 8-9 November 2019 meeting.

RURAL MINISTRY CONFERENCE 2019

The RMC took place over three days, 12-15 September, and was held at Rutherford Park Conference Centre at Blampied, between Daylesford and Creswick in Central Victoria, in a near perfect rural environment. The conference was attended by 47 people with 18 dioceses represented along with two BCA staff. The dioceses of Sydney, North West Australia, Armidale, Willochra and the Northern Territory were not represented. While the presence of 5 dioceses was missed (4 of which have great insight to share in rural ministry) the attendance and the range of dioceses that made a commitment to the conference was pleasing as it was the first gathering for many years at a national level to look at rural ministry.

Presentations were largely drawn from people attending the conference and included:

1. A statement from the heart – Indigenous Ministry
2. A survey of Anglican Ministry in rural Australia
3. A theology of rural ministry
4. Local ordained ministry in the Diocese of Bendigo – case study
5. Safe ministry in rural settings
6. Supervision in rural ministry
7. Enabling a culture of development
8. Sharing our stories - every diocese presented
9. Rural ministry around Australia - The Primate

A final session titled, “What Next...Where to From Here” was held. Some outcomes of this session were:

1. Establishing a Rural Ministry Network through General Synod
2. Setting up a closed Facebook group on rural ministry
3. Holding another conference in two years’ time
4. Investigating city – rural parish partnerships
5. Looking at the possibility of a publication on rural ministry in Australia

Much of the benefit of the conference came from the opportunity for informal interaction and conversation over meals and during free time. The energy in the conference was palpable and participants commented that while there are “big issues and challenges, the morale at the conference was a great plus”.

Some common themes that emerged during the conference were:

1. Rural ministry in Australia has always been a challenge. From the beginning of white settlement to the present time there have been reoccurring challenges of resourcing rural ministry in terms of clergy, leadership and finances. The tyranny of distance has always been there!

2. Population decline is now a major issue especially for inland dioceses. With 90% of Australia's population now living within 150kms of the coast, the decline of many towns and regions is a problem. Where stations in Western Queensland once had a village gathered around the station homestead employing over fifty people, now there might be five or six. While some inland cities are maintaining their population, it is always at the cost of the hinterland around it.
3. The issues of water, drought and corporate farming all have a huge role in the current situation facing many rural communities. The chronic impact of drought and lack of water is biting big time across inland eastern Australia. Even the water supply of large centres such as Dubbo are threatened.
4. The financial sustainability of ministry is concerning with the average cost of maintaining a full-time stipendiary ministry position being \$100,000. Fewer and fewer rural parishes can meet this cost with the outcome being that the number of parishes is reducing rapidly. Many parishes are still listed but are either part time or rely upon locum ministry for regular Eucharistic worship. The other impact is that many rural parishes have not had permanent long-term ordained ministry for many years. The impact on parish life in terms of raising up local leadership and delivering ministry into local communities is severely compromised. In some dioceses, lay people have been trained to undertake pastoral ministry but sustaining it over time becomes a challenge.
5. There was a very strong feeling at the Conference, that while on the one hand there must be a commitment to a safe church, much of the implementation of policy in rural parishes is very difficult. Stresses surrounding the scarcity of people available to fulfil requirements is high. Everyone present could see the dilemma but fixing it or finding practical solutions was left unanswered. A presentation was made to the conference from the General Synod Safe Ministry Commission.
6. Rural ministry for clergy is a "special calling". For generations large numbers of clergy have passed through rural parishes. They have come and gone, often rapidly, seeing rural ministry as a steppingstone to a more substantial parish or ministry. However, there is now a realisation that over time this has not been helpful in undergirding rural ministry and rural ministry must now be approached as a calling. This recognition has a long way to go especially in the recruitment, training and development of a cadre of clergy across rural Australia. While some theological colleges are using a unit on rural ministry as a church we lack a special place of training to service our rural ministry needs.

While there are these challenges, its needs to be boldly stated that there are some good things happening or being tried out in rural ministry across our Church. Some examples from the conference included:

1. The Goldfields/wheatbelt ministry from the Diocese of Perth. Perth has been able to appoint a full time Archdeacon for Rural Ministry which focuses on this area of the diocese. There are over 15 small parishes or points of ministry over which the Archdeacon has oversight. She has been in the position for a number of years and concentrates on providing a monthly Eucharist to each church, training of lay people for worship and pastoral ministry, holding two conferences a year for the churches

involved, and an annual rural ministry gathering before Synod. She also organises a roster for the Eucharistic services which is achieved by using a combination of retired clergy and clergy from larger parishes in Perth offering to do a weekend supply. The Archdeacon, being full time, is also available for any of the parishes/churches to call her in regard to pastoral emergencies, funerals and other pastoral needs.

2. Ordained Local Ministry Programmes (OLM) happening in a number of dioceses, but the level of training varies, as well post ordination supervision and development. The conference heard about the Bendigo model which includes five years of training - two before ordination where candidates undertake the Australis Certificate of Ministry and a three-year post ordination programme called Training in Ministry (TIM). All OLM programmes across Australia have struggled with succession in terms of enabling the second generation of OLM clergy, although Bendigo reported it is up to the third generation. The strength of the OLM model is dioceses working on resourcing their own supply of clergy. It can probably be best described as an Apprenticeship Model.
3. The Diocese of Bunbury reported on two initiatives: One was to allow small, multi-centre parishes to relinquish being a formal parish and instead be recognised as community churches, or places of ministry. This initiative was done partly to relieve the burden of administration and concentrate on sustaining the small worshipping communities. The diocese is fortunate to have a full time Ministry Development Officer and part of her role is to have oversight of these worshipping communities. Another initiative is to establish a network of "lone Anglicans". Increasingly in the wheat growing areas of the diocese people are very scattered and there are just not the numbers to form a worshipping community, but faithful Anglicans still want to feel some sense of belonging or connection. The facilitation of this network is online, and the problem at present is finding someone to take responsibility for it.
4. Other initiatives were reported on, such as online training for ministry and pastoral care, but again there are challenges in their sustainability and quality. Some Theological Colleges, particularly Ridley, have partnered with the Diocese of Riverina to introduce some online learning modules, but the uptake has as yet been small.

The conference was a beginning, connecting people in rural ministry across Australia so that they know they are not alone, to establish a conversation about rural ministry, and to share ideas. There was the realisation that even with all the advances of communication, distance and the sheer size of Australia, makes ministry in regional, rural and remote Australia a formidable task. For technology can enable relationships, but in the end, there is nothing that can match face to face communication in terms of building relationships.

A survey of participants following the conference showed that 96% rated the conference overall as highly rated and chose as one word to describe the experience as "encouraged". (This section of the report was prepared by Bishop Andrew Curnow AM, Officer for the Province of Victoria, October 2019)

RURAL MINISTRY NETWORK

The Purpose of the Rural Ministry Network is to:

1. Provide collegial support for those tasked with enabling ministry in regional, rural and remote Australia,

2. Enable the sharing of resources to more efficiently utilize the resources available in supplying ministry,
3. Capture, test and evaluate approaches to ministry in regional, rural and remote Australia so that what is learned is not forgotten, and
4. Develop a corpus of Australian reflection on the theology and practice of ministry in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Governance of the Rural Ministry Network is being drawn together at this point. A Working Group of 6-9 rural ministry leaders is being established. The Convenor is Bishop Matt Brain.

The expected activities of the Network are to:

1. Run a bi-annual Rural Ministry Conference to examine the issues and practices of ministry in the rural Australian Anglican context;
2. Look to publish a corpus of material reflecting on the theology and practice of rural ministry in Australia;
3. Curate an on-line resource sharing hub; and
4. Meet quarterly (as the working group) to prepare the conference, consider rural ministry needs that should be brought to the attention of the National Church, find common approaches to practicing and evaluating ministry in the rural context.

Effects of COVID-19 – 2020 and 2021

Sadly the stretched nature of rural life and ministry has meant that plans to progress the Network have not progressed as had been hoped. That said the formation of a governance group is a priority and the next RMC is due. The intersection with General Synod in 2022 will probably militate against a gathering this year with 2023 being the aim.

Report prepared by Rt Rev'd Dr Matt Brain, February 2021, updated January 2022.